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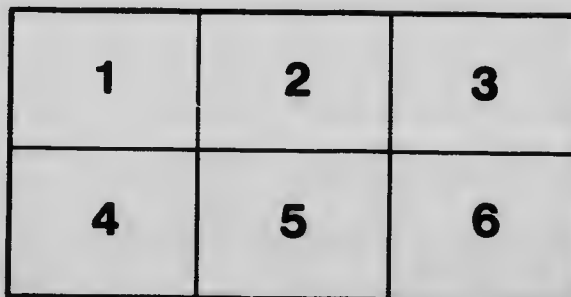
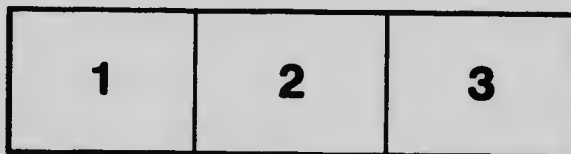
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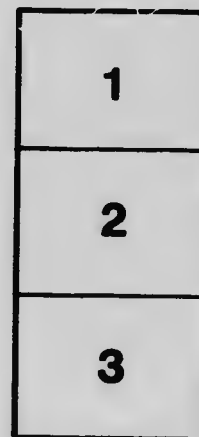
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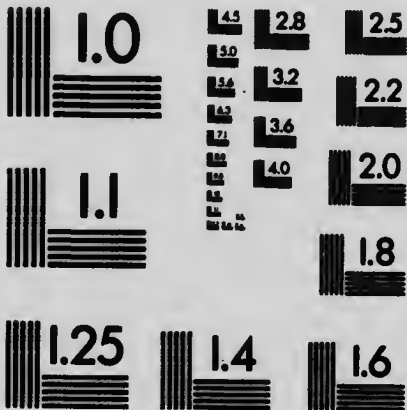
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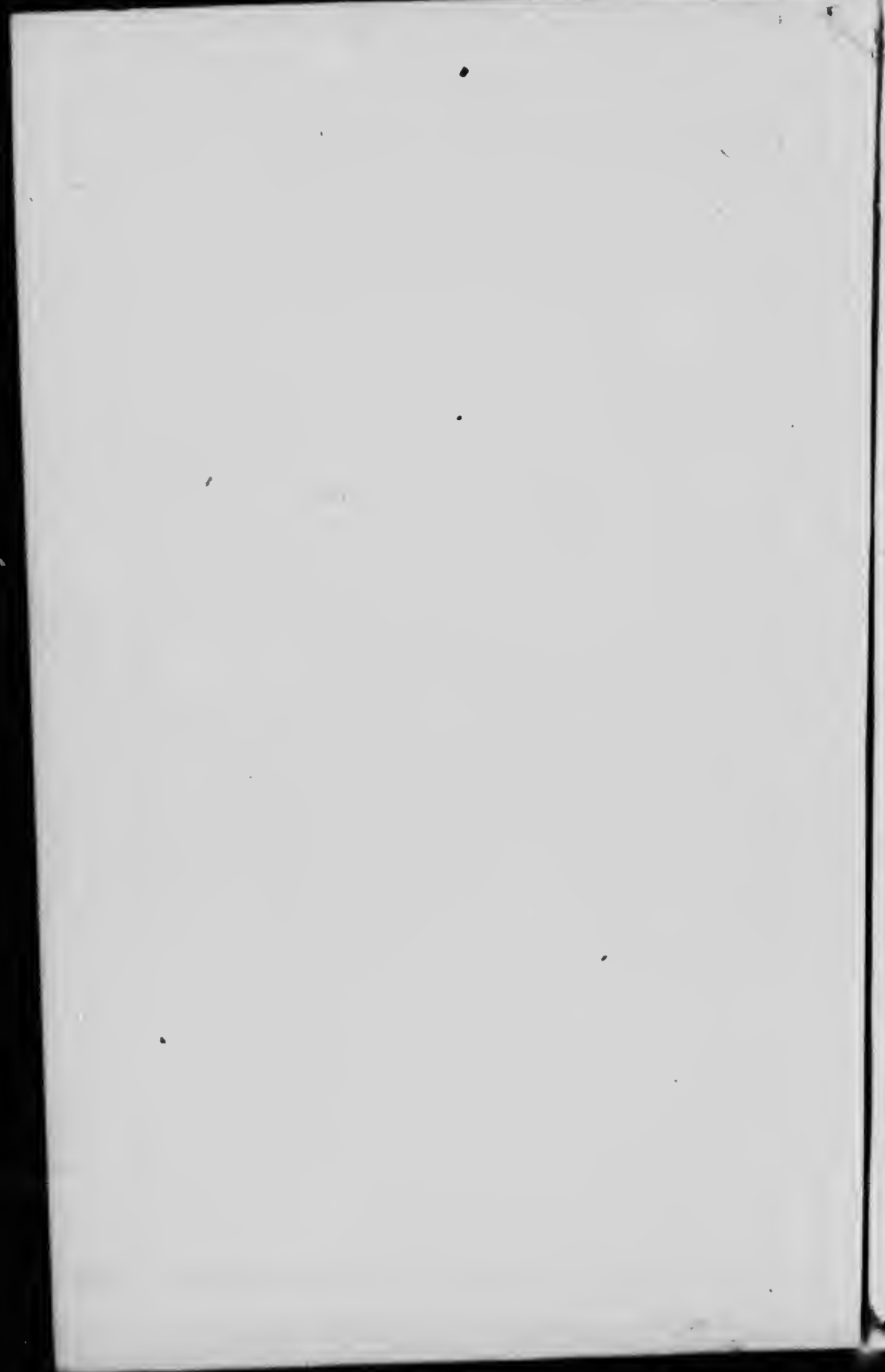


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Greeting
to Eleanor K. Kibelin
Christmas 1912



Elfa



Elfa: A Romance.

By Arthur W. Marchmont

*Author of By Right of Sword,
The Case of Lady Broadstone, etc.*

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*Each ill-considered, wrathful word,
Shall sever, like the cut of sword,
Some thread of life.*



Elfa

Chapter I

A MURDERER'S son !

That was the gruesome heritage to which I was born. The bearer of a name which in the past had stood high as the highest for honour, courage, and chivalry, but was now by my father's crime defiled and degraded into a byword of loathing with every cloddish peasant and loom-toiling drudge.

The curse lay like a pall over my early years, and from childhood I was taught to read in the looks of all around me the scorching gleam of hate or the scathing insolence of contemptuous pity.

As a lad my schoolmates shunned and reviled me, leaving me to a solitude of innocent shame, to feed the furnace of passions which destroyed every wholesome thought and boyish impulse. How I hated them for it !

Once in a paroxysm of wrath, goaded by the taunts of one of them—the biggest bullying braggart of them all—I seized a weapon and struck him down. He was more scared than hurt ; but the rest slunk away, like whelps in a hell-

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pack struck dumb with terror, and pointed to his blood as he lay moaning on the ground, and then at me as if I were a harbinger of murder and death.

I knew their thought. As the father had been so was the son. But they dared no longer clothe it in words nor show it in acts.

I hugged my triumph for the power which was thus revealed. My companions might hate me, but I could make them fear also. The lesson shaped my course through the years. I had the frame and muscles of any one twice my age, and every means of developing my strength and skill with weapons was ceaselessly practised until the time came when men gave way before my anger like threads of glass before the blower's flame.

Then the days came when the little Corsican's ambition turned the whole of Europe into a battle-field, and I set myself the task of building up anew the fame and honour of my house. They were stirring times, and a strong arm, a contempt of death, and a dexterous sword found a ready welcome in many a camp. No man could take or give heavier blows than I ; and Heaven knows that I had but little reason to treasure my life.

But Fate still dogged me. No man cared to stand alone before my sword, and I should have won my end but for treachery. A sudden attack was made upon me by two of those who knew my story and refused me comradeship, and one of them, by a dastard stroke dealt when my guard

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was down, ploughed and gashed my cheek. He would have paid for it with his life, as his fellow paid, but panic-stricken at the blaze of wrath in my eyes he fled from my vengeance, and I was too spent with my hurt to follow.

When the wound healed and I saw the hideous seam on my face—like a fitting brand for a murderer's offspring—I sickened in horror at the sight. Despair fell upon me and I resolved to fly the country and hide my name and shame; and I never stayed my hurrying feet until I reached a distant, lonely region, far from the haunts of my fellow-men.

I made my home in a mountain cave alone with my shame, my secret, my ugliness, and my God; and there at length, when there was no longer cause to stir my wrath, the impulses of passion cooled. There was a promise of peace in the place; if only the peace of a desert.

For years I lived there the wild, free life of a hunter; solitary, save for the company of my hounds, until all unexpectedly Heaven sent me a companion. A new and strange light was flashed across my rugged path—the light of love, whose mellowing radiance stirred to life distracting hopes and fears, doubts and desires, and the thousand kindred yet conflicting emotions to which my heart had ever been a stranger.

It happened thus.

I was hunting in a gloomy valley, far from the haunts of men and miles removed from my hut home: a place so dark, so weird, so awesome

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in its loneliness that even I was chilled by the desolate solitude of the spot. At the bottom of the ravine, where a huge boulder had rolled from the rocks above and lay covered in lichen and moss, I found a tiny clearing, where the sunlight pierced the heavy foliage of the trees and glinted on a couch of moss, on one side of the fallen crag at which my hound, Karl, with set limbs and outstretched tail was pointing steadily.

I stopped and gazed in rapt amazement at what I saw.

On the ledge of lichen-covered stone lay a girl, more beautiful than any I had ever seen. Her eyes were closed and her face, oval-shaped with features of delicate cast, rested on her hand and rounded arm, while long golden tresses rippled over the shapely bust, which rose and fell as her breath came and went in her troubled slumber. Under the long lashes which swept her pale cheeks I saw traces of tears.

An overwhelming desire seized upon me to wake her, that I might look into her eyes and listen to her voice. But the next instant, remembering my scarred and hideous face, I checked the impulse. No one could look on me without loathing; and at this thought I cursed the Fate which, even in this wilderness, had found a new torture for me.

How long I gazed I know not; I was never one to heed the run of time; but it was long, for I watched the sun-rays sweep across her face, lingering lovingly, as it seemed to me, to kiss

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with golden richness the dainty grace and sweetness of the form.

As it grew dark I awoke from my rhapsody. For me there was hope in darkness. She could no longer see my face.

I went to her side and called to her:

"Maiden! Maiden!"

But there was no response.

I bent low to listen; and my heart beat with furious rushing swiftness and my brain seemed on fire, as I felt her warm breath on my stooped cheek.

Then I laid a hand on her shoulder; and at the mere touch of her my heart seemed to leap out of my breast, and every muscle in my body grew rigid as steel.

My efforts to rouse her were vain and fruitless, and what to do for the moment I knew not. The light was fading fast, the night clouds rolling up, the air growing chill and damp, and I could but guess whither the hunt had led me.

I knelt beside her and again tried to rouse her; but without avail. She had fainted, and perhaps, for aught I could tell, was dying. I took her hand, small and delicate, but bearing toil-marks. It was like a stone for coldness. I chafed and pressed it to my cheek and lips and tried to kiss warmth into it: but when I let it go, it fell back, heavily and listlessly.

Then I fell to cursing myself for the folly that had let her stay thus, faint and ill, while I had been feasting my dazed wits on her beauty. She

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might die, and then—ah, that accursed thought! —I should be her murderer.

I fell on my knees and with a vehemence that set me trembling prayed to Heaven to spare her, and, rising, lifted her in my arms to bear her to my hut. She was but a feather-weight to me, for my strength has always been as that of three men.

How I reached my hut, I know not. I remember nothing of the journey. I had miles of rough country to traverse ; but I walked like a man in a trance. It may have been my dog or my own instinct that led me. I know not. All feeling, all consciousness, indeed, was centred in soul-absorbing thought for the girl I bore in my arms. I never faltered, nor stumbled, nor slipped in a single step, and only awoke to the need for effort when I laid my burden on the couch of skins in a corner of my hut.

She lay so still and quiet that, at first, I feared I had but twined my arms round an emblem of death to bring it into my home. But she was not dead; and I set myself with such trembling eagerness as I had never felt to find the means to bring her back to consciousness.

Among my stores, gathered in some of my journeyings into the distant villages, was some brandy. I forced some now between her clenched white teeth, and I could have cried out for joy when a little sigh came struggling and fluttering through the chilled lips.

What was wanted was warmth; and I piled

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every skin in the hut upon the still form, tearing off my heavy hunter's coat, which was already warm, to place it first, that it might rest upon her.

I felt no cold, for my blood was like coursing flame.

Then I kindled a fire on the plateau outside, and filling some vessels with heated water, placed them to her feet and hands; and with rapid fingers prepared such fare as I deemed she might be tempted to eat.

But I had no light in the hut, lest she should wake suddenly and be frightened by my looks.

It was some time after I had completed my simple preparations when I heard a slight movement among the skins; and I think I felt more abashed at that moment than ever before in all the dangers which had thronged and jostled each other in my life.

I lit a lantern that I kept at hand, and, after bending for a moment over the couch and noting in her features the signs of returning life and colour, I crept out of the hut like a thief, and let fall behind me noiselessly the heavy bear's skin which served in place of door.

I waited, with my ear close to the entrance, listening as if for the wings of the Angel of Life. Then, a strange unwonted calm fell upon me. There grew up within me an assurance that the maiden would live; and an ecstasy, such as never yet had thrilled my nerves, sent a rush of mad joy bounding through me at the thought that it

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was to me that she would owe her life. To me, the hateful, hated, hating outcast, banned and cursed of all men. And as lightning darts and shoots through the night, illumining the blackest spots with its gleams of brilliance, so the thought shot from sense to sense, till my whole being was radiant and my huge body quivered with rapture.

"Now, let me die, for I have lived!" I could have cried; but I changed as quickly and prayed to live on, that I might see the sweet face again.

A low sigh came from the hut, then a movement of restlessness, and at last a little cooing cry, like the plaint of a terror-stricken dove. Then all was again silent.

After a space there sounded a maiden cry of wonder and alarm, and then she spoke in a voice low, sweet, and tender:

"Where am I? Where am I?" and I heard her move as though she had risen on the skins. I knew the tongue in which she spoke as that of a distant district.

"Fear nothing; you are safe." I tried to steady my voice, but it trembled and quivered like a whipped school-lad's cry.

"Who speaks? Where is this place? How did I come here?"

"You are safe," I repeated. "I found you lying unconscious in the woods, and brought you here. It is my hut on the side of the Grossberg. Be assured; try to rest and sleep. I will guard you from my post out here on the plateau." No

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reply came ; but as if in obedience to my words, I heard her move and lie back on the skins.

Presently, I thought of her need for food.

"There is food, such as I have to offer, lying close by you. Try to eat. You are not frightened ? " I asked.

"I am not frightened. The sound of your voice bids me trust you and disarms my fears. I will do as you wish."

I was as one in heaven.

For the first time in my life, a human being had not shrunk from nor shunned me—aye, had trusted me : and the simple, artless words, confidently spoken, vibrated through every nerve and fibre of my body. They made a delicious melody in my ears, with an ever-changing rhythm of love : like the soft, subtle sweep of a summer breeze across the strings of an æolian harp, rising and falling in a tuneful harmony of fluctuating sweetness.

I lay back with my head on my hands and my face upturned to the heavens, and closed my eyes to listen to the delightful echoes of the maiden's words. And when I opened my eyes, the world seemed full of beauty and love : the stars glittered and shimmered in coy congratulation ; the winds soughed and whispered among the tall pines below and around me, in tones that were entrancingly new and soothing to my ear. The silence of the night was no longer drear and waste and empty, but was as the hushed softness of happiness ; and as I gazed, strange and bewildering emotions

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seized upon me and held me, till the hot tears ran in streams down my cheeks, unchecked, because this one human heart had answered in sympathy to mine.

"I have eaten; what shall I do?" came the voice from the hut.

"Lie down again and rest," I said; and my great frame and heavy limbs were shaking so violently with the new feelings that my voice was still unsteady. I paused in the struggle for self-control.

"Are you there still? You are so quiet that, listen as I will, I cannot hear you," she said, before I had schooled myself.

"I am still here," I answered, "and shall remain here till dawn. It will be light soon; and before the day comes, I must go. I have far to go, and must leave at dawn, so that I may return ere nightfall. You are to remain here while I am away; and you must rest as long as possible. You will be quite safe. While I am absent, my hound will guard you; but there is no danger. No one ever treads this solitude save myself. You will find food, such as it is, in the hut. You will stay?"

"I will stay," came the reply, as trustfully spoken as before; and I breathed a sigh of relief.

In the day, I dared not show myself to her. Dared not yet; for a wild hope had sprung up within me; and my brain, ever ready with resource to answer to my will, had formed a plan. I would

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feign a need to be always away while it was light, returning only when in the dark my ugliness could not be seen. I would try to win upon the maid by kindness and protecting love ; to draw her to me by nurturing the simple trust and faith that were in her ; until in the future some love, answering to the fierce craze that possessed me, might help to blind her eyes to my poor scarred features.

"Send your dog to me," she said, after a long silence, in which I thought she had slept. I whispered to him and the huge, brave, obedient beast—a monster wolf-hound—understood me and pushed aside the bearskin door and crept to the couch where she lay.

"His name is Karl," I said ; and then I listened with a delight which made me laugh like a child, while she petted and loved and kissed the dog. Until she had come, he had been more to me than any human being.

Presently, all was still, and I gathered that the maid had fallen asleep again. Soon afterwards, I scented the coming dawn, and before the first streak of pale amber light had shown along the valley which stretched away to the east, I was already on way down the mountain-path, for the first time in many, many years, hoping, instead of fearing, to look on the face of my fellow-man.

Chapter II

"THE sound of your voice bids me trust you." These words of the maiden rang in my ears the whole of the day. The winds caught the refrain of them ; the streams rippled back an echo of the same message ; the birds warbled it to one another as I passed under the boughs ; the very sunshine seemed to print it on sward and path and crag.

A wonderful joy held me half spellbound. Snatches of old songs I had heard happy people sing and cursed them for singing, now came into my memory, and in my deep bass voice I tried to sing them too. I greeted the folk whom I met in tones to which my tongue had ever been a stranger, and with looks that were a curious contrast to my wonted demeanour.

In all the replies made to me, I seemed to hear an echo of the maiden's voice. It was with me as if I had taken up into my life some subtle essence of the infinite sweetness of her being, which even in my forbidding presence appealed to my fellows. It was with wonder and amazement, as though I had witnessed some kindly miracle of Heaven, that

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I gazed on the face of the first person who smiled on me.

I stood still and passed my fingers across my cheek as if to feel whether a miracle had really chanced, and the maiden's power had in sober fact charmed away the scars. No, they were still there ; and this added to my bewildered perplexity.

It was only a rough peasant woman who had greeted me with this first smile. I smiled back, and then went quickly to her and held out my hand.

"God thank you for that look, mother," I cried, causing the woman to stare at me as if I had lost my wits. "Give me your blessing."

"I smiled in answer to the happy light in your eyes, my son. My blessing is a small matter by the side of that which must have lighted on you. But I pray Heaven to bless you."

I doffed my cap and bowed my head with reverence.

I could not understand myself.

I, who all through my life had taken my own path, looking neither to right nor left, caring for no man, nor woman, nor child ; nor God, nor devil, for that matter ; was trembling like a babe, because of a peasant woman's greeting.

All day it was the same, wherever I went, whomsoever I met.

I had chanced on a market-day in Massen, the little town to which I had bent my steps, and the jostling crowds in the market-place made way for my giant form, not as of old, with averted, half-

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frightened glances, but with smiles and pleasant looks and kindly greetings. No longer did the jests die still-born on the jesters' lips ; no more did boon companions cease their chatter and nudge each other at my approach, hushing their voices and speaking in low and stifled tones ; no longer did the women stay their work as I drew near and cross themselves when I passed, as if to exorcise my devilish presence ; even the children ran to me and after me, plucking my clothes to win smiles from me, and then laughing back with their merry eyes.

I could scarce credit what I saw, and half believed the maiden must have witched my eyes till they were traitors to me.

I had gone to the place—it was some six or seven leagues from my mountain home—purposing to buy such things as I thought would serve to help out the comfort of the little maid and give her pleasure. I thought, too, that this might aid to keep her from leaving me. I had no lack of gold ; and I spent my money that day like water, till the load I had to carry was heavy enough to have taxed even my broad back at another time. But I made light of it then.

I carried everything to an inn and arranged it to fit my shoulders ; and then, measuring the hours that I should need for my journey, so as to time my coming with the fall of night, I cast myself on a bench minded to get some sleep. It was an old hunter's trick of mine to sleep when I would and how long I would.

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When I woke, several others were in the place, and I heard them speaking of wars and fighting and wounds and death. At another time this talk would have brought loud oaths to my lips and have driven me from the house. But now, I sat up and listened. Presently, one of them, a man whose hoary head and withered, wrinkled flesh betokened great age, turned and spoke to me.

"You are a man of war ; tell us how goes the fighting," he said.

"Why think you so?" I asked.

"You bear the noblest jewel of honour that man can bear," he answered, touching his shrunken cheek. "The scar medal of a deadly wound right in the front."

"This is no war wound, friend," I answered, in a tone so level that I marvelled at myself. At another time the rage would have flushed my cheek and almost burst my heart at the slightest reference to my looks.

"Then 'twas gained in deadly combat, master," replied the other. "And, if I judge aright, the hand that did it will ne'er grasp sword again. You are a man of such a pattern as I have rarely seen—and I have seen heroes, too, by the hundred in my day. Would you tell us the story ; for though my blood may be thin, I love the tales of hard blows given and answered?"

"There is no story to tell, old man : no story, more than that a man said that, which in those wild days I would brook from none : and when we

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fought, he dealt me a dastard, treacherous stroke when my guard was down ; and this was the result ;" and actually, I pointed to my own disfigurement.

"But you killed him, master," cried the old man, almost eagerly, as it seemed to me.

"Nay. He fled from me. I sought him ; but from chance, or prudence, or cowardice, or what may be, we never met."

"'Twas well for him, master ; well for him," murmured the garrulous old fellow, looking as though with admiring wonder at my limbs and frame. "Pity you're not a man of war : such thews and sinews find their aptest use in armies. What are you ?"

"I'm a hunter," said I, finding myself strangely amused at this babbling curiosity of old age. "At least, I'm that, more than aught else now ;" and I rose to go.

"Why, you're more a giant than a man," he cried, lifting his hands in surprise, as he noted my towering height and watched me swing the heavy load I had with one hand lightly on to my shoulder. "A true giant ! Aye, and if the light in your eyes speak truth, as noble as you are lusty. I was a strong man once ; but ever a babe with such as you. Give me your great hand, master, and take an old man's blessing. Aye, aye, never but a babe to you ; a puny babe ; but a strong man, for all that, as men go ; but not giants." And he stood and watched me as I strode off along the street, with a light, buoyant step, making nothing of my

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burden, and thinking only of her who was waiting for me at the end of my journey.

As I pushed my way rapidly forward, I set to pondering the marvels that had marked the day.

Even my very scars, like myself, had been transfigured and praised; called the "noblest jewel of honour;" and the light in my eyes had shone in the hearts of my fellows. It passed my understanding. 'Twas like a dream: yet never had vision of mine been so extravagant as I had lived that day in simple fact. When I had dreamed, the gentlest visions had been of some wild hunting scene, where I had chased the game far afield and triumphed in the slaughtering of it. My sleep thoughts had ever held a fit companionship with my life; and the greetings of women, the babbling love of babes, and the blessing of old men stepping to the grave had never yet had lot or parcel in my thoughts.

Then, I reviewed in memory every scene of the day, from the peasant woman's greeting to the old warrior's blessing: and the more I meditated, the more I marvelled at it all.

Could there be some change in me? I had not looked on my own features for years; and the memory I had was of a face, swarthy, lined, and full of hate; with one side marred and blemished by the fearsome red scar, showing like blood and circled and seamed with blue. The deeply furrowed seam was there; I could feel it as I passed my finger over the spot; but perhaps there might be some change in its appearance.

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I looked round me ; and at that minute heard the gentle, purling murmur of a rivulet. I laid my burden down at the foot of a lofty pine—I had strapped it to my back to ease the carrying, and readily slipped my arms from out the straps—and with my staff in my hand I pushed my way through the underwood toward the sound of the waters.

'Twas a narrow brook, whose shallow streamlet rattled over its pebbly bed, its surface broken with a myriad silvery ripples. I bent over it, but only to be mocked at ; for its diamond wavelets showed me myself in a hundred miniatures, here a bit and there a bit, seeming to laugh at me as they rushed merrily by, with no time to spare for the vanity of a great rough fellow like me.

I laughed, too, for I seemed to catch in the water music the soft, low mirth of the maiden.

I looked about me, and, taking a boulder that lay near, I dammed the stream with it, making a space that was smooth and placid and bright ; and there I gazed long and curiously at my features. They were the same, yet not the same. There was something in my looks, as I bent my huge, shaggy-haired face over my mirror, that I had never seen before. Half my face had never been uncomely ; and, with all the vanity that ever lurks in the brain of an amorous, mirror-questioning swain, at first I sought to feel that the comeliness was greater and the blemishes less than ever.

But I did not suffer the folly long ; and when I rose from my knees I sighed, and was sad at the

Elfa

result of my scrutiny. The scar was as deep and ugly as ever.

I lifted the boulder from the stream again, and as the freed water rushed away down its course with redoubled energy, almost like a thing of life, I gazed heavily after it for a space ; and wished that even so lightly my ugliness could flow away, with the water-mirror that had revealed it to me anew.

Then I turned to pursue my way.

When I reached the tree where I had laid down my burden, I stood in surprise. The pack was gone. I looked round on all sides, but not a sign of it met my eyes.

I turned, and ran with rapid steps down the path I had traversed to a point which commanded a view of all below ; but I saw nothing. Then I ran back, and passed on ahead. Despite my great size I was fleet of foot as the deer ; and, running hard, I came to a cunning twist of the path which showed me a sight that brought me to a standstill, half-laughing, half-wrathful.

Some distance on ahead, I saw three lusty rogues who had looted my bundle and were making off with it at as great a speed as its hampering weight would allow. Two of the rascals had hitched each an arm through the straps and were walking abreast with it hoisted on their joined backs, while a third was giving such help from behind as the nature of the ground and his own lazy inclination suffered.

The villains were travelling my way ; so I made

Elfa

no sound, but followed at a wary distance, letting them play sumpter mule for my shoulders. Presently, making a circuit through the wood, I passed to the front of them, and stood where my path forked from the other. There I waited till they came up labouring and panting, and groaning and oathing under the toil of their ill-gotten burden.

"This way, mules—this way," I said, stepping out to them from my concealment and pointing my staff to the narrower path. "This way, if you're minded to carry my burden longer."

At this the fellow at the rear came forward, and, seeing me without arms, levelled his firelock at my head, while the others began to lay down their load.

I smiled at the fool ; and a quick blow from my staff, dealt with a force that the rascal had little thought to meet, knocked his musket in the air, where it exploded harmlessly ; then, before the surprise was out of his face, I had him in my grip. For an instant I lifted him in my hands, as you may see a wolf-cub in the talons of an eagle, and shook him till the life seemed rattling out of all his joints ; and then I hurled him into the underwood, where he lay moaning and shuddering with pain and fear.

The companions came against me, one clubbing his musket and the other with an ugly-looking, long-bladed knife, that gleamed with the glittering threat of death. I breathed hard as I felt the wrath within me rushing up ; as the waters of a

Elfa

land-pent lake will hiss and spume when the blast first catches the placid surface. I rushed upon them both, laughing savagely at their puny efforts to meet my onslaught. A blow from my staff shattered the arm of him who had raised his gun ; and almost at the same instant I seized the dagger hand of the other villain, and twisted it with such strength that he uttered a short, sharp cry of pain and baffled rage.

The scent of conflict was in my nostrils, and my heart leaped in my bosom with the fury of old time ; and I shook and jostled and buffeted the knave, till I had wellnigh beaten the mongrel life out of his carcase. Then with a thrust I sent him reeling from : e, dazed, dizzy, and fainting.

At that momen. the devil thrust temptation on me.

The villain whose right arm I had shattered had snatched up his comrade's dagger with the left, and had stolen up with stealthy cunning in my rear ; and when I turned it was to find his blade gleaming above me. The mad fool ! It was but the work of a second to trip him by the heels and thrust him in the chest with my arm, and there he lay on the ground at my mercy.

The hell that raged in me at that instant must have blazed out of my eyes, as volcanic fire will show through some rift or gap near the surface ; and he cowered before me and covered his face with his hand. I tore his hand away and made him look on me, as I raised the knife high over

Elfa

him and bared his throat for the blade, glaring down at him in glowing triumph.

"You hell-hound!" I hissed between my clenched teeth. "You shall die!" And I poised the knife for the blow, and waited a second while he quivered in his terror.

Then a strange thing chanced. I seemed to hear the echo of the soft accents of the maiden's words:

"The sound of your voice bids me trust you."

In a trice, every vestige of my wrath left me; and I rose and paced up and down, thoughtful and sad, because I had so nearly taken the fellow's life. But soon I grew joyous and happy; for I felt that my old master, the devil, had been conquered by the maid and that I was free.

I ran to the men whom I had worsted in the fray, and, carrying them out gently, tended their hurts in such manner as I could, and placed them side by side. I told them that what they had stolen was mine, and yet not mine; for I was taking it to another whose life might depend upon its safety; and I ended by giving them such loose money as I had to repair the losses I had caused them.

And when I shouldered my burden, with an ease that made them gape in wonder, they thanked me in broken words and begged for forgiveness. I gave it them freely enough, rascals though they certainly were—for they had helped to make my heart lighter even than before—and set out to resume my journey. I had to hurry, since I had lost much time, and had yet some leagues to cover,

Elfa

while the sun was already, fast goldening the west.

When my feet began to feel the slope of the long, rising ground, at the crest of which the Grossberg rears its rugged, shaggy, pine-covered sides, I could feel my tawny cheeks flushing with the same sensation of nervous delight that had moved me so curiously on the previous night.

Then, suddenly, the way seemed to grow steep and difficult, although I knew every inch of it, and I sought to puzzle out the cause for this. It was not fatigue ; for not a muscle of me had tired. But a thought came into my mind which in a moment drove the blood back into my heart ; my body grew nerveless and flaccid, like a dead roe's heart, and I staggered and leaned against a tree and fought for my breath.

What if the little maid had left me?

I chid myself for my weakness, and tried to smile at myself for a fear-duped fool. But the fancy would not be dislodged from my brain.

I toiled on up the mountain-side, stopping ever and anon to listen for some sound of her ; and when, as was but natural, I heard naught, great beads of nerveful sweat stood out on my brow. This stayed my progress, and the night had been down a full hour and more, when I drew near the plateau on which the hut stood.

It was all as dark as a storm-cloud, and the ever-gathering fear within my breast grew till it made me wellnigh frightened to move. One or two night birds, startled by my footsteps, rose with

Elfa

a whirr and flitted past and away from me : and these I read as omens of ill. Surely the maid must have rarely changed me, thought I, when it came to such a pass that I heeded the brain flecks and crotchets of old women and fools.

I had almost reached the plateau before the feeling passed ; and then it fled in an instant, followed by a revulsion which went near to unman me.

A burst of song came suddenly to my ear, rich, tender, and full ; now soft and low, like the prayer of a sweet-voiced nun ; now melancholy as the gentle lapping of a smooth sea-wave falling on a sandy shore ; and again, rising in volume and mingling with the bough-brushing breeze, as a full-noted bird will carol at dawn from the topmost branch of the tallest tree to greet the sun.

I listened spellbound. The tones thrilled in me as I stood on the plateau, leaning on my heavy staff, with bowed head and throbbing heart.

I knew the song. It was an old folk-song of welcome from a maiden to her absent lover.

Here was an omen ; but I dared not now play the soothsayer.

When the song died away, I stood, without making sign or sound, longing that it might be restarted. But it was not ; for my faithful hound, Karl, give me a whimper of welcome, knowing I was near, and yet too obedient to leave his post.

"You are there at last, I know," cried the voice that had been ringing in my brain the livelong

Elfa

day. "Karl knew you were coming, and I was singing you a welcome." Here she gave a laugh, like a crooning babe; and then added, as if to chide me, "I have wearied for your coming. Why have you tarried so long?"

And for the time I was too moved to find words to reply.

Chapter III

"YOU said you would be back by nightfall," said the maiden, after I had spoken to her ; " and when the evening closed in, I waited : no, we waited, for Karl was quite as anxious as I was. But the darkness fell, and still you were not here, and then I began to fear that something had befallen you. And at that I was sad as well as impatient. The time has seemed so long ; " and she ended with a sigh.

" I was hindered in my coming, little heart," I answered, " and had to stand and do battle for my own."

" Are you hurt ? " she cried, quick alarm and sympathy in her voice.

" No, no ; not I. Men do not find it any light or easy task to hurt me," I made haste to reply, adding a laugh to reassure her. " I was bringing something from the town where I have been, which some knaves coveted ; but all they gained was a cudgelling."

" Tell me, tell me," she cried, clapping her hands. " You beat them off. Ah, you are strong and brave. Tell me, tell me about it."

Elfa

I told her something of the matter ; but said nothing of how nearly I had been to slitting the one rogue's wizen. I made light of it all, and so placed the thing that she laughed.

"Are you not coming in here?" she asked, suddenly, when I had ended the story ; and spoke so artlessly and simply, that I scarce knew what answer to frame. I have had but scanty practice in spinning wordy webs. I have ever been more concerned to do or not to do, than to find my reasons why, or why not.

"No, I am not coming in." I spoke plainly and perhaps bluntly, for she answered :

"Are you angry with me, then, that you will not look at me?"

"Nay, little heart," I said. "I could no more harbour anger against you, than the blossom could be wrath with the sun that gives it life. My reason is plain. You have flashed your light across my path, and I hold you for my patron saint. While you are here, the hut is, after nightfall, your secret shrine ; and I would die sooner than pass the threshold."

"While I am here," she echoed, heeding nothing of my other words and speaking in a hushed and breath-catching tone. "Are you going to send me away, then?"

"Do worshippers dismiss their saint idols?" My voice was hollow and deep with feeling as I spoke. A silence followed, which she broke ; but only after a long interval.

"You have not spoken to Karl yet," she said,

Elfa

"and he keeps laying his great head on my hand, and touching it with his nose, and glancing out, asking to come to you. May he come?" I blessed her for the gentle thought of the hound, and called him to me. The faithful beast gave a loud whine of pleasure and came rushing out, fawning upon me, nosing my hands and face, and leaping up for a caress. I loved the dog; and I loved the maid for loving him, too.

"May I come out as well?" she asked, after a while. "I have done all you told me through the day; gaining all the strength I could, resting here, and talking and singing to Karl all the time, and sleeping while he watched me. I could not help just slipping out now and then on to the plateau to look for signs of your coming. May I come out now?"

"The night is chill and the air raw; scarce suited for dainty little maids to be abroad in," I answered, at a loss what pretext to give; for I was loath to let her come, lest she should see my face; and yet loath not to let her.

"I can cover my head, and I would not stay long. But I want to say something that I would rather say when we are side by side, or face to face."

I winced at this word of hers, like a scared leveret.

"You will be stronger to-morrow," I said.

"But what I have to say, I wish to say to-night. Please let me come," she urged, with all the persistency of a pretty maiden.

Elfa

"If you wish it so much, do as you will," I said, being vanquished.

"Not so," she answered, with such sudden submissiveness that she conquered me completely.

"Not as I will, but as you."

"Come then, child," I answered; and I heard her give a pleased cry and leap up from the couch where she had lain.

I looked toward the entrance to the hut—long use to night vigils had made my sight good even in the darkness—and I watched the rug moved aside and the little hooded figure come peeping out.

"I cannot see you. Where are you?" she cried, stretching out her hands as if to feel her way to me.

"I am here," I answered; and at the sound of my voice, she turned and came to me.

"I cannot see you. Ah, there you are. Take my hands and hold them while my eyes grow accustomed to the darkness."

She put both her hands into mine as she spoke, and then bent down her head till her lips touched my hands, and she rained kisses on them, excitedly and fervently; and threw herself on her knees before me and thanked me and invoked a hundred blessings on me for having saved her life.

As for me, every sense in me was clogged; my tongue clave to my mouth, my chest heaved, my breath came and fled in quick deep gasps, my knees trembled, and my great body vibrated in unspeakable emotions; as you may feel the great oak of the forest vibrate even to the base of the trunk when the storm flies on the gale.

Elfa

Minutes seemed to pass before I could find strength even to lift the dainty chick from the ground and command voice enough to murmur in broken tones :

"Nay, nay ; don't kneel to me. If knees are to be bent, they must be mine in front of you."

When I had lifted her to her feet, she stood by me and would not loose my hands : and we kept thus in silence amid the dark stillness of the night, with the stars glittering in the blue-black setting of the heavens, and the breeze moving up toward us among the tall pines, whose black outlines, swaying slightly, with here and there a rustling creak, I could discern against the sky.

"You do think I am grateful to you, don't you?" said the maid at length : and in her voice I could hear the tears which the rough skin of my hands had been too hard to feel, as she had kissed them.

"Yes. But I rendered far greater service to myself than to you in what I did," said I, the tender grace of the child moving me to the core.

"I will try that it shall be so," she answered, with low and witching sweetness. "Now, I have something more to ask. What is your name? You have not told me. Mine is Elfa," she added, with winning simplicity.

But the question, like so many of her little simple sayings, puzzled me. I was loath to tell her the hated name I bore, lest she should have heard of the ill deeds associated with it. And yet I could not lie to her.

Elfa

"Elfa," I repeated, thinking to gain time to shape my answer. "Elfa. That falls with quaint rhythm on my ear, little one, and fits itself like a sweet old friend into a niche of my memory."

She paused before answering, stooped and again kissed my hand.

"I am glad," she murmured. "But now, you must tell me yours. All day I have had to think of you without a name, till my heart gave you one. Would you like to know what that was? I called you Kind Voice in my thoughts. But I want your real name."

"I have scarce had need of any name at all in later years," I answered. "For this plateau is like the eagle's eyrie for solitude. But years ago men called me Ernst. I bear another name, but it is pain to me to mention it, or even to think of it."

"Then I will never know it; and I can never mention it or think of it, either," said she, with a ready-witted, earnest sympathy which went straight to my heart. "Ernst, Ernst, Ernst!" She repeated the name several times, slowly and thoughtfully; and I had never deemed that such melody lay in its rugged letters. "And may I call you Ernst, and will you call me Elfa?"

"How came you by so sweet a name, Elfa?" I asked. And as I brought my lips to frame the child's name thus, to call her by it for the first time, my tongue hesitated and nearly played me false, tripping over the simple syllables, till my voice was hardly more than a deep bass tremulous quiver.

Elfa

She noticed the slip and laughed right merrily.

"Elfa, Elfa," she said slowly, as if she would teach my tongue to utter it. "Do you find it hard—Ernst?" And now it was her voice which was unsteady. "We must never find it difficult to speak each other's names, Ernst;" and the little rogue repeated it, just to school her pretty lips in the utterance.

"Nay, Elfa"—I had it glibly this time—" 'tis too pretty a name to slip the leash of memory. I shall ne'er forget it."

"Nor I, Ernst," she answered simply, and yet in such a tone as made my heart bound within me.

"How came you by it?" I asked, after a lengthened pause.

"I will tell you all that, when I tell you the story of my little life; but to-night I have enough to think of. I know your name, and I have been by your side. But not quite enough, after all. I want to see your face, Ernst. Why do you start like that?" The question disconcerted me somewhat, but I made haste to reply to her, lightly.

" 'Tis a goodly span from your eyes to my face, Elfa; and the light of the stars will scarce avail for sight-seeing."

"A goodly span, indeed," she said, playing on my words. And then she withdrew her hands from mine and stretched them up toward my face.

"See, I can scarcely reach to your shoulders. You are like the great man-mountain of the fable;" and she gave a soft musical laugh.

"What is that?" I asked, unthinking.

Elfa

"Stoop down to me and I'll tell you."

I stooped low, to humour her, not guessing what she purposed.

"In far-off fairy days, a little lily plant blossomed and flourished in a valley, beside a great rugged mountain ; and day by day the scent of the lily blooms was carried up by the wind till the mountain yearned for a touch of the flowers whose perfume so delighted him. But he was so tall and she was so little, that for a long, long time he yearned in vain. Then, one day a fairy passed through the valley, and the mountain told her of his wish. 'Would you like the lily to be nearer to you?' asked the fairy. 'I would give half my great height if she were,' answered the mountain. And then the fairy stood and, after whispering to the lily, waved her wand ; and the mountain began to grow down to the lily—just as you did to me but now—and at a signal from the fairy, the lily spread out her white blossoms on the mountain—like this"—and she put her arms round my neck as she spoke—"and laid her head with such a happy rustle on the heart of her great mountain friend—like this—and felt so restful and contented as she had never felt before," and she sighed as she nestled her head on my breast. "And then, the wand waved again, and just as the lily had given the mountain three happy, happy kisses"—and Elfa kissed me rapidly thrice on my cheek, and then ran away to the hut and stood a moment to finish the fable—"the fairy vanished and the mist cleared away, and the mirage which had lifted the lilies

Elfa

and lowered the mountain top to meet them, disappeared also, and everything was just as before only not as before, since the lily was prouder ever after, because she had kissed the mountain. And so, good-night, Mountain Ernst ; you see the starlight did avail me after all ; " and with another peal of joyous, roguish laughter she went in.

I stood just where she left me, like one bewitched. I was loath to move even a muscle, lest the soft imprint of her fairy arms round my neck, and the hot, hectic kiss spots on my cheek and hands should lose aught of their distinctness. The touch of her warm fingers as they had clasped mine, and had fluttered as lightly as the gossamer wings of a summer moth over the muscles of my arms, lingered as though she were yet by my side. My breast still heaved and quivered beneath the press of her head, where she had nestled it, as I had stooped to her till the ripples of her truant locks had mingled with my beard and brushed my cheeks : as the bowed branches of the lime are wont to be kissed by the wind-rustled grasses at its feet.

So subtly strong was the sweet deceit, that I had but to close my eyes, and I could make oath that my neck still bore the pleasant yoke she had placed on it. And I stood thus draining to the dregs the cup of rapturous ecstasy which memory held to my ever thirsty lips.

So still and silent and immovable was I, that my hound Karl, fearing something was amiss with me, crept to my side and, finding my hand, licked

Elfa

it and whined. And when yet I took no heed, he fawned upon me and thrust his nose against my cheek, and whimpering very gently, as if to ask what ailed me.

This recalled me somewhat to myself. I spoke to him, caressing the beast for his loving vigilance, and lay myself on the ground. It was many a day since we two had been apart for so long a time without my paying more heed to him than I had done while Elfa was witching me; and I think the dog had a touch of jealousy. As I was on the ground he came to me and laid his huge shaggy head on my chest, and crept close to my side, as though wanting to make it plain how he had missed me. I knew the faithful creature's ways well enough, and I put my hand to his mouth, and he first licked it and then, after a fashion he had had from a pup, he drew it in between his teeth and played now and again at champing it, with a touch so light—aye, as light as the maiden's kiss—that it would scarce have bruised a peach.

Presently, Elfa called him; and the rascal feigned in an instant that he was sleeping and could not hear; and when the call came again, he drew in a deep breath and let it out, for all the world like a human cheat, as if the slumber was deeper than ever. She called a third time, and then, as though he reasoned that a longer feint might bring him trouble, he stretched himself as if to wake, and looked at me and licked my hand, asking me plainly whether he was to go.

"Go, Karl," I whispered, patting him. He

Elfa

whined in response ; and first laying his chine close against my cheek, just to let me know how low he was to leave me, he rose and trotted off obediently ; and I heard the maid kissing and chiding him, and petting and scolding and feeding him all in a breath.

And then I set to thinking again of her words and caresses, wondering at it all, finding ever some new and subtle charm in act or accent that heightened the witchery. I tantalised my wits to devise fresh ways of enjoying the novel sensations I held my hands out in front of me and tried to count the little shooting pricks of delight which tingled at each spot where her kisses had fallen. Ah me ! I was but a great, happy fool that night ; drunken with the knowledge that the little maid had sought to show her pretty gratitude prettily.

As I moved my hand once, to raise myself to a sitting posture, it struck against the great pack I had brought from the town. I had clean forgotten it ; but now, I took it in hand and loosened the bands and spread out the contents around me.

"Ernst, Ernst," called the child from the hut, hearing the noise I made. "Are you going away?"

"No, Elfa, not till the dawn."

"And why at the dawn, Ernst? Are you afraid of me in the daylight?" and she laughed merrily.

"No, child, not afraid. But the task I have laid on myself carries me away from the plateau before dawn," I answered, putting her off.

Elfa

"What task is that?" she asked, with sweet pertinacity.

"I am hunting a strange quarry and have to learn its ways and uses." And this was true enough in a manner.

"What kind of game is it?" she persisted.

"A white roe, such as is rarely seen in these parts," I answered, chuckling softly at the turn I gave her query.

"Are you going to kill it, Ernst?"

"No, child, I am but seeking to snare it and tame it and keep it for my own."

"Oh, that will be delightful," she cried, laughing again. "And you'll bring it here, and then I'll tend it and love it."

I thought I had done well to turn aside her curiosity in this way; and so I had for the moment. But afterwards, the thing was like to have been a plague; for whenever I returned to the plateau after that, she plied me with so many questions of the white roe: had I seen it? Where was it? How long had I been hunting it? What did I try to snare it with? Why did I not want Karl with me? and a hundred other like queries: till I had been fain to cry for mercy; and went near to telling her that the white roe had fled away to her fabled mountain to graze the lilies in the valley.

"Kindle the lantern, Elfa," I said, after a while, "and see what I have brought from the town." I called out the hound and, devising a loop, made

Elfa

him carry in parcel after parcel in his mouth the maid.

Then I hugged myself and shook my sides in glee, as I listened to her cries of surprise and delight, when she opened packet after packet.

It was a curious medley I had got together. Dress-stuffs, silk, ribbons, brodered head-gearing, feathers, neckerchiefs, all such as the town could boast. I had told the woman who had sold me the wares to put together everything of such a sort as might please the eyes of a pretty girl; and she had given a very generous interpretation to my bidding. Another parcel had trinkets, beads, and corals, some braids of gold and silver, and a few jewels. There was plenty of colour in all, for I had ever found that that bird is judged the most beautiful whose plumage blends the brightest tints. In yet another parcel were packed toothsome sweets and luscious fruits and dainty foods and fare, such as I thought might tickle the child's palate. A fourth packet held perfumes and scents and spices, subtly aromaed, and—but there, I scarce know what there was or was not, and cannot catalogue the various contents.

The hut was only a poor bare casket for such a lovely jewel as Elfa, and I was minded that the contents of the pack should form in some sort a better setting for her beauty.

I was more than repaid by the happiness I gave her. Her little "oh's" and "ah's" in which she vented her surprise and delight, as her trembling fingers hastily unpacked the strings and she saw the

Elfa

contents, were music to me ; and I think I was even happier than she, and even more excited. It was a new thing for me to be so pleased at another's pleasure.

The maid dallied with the things—a present from the mountain to the lily, I told her they were, jestingly—half through the night ; and when I rose to leave at dawn, a hitch in the door curtain showed me that she had fallen asleep in the midst of them, as they lay scattered all around her ; for all the world like a tired child at play overtaken by drowsiness.

Chapter IV

MY task for that second day was the finding of a site where I could fashion another hut for my own use ; and I had in my thoughts a suitable spot some two or three hundred yards to the west of the small plateau where I had made my home. It lay on the other side of a shallow chasm in the side of the Grossberg, and was marked by a huge oak-tree that had often served me as a watch-tower.

By some volcanic freak in far-away times, nature had torn a mighty wedge from the mountain-side and cast it with its massive head stretching out across the narrow gorge. It was almost at the end of this that the oak-tree stood, truly 'like a monarch sentinel of the woods, surrounded only by scattered pines and firs. The views from it, both up and down the ravine, were clearer than from any neighbouring point of vantage ; and many a time from there I had been able to note the signs and movements of some wild quarry, which I had afterwards tracked down.

What pleased me most now, however, was the fact that from the post of observation from among

Elfa

the tall branches to which my axe had cut an easy climb, I could see the plateau where stood the hut. I could thus even from a distance keep watch over Elfa and assure myself that all was well.

At the base of the shallow chasm was a never-failing supply of water which I had secured, lest at any time that near the hut should fail. This was from a small mountain spring, its silvery, sinuous descent marked by a number of miniature waterfalls at certain points where it had to leap from crag to crag. In such spots the falling waters had worn for themselves many little basins; and it was the largest of these which I had hollowed for my purpose.

The site for the new hut, or cave—for it was to be half hut half cave—was on the side of the jutting slice of rock, where the tip of the wedge pointed toward the Grossberg. It was a slight surface rift, with a floor of fairly level rock, and some three-quarters of the top was already roofed by a massive slab of fallen stone. Within, the place was dry and roomy, and all that was needed to make a hut of it, was a roof for the fore-part and a contrivance to cover the entrance.

I had carried with me such implements as I thought I should want and, working with all my will, as was ever my way when I had a task in hand, I managed in the hours between dawn and dark to carry out the changes I had planned. When all was finished, however, it was only a rough affair: but I was too hardy and seasoned a hunter to feel the lack of soft comforts.

Elfa

I might have finished sooner, but in the early part of the day my thoughts were with Elfa and I was up and down the tree, like an orchard thief after apples ; and the oftener I went, the oftener I wished to go. Later in the day, however, I put a curb on my desire and set myself doggedly to finish my work. But when evening came and the hour for my return drew nigh, I let my fancy have its way, and I climbed the tree and stayed there, my eyes scarce straying from the plateau.

I did not go unrewarded. Elfa came out more than once, with Karl always close by her side ; as if the good beast had read my heart and knew that I had made him regent and protector in my absence.

My sight was like a bird's for clearness, and I could follow her every movement and watch her features. Now and then, she made of her hands a shade against the sunlight and peered, curiously and eagerly, this way and that across the breadth of forest scenery ; and I whispered to my heart that she was looking out for my return. So easily were my senses bent to follow my wish, that I thought I could read upon her face, not only curiosity, but a hope of pleasure expected ; and it delighted me to fool myself in this fashion.

As the sun was setting, she paced the plateau in more frequent visits, each growing longer ; and then I pictured a look of disappointment at my tarrying ; and I toyed with the thought on the way to the hut, when the dusk had gathered thickly enough for me to return.

Elfa

On my way I shot a brace of wild-fowl ; and I knew how old Karl would prick up those shaggy ears of his at the sound and long to come to me and find the game.

When I had approached nearer, I sent my voice before me with a loud call to the hound, and stood to listen as the shout was echoed from the hills around wellnigh a dozen times ; and almost before it had ceased, I heard the underwood giving way before the mad pace of the dear dog as he rushed down the hill to find and greet me.

We hurried on together, and as I strode up to the little clearing near the plateau, the same sweet strains of Elfa's yesternight welcome song rang out with melodious trill on the warm air. And to-night, she met me in the space before the hut.

"I thought you would have been earlier, Ernst," she said. "Have you caught her?"

"Have I caught whom?" I asked.

"The white roe."

"Oh," I answered, with a laugh at myself for having forgotten what I had told her. "Nay, I have not set eyes on her since I left the hut at dawn ; at least, not within snaring distance." And then she pressed her prattling questions thick and fast upon me about the roe, till I scarce knew what I answered. She had a pretty cross-questioning sharpness, and must have tripped and trapped me often enough, had she not, like a woman, in pressing one vantage-point, forgot to use others already won.

Elfa

When the fire of questions had slackened somewhat, I turned the matter aside by pointing to the birds I was carrying and promising her a hunter's supper. Then I set about kindling a fire in a spot which I had contrived: a sort of brazier circled by large loose stones and surmounted by a high three-footed stand from which hung a small caldron.

"What are you going to do, Ernst?" she asked.

"To let you see how we mountain-living hunter-folk shift for themselves in dressing and cooking our game," I answered gaily.

"And what am I to do, meanwhile?"

"You must play the little lady guest and look on," I said.

She laughed outright at this, and cried:

"Oh, Mountain, Mountain, what a useless little weed you must think me. See here!" and with that, she took the birds from me, and with fingers as deft as her laugh was sweet, she had the feathers off them and had dressed them ready for the pot in a tithe of the time it would have taken me. Then she ran into the hut and brought some spices and condiments from among the stores there, and with these she set before me such a dish as the old Grossberg had never sniffed. Next she fetched some of the toothsome biscuits I had brought in the pack, and rounded off the meal with one of some flasks of red wine whose existence I had forgotten; and thus fed me, and ate with me, and quaffed with me in a little beaker, and chatted

Elfa

and jested and laughed, till the soul within me leaped for joy and good cheer.

A crown she set to it all, moreover, by bringing me my large pipe, which she bade me smoke, while she busied herself in cleaning the crocks and pannikins and mugs of such a merry feast as I had never played host at in my whole life.

She would not let me help her. It was her task, she averred; and she pressed the point with such pretty insistence, that I yielded; not that I would not gladly have aided, but that I thought it pleased her more for me to yield.

So I leant back on my arm, puffing at my pipe and watching her as she flitted about; now, she tripped into the hut, anon, stooped over the dying embers of the fire; then bent to caress the hound to whom she had given a mighty meal, whose generous savour was the richest that had ever made the old dog lick his chaps.

And when she had finished all she came and sat down at my side and thanked me demurely for the pleasure I had given her.

At that I gave a great burst of rollicking laughter that went roaring out into the night and came back to us a muffled echoed bellow from across the valley, and I vowed that that must be a cross-purpose pleasure where she had had all the toil and I naught but the easy comfort and good cheer.

But she rebuked me gently, saying that I knew not the ways of women who loved to minister to the wants of the men-folk about them; and that

Elfa

such service as she had done was no labour but the labour of love. And she was so serious with it all, and spoke with such quaint earnestness that I knew the words came from her heart.

"Your shaft has gone straight to mark, Elfa," I said. "I know little enough of the ways of women-folk; my way in life has been too rough and rugged. This mountain solitude is no hatching-ground for courtesy; no place for soft services; aye, and no fit abode for a delicate maid like you." I said this last slowly and reluctantly.

"I have been thinking of that to-day, Ernst," she answered, in a tone to the full as thoughtful as mine—and my heart fell at the words. "I have been fearing lest you should say something of the kind. But if you are pointing your words at me, you must listen first to all I have to tell you, and then"—here she sighed and her tone grew sad—"then, if you wish it, you must send me away." At this she put out her tiny hand and thrust it into mine. It was the first sign of a caress she had given since my return that night, and every nerve in me seemed to glow with pleasure at it.

I would have given half my possessions just to tell her then that no act of mine should ever part us; but I checked the words as they rose to my lips.

"Tell me, child, just how you will and how much you will," I answered. "I have no thought of you but for your good."

"I believe that; nay, I feel it in my heart.

Elfa

I trust you, Ernst, entirely. If I could not, I should be very wretched." She paused a moment and then went on. "Mine has not been a happy life, and through all its little length I have seemed to want just that sense of perfect safety and security which, almost like a magic charm, you have brought into it at a stroke. I have never had real friends or real protectors. My mother died when I was born, and my poor father—I do not blame him—never could forgive me for having cost my mother her life. When he died, I was still only a little thing, some seven or eight years old; but, like unhappy children, quick to understand the feeling he had had against me. Then I went to live, first with one relation, then with another; but always to be treated as a nuisance and a burden; to be put to rough work, repaid with slights and grudging food."

"Poor little heart," I whispered, stroking her hand.

"Yes, poor in all that makes young life pleasant," she said sadly. "But some three or four years ago, when I was about seventeen—I am more than twenty now"—and she laughed softly—"well, a great change came. My father, it seems, had left me what everybody thought a few acres of worthless land which no one cared even to try and till. Of a sudden, however, the neighbouring land passed into the hands of wealthy men who found that it had great mineral wealth. Their riches made mine, for my little neglected spot of ground was found to be the richest in

Elfa

all that part of the country. But this was kept from me, and I only found out the truth by accident. Then I was ordered to give myself to a man whom I detested. He was a cousin, and his object was to get possession of my land. Ah, I shudder when I think of that time."

I felt her shiver at the recollection.

"I hated him, Ernst. It is wrong to hate; but he made me hate him. He forced himself on me at all times, tormented me with his presence, his smirks, his lies, his boasts, and his pretended kindness, till I loathed to see him approach me. And when I swore that I would rather die than be his wife, he first pretended he was sad; then laughed at me; and then swore that he would force me; and seizing me by the wrist, stood over me and threatened me, vowing that he would kill me—or worse."

"Give me the villain's name, Elfa," burst from me in a voice hoarse and deep with passion, while my breast heaved with the wrathful tumult that the maid's words raised.

"Nay, Ernst," she said, pressing my hand. "If you are so moved, I must not tell you more."

"I will be patient, child," I answered; and I marvelled at the power she had to rouse or calm me at will. She could sweep every chord in my nature which answered to her influence, as the zither strings are wild and rough, or tender and soft, at the thimble touch of the skilled player.

"I cared nothing for the money, but I feared my cousin, and after that I ran away," she con-

tinued. "And after a time, when I had travelled far from Aschern, where my home was, I found a shelter in a peasant's cottage, hidden right away in the heart of a woodland district. There it was that I learnt such matters as enabled me to be useful to-night. I was much happier there than I had been; for the woman was kind and I did not mind doing the hard work that she set me. But I had to leave in the end, for I was traced by the man who had threatened me. I had lived there many months, two summers and more; and when I returned one evening from watering the cattle, I saw him standing by the door of the cottage. On the instant, I turned and fled. I was afraid of him, Ernst."

"It was after that that the strangest events of my life happened; so strange, that as I look back on them, they seem like a dream, or a page out of some fairy tale. One bright spot, and one only, there was in my life at Aschern: the kindness and love of a girl cousin, whom I loved and who loved me. But she could do nothing to help me in my trouble. The memory of her is the only pleasant thought I have connected with all my childhood and home life. Ah!" she said with a sigh, so deep that I felt her hand quiver in mine. "I am glad, so glad, that the past is past;" and at that, I closed my hand over hers by way of promise of protecting sympathy.

Elfa

Then she broke the narrative, and said:

"It is chill. I will fetch a wrap, and then we can sit out together, and you shall learn all about the weary little wanderer who has come creeping to your side for shelter." And she went into the hut.

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Chapter V

WHILE she was gone to the hut, and I refilled and relighted my pipe, the rascal Karl crept into the place where Elfa had been and pushed his great shaggy body against my side and thrust his nose into my hand. He could not take it yet for right that any one but he should come nestling to my side.

I caressed him, and when the maid came back he fawned upon her, but would not give place to her until I bade him, when he stretched himself at our feet.

"Karl, good Karl ! dear, kind, faithful old dog !" cried Elfa, stooping over him and giving him a kiss for every adjective. "I have tried him so much in these two days, Ernst. I know that he has longed all the time to be with you ; but he has been as true to his duty as a soldier ; and I could almost believe he has deemed it part of his duty to appear pleased and happy, while all the time he has been fretting."

"Good Karl !" said I, reaching out to caress him.

"He has been acting host to me, you know, Ernst. Wherever I went he has stalked gravely

Elfa

with me and has watched me every instant. To-day, when I was sorting and arranging all the beautiful things you brought me from the town, he sat looking on with his great, grave, brown eyes fixed on my face or following my hands, as if to say, 'that it was a very unusual thing that was happening on the Grossberg, but fortunately he was present to give it his countenance.' And now and then I would speak to him and put sometimes a ribbon or an ornament under his nose ; and then he would sniff at it with such gravity and gaze up in my face so solemnly, as if to give his consent to my keeping it, that I would throw my arms round his dear neck and kiss him. But I am not sure that he cared for that."

"Did you tell him the fable of the lily and the mountain, Elfa?" I asked jestingly.

"No, Ernst ; there was no need. I could reach him without stratagem," and a little bubble of half-mischievous laughter rolled from her lips. "And now I ought to scold you, Mountain," she added, "for trying to spoil me with such pretty, pretty presents. I have been busy all the day putting them on and taking them off, admiring them, and wondering how a great, strong hunter could be so clever as to think of all the little wants of such as me, while heaping up such a load of beautiful things. It has been a happy day for me : the happier because it was all due to you : and I could think of all these things and of you at the same time. I do thank you, Ernst," she said coyly and prettily. "I have never had such lovely things in all my life before."

Elfa

"And I have never had such a little maid to try and think of," I answered.

"And will you always try and think of me—I don't mean in that way, but kindly and protectingly?"

"May my strength wither if I do not, Elfa!" And my words came with intense earnestness, for her appeal went plumb to the depths of my heart.

"And you'll try not to think and not to speak hard things of me, Ernst?" And her voice was softer even than before.

"My brain and tongue would palsy first, child," I cried. "I am a man whose life has ever been hard and my ways harsh: how hard and harsh your simple innocence can never guess. Your coming is like a rift of blue in a thunder sky. I have had to fight for my own hand against the world and the world against me; and there has been no peace for me save the peace which solitude can offer. And as a tender graftlet will change the whole nature of a rugged stock, so, as it seems to me, have you changed mine. Were I to thank you with sour looks, ill thoughts, and harsh words, I should be worse than a brute. You have my word freely on that; my oath, if you will. But there is no need of that. Rough and uncouth though I am, I have ever set my life upon my word and ventured all to make it good." Borne away by the feelings I had thus let loose, I took her hand and carried it to my lips. "I would give my life for you, child!" I whispered as I kissed her fingers.

Elfa

As if to make me understand how much my earnestness moved her, she crept closer to my side and leaned her head against me, as you may see a timid fawn, when the storm flies on the gale, creep close to aught which offers promise of the needed shelter.

"You'll think I am a child, indeed, to have pressed you so on this ; but when you hear how even my very life may hang on such a balance, you will not judge me harshly. Let my hand rest in yours, Ernst, while I tell you. It makes me feel so safe and so happy.

"When I fled from the peasant's cottage I had neither food nor money with me ; but I did not stay to think of that, for my one absorbing wish was to get away and hide myself, I cared not where. It was late in the evening when, from the mountain-path down which I was passing, I caught sight of the man I feared. I turned and fled over the mountain ; I knew the district well ; and I walked and ran at headlong speed, choosing the least frequented paths.

"I journeyed the whole night through, and in the earliest morning I begged a crust of black bread and a drink of milk at a cottage which I happened to pass. Then I hid myself in the thick of the wood and rested. Fatigue made me sleep ; and when I woke the shadows were beginning to grow long. The country now was strange to me ; so I took to the roads and set my face steadily forward all through another night. Afterwards I ventured to walk by day, begging

Elfa

my food and sometimes a lodging at the cottages I passed ; and in that way I put league after league between me and the man I hated.

"I had been journeying thus many days, and one evening I turned from the road to rest, and found myself in the thick of a wood which covered the sides of a valley between high hills. A very beautiful but lonesome spot ; and I was wondering, almost in despair, where I should rest that night when my eyes lighted upon a little wooden cottage, its front so covered with flowers and creeping plants as to be almost concealed.

"Famished for want of food and sorely in need of rest, you may imagine how eagerly I hurried to the cottage, praying that I might find the inmates as friendly and hospitable as so many of the peasant folk had proved.

" 'Enter,' said a voice in response to my knock ; 'I have waited for you.'

"The words startled me, but not more than the tone in which they were spoken. It was a woman's voice, but nearly as deep as a man's, the utterance slow and ponderous, and, as I thought, intentionally adopted to inspire awe.

"I entered and paused in amazement, staring, like one spellbound or in a dream, at the woman and her extraordinary surroundings.

"She was very, very old ; her yellow face lined with wrinkles, like the cracks and folds in old parchment. Her hair, white and long, fell over her shoulders in lank curls from under a tall, black headdress topped by three coal-black feathers.

Elfa

Trailing from her shoulders to the ground was a red, black-bordered cloak, curiously wrought with the skins of small animals : ferrets, rats, and lizards, with here and there the plumage of birds and the skins of snakes.

"She was sitting on an elbowed chair on a small platform raised two steps above the floor and placed beneath a canopy, the curtains of which were of the same colour as her cloak and similarly embroidered. And all about her were shelves on which were many sorts of birds and small animals, and snakes, some living and some dead, while the skeletons of others, the bones polished till they shone, were ranged along the top of the canopy, with three human skulls in the centre.

"'I have waited for you,' repeated the woman, and her eyes, black and piercing, gleamed out at me from under her shaggy white brows, as if she would read my inmost thoughts.

"'I have come by chance,' I answered. 'How, then, can you have waited for me?'

"'You have not come to give my grey head the lie !' she said sharply, and with some sternness. 'Enough, then, that I say I have waited for you.'

"I guessed then something of the meaning of the strange surroundings, and that her words were intended to impress me with her power of foreknowledge ; but I am no believer in witchcraft, and am not timid of such things. So I answered freely enough : 'Then you must know why I am here. Will you do what I wish?'

"She paused, her piercing eyes fixed intently

Elfa

upon me. 'Yes, you shall eat and drink, and shall find what you seek.'

"The answer was so apt that I could not restrain a start of surprise. Yet there was the prompting of a kind heart in it ; and, as it is always with me to trust or not to trust from the first moment, I went forward and took her thin, bony hand and kissed it as I thanked her simply.

"She gazed long and searchingly at me as if to read my inmost thoughts, and then drawing me forward placed me in the chair at her side. 'Tell me all your story,' she said, after a long pause. I complied, telling her everything without reserve. She listened, her eyes closed, and then sat thinking. 'You are a good child, and shall bide with me as long as you will. Go through that door and wait for me.'

"I went where she pointed and found myself in a room furnished like a peasant's comfortable kitchen, and with none of the eccentric fittings of the other room. She followed almost directly, having put off the long cloak and head-dress, and even the long white curls.

" 'Ask no questions,' she said in response to my look of surprise ; 'but await the time when I shall choose to speak ;' and with that she busied herself with an activity wonderful for one so aged, and gave me food and drink, and afterwards bade me sleep on her bed.

"I obeyed only too readily, for I was worn out, and I fell asleep with a greater sense of security and peace than I had known for many days past."

Chapter VI

"IT was a quaint home and a singular welcome," continued Elfa, after a pause, "but a true and hearty one. The old woman proved a staunch and real friend, although at times subject to fits of temper when she was harsh, unreasonable, and querulous.

"When she saw that I winced at violence, for anger always seems to hurt me more than I can express, she would stop suddenly, gaze at me a moment or two, and then grow tender and gentle.

"For many days she kept silence about her life and the reason for what I had seen in the other room, and only once again did she let me see her in her quaint array. And she forbade me to enter the room, declaring that if I disobeyed her I should leave the cottage instantly, and that that would be the least part of my punishment, hinting vaguely at grievous misfortunes which would befall me.

"But I soon learnt the meaning of it all. She had a wide reputation as a soothsayer, and people came from far and near to consult her in the hope of learning their future. These visits were

Elfa

always paid at a certain time in the day—the two hours before sunset—and I observed that, to all who came, her greeting was in the words she had used to me.

“She passed many hours in the front room, often talking to herself and the queer collection of living creatures she had gathered there. She had names for them all, and one of them, her chief pet, a large white rat, she carried in her bosom, and would often take it out at our meals and feed it.

“I was very happy there. I did such housework as there was, and prepared the meals ; but this left me abundant leisure to roam about the hills, revelling in the peaceful shelter I had so unexpectedly found, and wondering vaguely at times what was to follow.

“I could tell you many strange things of her, but one only must suffice for the present. Our talk together, never very much, was nearly always about myself. She questioned me until she had drawn out every fact and incident of my own life, and everything that I knew of others ; and her memory was wonderful. Not a word I told her was forgotten, and often she would surprise me with sudden questions, cleverly framed to test the truth of what I had said. I saw her twofold object—to prove my sincerity, and also to store up any facts I knew lest they should be of use with those who came to her.

“Well, one day when I had been some months in the cottage, she called me to her in the front

Elfa

room, where she sat in her quaint array. She was very gentle, and drew me to the seat beside her under the canopy, and kissed me several times with more tenderness than she had ever before shown.

“ ‘ You have been a good, obedient, loving child, Elfa,’ she said, after a pause, ‘ too loving and trusting to have met with such rough usage in the past, and too fragile to combat with it.’

“ ‘ I am happy in the shelter you have given me, grandmother,’ I answered : she had asked me to call her that.

“ ‘ But this shelter is passing away, child. You do not know me, nor of me : though I am known in many a wide district and far country. I have not even told you my name ; and I would not have you know it. Enough, that many people, the old and young, the hale and the sickly, strong men and feeble maids, all and every kind come here to me to know what fortune lies ahead for them. For it is my power to read the future. Not always, nor with all, but sometimes with a vision so clear and distinct that I myself am full of wonder. Men call me a witch : though often all the witchcraft lies in reading their own thoughts. To-day, I have had two clear visions : in one the future lay like an outlined map before my tranced eyes ; in the other, there was nothing but a grave. This was mine ; the former yours.’

“ She spoke so solemnly, and with a manner so earnest and impressive and so full of conviction, that I was moved in spite of my reluctance to

Elfa

credit her with the power she claimed. I made no answer except to press her hand. And then, like a silly maiden, I was all eagerness to know what she would say of me.

" 'The finger of Death is beckoning to me, child ; the blood in my veins is drying up ; my heart is growing tired of beating ; the grave is opening to offer me its silent, lonesome, eternal peace. The very day is not revealed to me ; but soon the end will come ; and then your shelter here will cease. My memory will be hated as that of a witch, and these walls will be levelled to the ground, stone from stone, as the harbour of an unholy and accursed thing. It would have happened long since ; but men are frightened of me and my power, and fear the evil which they believe would fall upon them at my bidding.' A weird and somewhat scornful smile moved her wrinkled face as she spoke.

" I shuddered and moved closer to her.

" 'That is right. Trust me, Elfa ; you are safe in that,' she said, and then took my hand. 'I have told you this to prepare you : not because I am loath to die. I am glad, for I am tired. Your future should not trouble you like your past : though the map of your life is marked with red and with black, as well as with gold : and blood and death will have their part in your lot, as with all human kind : though the gold of happiness, now rich and strong, now thinner and fainter, should prevail over all else. Should, I say, mark that, should ; for there is one source of harm to

Elfa

you, I cannot gauge. You are like a bird of the South to whom the sun of summer is life, the cold and storms of winter, death. In the tempest of wrong, wrath, and cruelty you will faint and droop like the swallow before the blasts of a northern clime, and will grow old and die before your time.

“ ‘ Each ill-considered, wrathful word
Shall sever, like the cut of sword,
Some thread of life.’ ”

That is the strain to which your life will run ; and should misfortune cast you among companions who use you ill, you will wither like the moth of a day. Anger, harshness, and cruelty will ever form for you the lash of the whip of death ; and woe for you if it be ever uncoiled. Save for that danger, your life will be as good and bright and happy, as you yourself would wish it.’

“ A long silence followed, in which she seemed to sink into a deep reverie ; while I myself was sad and thoughtful enough. Sad for her and her coming death : and thoughtful for myself and the strange future she had marked out. The words of the strain she had repeated, or invented, I know not which, were running in my ears all the time.

“ She roused herself suddenly and, kissing me, sent me away from the room.

“ We seemed to grow more intimate after that evening, and as the days passed, I could see no change in her, except increased gentleness toward me.

Elfa

"Then, one morning, she startled me by saying that I was to go out with her. Never before had she left the cottage once in all the months I had been there ; but I asked no questions, knowing she would resent them.

"She told me first to kindle a big fire at the back of the cottage. Wondering, I obeyed ; and when the flames were leaping and roaring, she brought out first her cloak and the hangings of the canopy, and then the dead animals and skeletons, and cast them into the blaze. Many times she came and went thus—for she would not let me touch them—and stood watching the flames consume them.

"She did not speak a word to me all the time ; but was very sad, wringing her hands mournfully. And when they were burnt, she stretched her arms over the ashes, waving them to and fro, and crooning to herself some words I could not understand. Presently she took from me the rake with which I had fed the fire, scattered the ashes with vigorous sweeps in all directions, and then hurried back into the cottage.

"I followed, troubled and wondering at what had occurred, but not venturing to speak, and I heard her in the front room calling the living things that were there. She came to me soon afterwards, and giving me so much of the burden as her strength would not permit her to bear, she bade me go with her. I was full of foreboding as I followed her up the zigzag path she chose up the hill. The weight of the load she carried taxed

Elfa

her strength so that her breathing was laboured ; but she would not let me share it. Once when I caught her up and offered, she spoke roughly, bidding me keep behind as she had ordered.

"She did not halt nor falter once, and held on her way for an hour or more until we reached a spot where a great mass of fallen stones lay heaped in orderly disorder, forming a sort of rugged, moss-covered rampart on the mountain-side, clear of trees and shrubs, save for the bracken and briar, and giving a wide and glorious view over mountain, dale, and forest. She sat down, facing the sun, and her look of mental pain and sadness made my heart bleed for her.

"I set my burden down by her and laid my hand on her shoulder. She started at the touch as if she had forgotten my presence ; but she accepted the caress as a token of my sympathy and, lifting my hand from her shoulder, and pressed it in her trembling fingers, first carrying it to her lips to kiss it. Then I felt that her face was wet with tears.

" ' Do you know why we have come here, child ? ' she asked.

"I nodded, and stooped to kiss her forehead. ' I think I do,' I said.

She did not reply for a while, gazing over the hills, the sunlight bathing her wrinkled face and hair with golden radiance.

" ' My hour has come, Elfa,' she said at length, her voice low but quite firm and steady. ' I am going to die. It is not that which saddens me, but the

Elfa

thought of these poor waifs. I am troubled when I think that my care for them may now prove to have been but cruelty, since I have robbed them of the power to care for themselves. Not all. Not all ; some are as wild as ever ; but others can make but a poor fight for life.'

" ' You must not harbour such a fancy as coming death,' I said.

" She turned with a smile as she shook her head slowly. ' Fancy? It is no fancy. I shall not see another sun.' She spoke with such an air of conviction that remonstrance was useless.

" ' I will care for these, if you will, grandmother.'

" But she shook her head again. ' No, Elfa, it cannot be. You are on the threshold of a new life even as I am stepping now into the long night. Remember all I told you when I spoke of your future ; you must never forget that. And now, child, leave me for a while alone.'

" Understanding now what she purposed to do I went to a little distance and watched her. I shall never forget that scene, Ernst. Some of the little things appeared to rejoice in their freedom and darted away ; but the birds knew her so well, and were so excited by their unexpected liberty, that they carolled and twittered and chirped in every key as they fluttered round and round her, perching on her shoulders, her head, her arms—anywhere that offered a foothold. She tried to drive them away ; but when she succeeded one moment, they would be back again the next, warbling and flying

Elfa

round about her, till she could do nothing but gaze at them in very helplessness of love through the tears that gathered in her eyes and rained down her cheeks.

"After a time, however, one or two of the stronger birds began to try their wings. A starling was the first to go, flying to a tall boulder, where he perched, chattering and calling to the rest. A blackbird followed and a large thrush, and these then essayed a longer flight to some trees at the edge of the clearing; and thus, one by one, these little captives spread their wings into the great world to which they were such strangers. All save one, a sweet-singing finch, that would not leave. When it alone remained, the old woman made several attempts to drive it away: setting it on shrubs and stones and on the ground, and then throwing it into the air: but all to no avail, for the faithful little bird flew at once back and perched upon her, bursting out every time into throatful song. I loved the little thing for its faithfulness.

"One other pet there was—the large white rat, which she had kept to the last, loving it, I think, the most. She carried it nearly always in her bosom, and I had often seen her kissing and caressing it. She took it out now, kissed it for the last time, and set it on the ground and walked away. The rat, not knowing what to make of this new experience, crouched for a moment expectant and shivering, its quick red eyes darting in all directions, and then ran after its mistress and

Elfa

jumped upon her dress, and, crawling up, nestled against her neck with an old familiar caress, and sought to go its usual way into her bosom. This happened time after time, until the old woman was forced to let the bird and the rat remain with her.

"Then she beckoned me, and we went back through the wood, but by a path different from that by which we had come. She kept me by her side now and leaned upon me, for her strength was giving way ; and we walked thus until we reached a path which was broader and plainer than any other. There she stopped.

" 'We must say farewell here, Elfa. Follow this path, and it will bring you into a village that lies at the foot of the mountain. Take this with you'—giving me a small bag which she took from under her dress—'there is money in it, enough to supply your simple wants for many days. But hide it, lest it be stolen from you.'

" 'And what of you?' I asked.

" 'I shall not return. My path lies that way,' she replied, lifting her hand and pointing up the mountain.

" 'My way is with you,' I said quietly.

" 'You have been obedient and good to me, Elfa. Obey me now.'

" 'I will not leave you,' I answered.

" 'I wish it ; nay, I will have it !' she said quickly and imperiously. 'You must not thwart me now.'

" 'I will not leave you,' I repeated.

Elfa

" 'But I must be alone. I will not have you with me ; I need you no more. I bid you do as I have said.'

" 'I will not leave you,' I said for the third time. 'Shall I be less true than a bird or a rat?'

" This reference moved her. She gazed at me with a great tenderness in her eyes, and she kissed me.

" 'You shall have your will, Elfa. We will return to the cottage, though I had not meant or thought to enter it again.' And she went on down the hill back to the cottage. She would not go in at the front, dreading, I think, to pass through the empty room ; and I kindled a fire and prepared some food, for we had been many hours on the hills. But she ate little or nothing, and soon crept away into bed.

" I sat with her, intending to watch through the night ; for I had a fear of some coming evil. It was very solemn and still ; and I sat listening to her feeble breathing, and thought that she was asleep. But she was not ; and now and again, when I laid my hand upon her face, or smoothed her hair or her pillow, she would put up her fingers to take mine and press them, or sometimes kiss them, murmuring my name. Some two or three hours later the moon rose, and its light came through the window and shone upon the bed, making the face look deathly white in its silver sheen.

" Then a strange thing happened. The little finch, missing its cage, had been very uneasy since

Elfa

our return to the cottage, and had perched itself on the head of the bed. When the moonlight came flooding into the room, it burst into a sudden rush of full-throated song, which sounded so loud and shrill and clear in the still room that it startled me. The song ceased as suddenly as it had broken out, and the bird darted toward the light and dashed against a cracked pane with such violence that some of the glass was broken. I picked it up and found that a splinter of the glass had pierced its breast. It had killed itself in its strange flight for freedom.

"'Is it dead?' asked the old woman, from whom I had tried to hide the little body.

"'Yes,' I answered.

"'Do you know what that means? It broke the glass to let in death, and was itself the first victim.' It was a weird thought, and I tried to turn it aside, saying that the bird had taken the moonlight for the dawn and had sought to greet it with song and to fly out to meet it.

"'No, no, child. It knew that death was in the air and offered itself to save me. Bend over me and kiss me. Good-night, Elfa. Remember all I told you.'

"'Good-night, grandmother,' I whispered, and kissed her.

"She fell asleep soon afterwards, and presently, wearied with the long walk and the mountain air, I myself dozed, woke again with a start, dozed once more, woke yet again, and then passed into a deep slumber, and did not wake until the sun was high in the heavens.

Elfa

" Chiding myself for having slumbered, I bent over the bed. She was right. Death had come in the night. I saw it the instant I looked on the face, still, rigid, and white ; but I felt the pulse, and then turned down the clothes to feel if the heart were beating.

" And as I did so, the sunlight, streaming in through the broken pane of glass, where she had said death had entered, fell upon the cold, still bosom, and there, stretched out at full length, as if it had been striving to crawl to the face for a last caress, lay the lifeless body of the white rat ; faithful indeed till death.

" I covered them both up and hurried from the place : full of sorrow at the loss of the only friend I had in the hard, wide world.

" She was buried in the burial-ground of a village not far distant. But not without great opposition ; for I learnt then that, as the Old Red Witch Judith, she was widely known, and as widely feared and hated. Her money enabled me to overcome the difficulties, however, and I was the only mourner at the simple little ceremony.

" Nearly all the money she had given me was needed for that purpose ; and I left the place, once more a wanderer, homeless and all but penniless, and set out in search of that new life promised me by my old friend Judith. Friend, I say, for I could not think of her as a witch, knowing her kind heart and remembering all her gentleness and care for me.

" But it seemed very hard to find. I walked

Elfa

many, many days, often hungering and thirsting, footsore and weary, until at length despair laid hold of me. I smiled at myself for having placed such faith in her words—faith which was betrayed by the hardships of every day of my weary journeying. When they rang in my ears, the promise appeared but a mockery, starting the regret that when Death had come into the room that night he had spared me.

"Increasing weakness made me often light-headed. I neither knew nor cared where I was nor where I went. I craved only for rest ; and one day I lay down in the woods, hoping earnestly that I might die. Yet mingled with the hope of death were the words of the strain to which she had said my life would run were echoing in my ears :

" 'Each ill-considered, wrathful word
Shall sever, like the cut of sword,
Some thread of Life.'

"There was no need for wrath, I thought. Misery, want, fear, cheated hopes, and fatigue had sufficed.

"And then—what a change it was ! When I awoke it was in a strange place. My fatigue was gone, despair had given place to new hopes, a kind voice I could trust promised me safety, and my blood was warmed and my heart beat fast in the rush of delight.

"My new life had begun, and I was safe in your care."

Chapter VII

DURING the days that followed, I pondered the story which Elfa had told me, turning it over and over in my thoughts as a dog noses its victuals to pick out the daintiest morsels. Which those were, any one will know readily enough who has been even singed by such a flame of love as blazed in me. Every artless sign of her leaning toward me was as fuel added to the flame.

Her dread of angry words and shrinking from harsh ways, her timorsome appeal for gentle usage touched the inmost chords of my nature; while her confidence and trust, which I read as the promise of yet deeper feelings, roused such hopes that I could scarce contain my overpowering joy. Fifty times a day I breathed deep vows to tend and protect her, and to fashion every act of my life so that it should both serve and please her.

I came to ask myself but one question in all things. What would Elfa wish me to do? And in framing the answer I sought in my rough, crude way to force my thoughts to follow the soft tracery of the child's gentle mind.

The change in me was like a miracle. It was

Elfa

as though Heaven had grafted this frail bud of delicate innocence upon the rough stock of my life for the purpose of destroying those instincts of passion and violence which, until her coming, had been the very sap of my existence.

At first I swore vengeance against every soul who had raised a finger to her hurt, and found pleasure in thinking out plans by which my great strength would enable me both to redress her wrongs and punish the wrongdoers. And I loved my huge muscles the more for their promise of help in her service.

But a few words from her, spoken in reply to a reference of mine to the matter, changed the whole current of my thoughts, and I put aside every desire and sentiment of revenge. That was for me the greatest change of all; for revenge, even of the smallest slight, had been more to me than the strictest law of God to the most God-fearing saint.

And I loved her so, that this setting up of her will in place of mine was as sweet as it was strange and new. What would Elfa like? what will please the little maid? were questions I never tired of putting to myself; and I could sit for hours cudgelling my wits and fascinating my senses in devising new delights for her.

I watched her words as closely as the sunlight follows the shadow of an aspen leaf, to catch some expression of her wishes; and put questions to her, trying to draw from her some desire. I was as pleased as a well-placed courtier when I

Elfa

succeeded, and tramped league after league to search and find and bring back some trifle that she had mentioned.

But there was still one grievous secret fear in my mind. I dared not let her see my face. She questioned me often about my persistent absence in the daylight; and I had to put her off with many excuses. I was loath to mislead her, even in this: but as the days passed the fear lest my unsightly looks should revolt her and turn her from me, grew as fast as my love deepened.

What had seemed in the beginning an easy enough task to look forward to, became impossible to me as the days rolled on. I was afraid to let her see me.

This dread was the single blemish in my happiness. It lay across our path, an ominous menace of disaster; as a hidden crag in the fairway of a stream threatens shipwreck and death to the voyager upon its fair-flowing surface.

I thought of many ways in which to try to overcome the danger: but in this my changed temper was all against me. It had always been my way rather to go forward to meet any peril which threatened me than to stay to be attacked. In all else my instinct was to act; to set all I had or cared for on the moment's hazard, putting all my strength and energy into the act and casting every thought of failure to the winds.

But in this I was a coward; and, like a coward, bored into every recess of my brain to find a

Elfa

reason for inaction. Often I would laugh at myself for the feeling: but the laughter gave me no courage, nor could I shame myself to put the matter to the test.

In certain moods I grew angry with myself for thinking that Elfa would be frightened by a few scars, that I was wronging her by such unworthy thoughts, and that, if she cared for me, a mar-spot more or less on my cheek would make no difference. But at that, my colder and more calculating half would prod and dig my memory, torturing me with a hundred reasons why beauty should be scared by ugliness, until in the result I was just the same doubting, despairing coward as ever.

How it would end I knew not. The time must come when the discovery would have to be made: but how, or when, or where, I could not foresee. One thing grew more and more certain—I would do nothing to hasten it.

In the end, it was accident that decided it: accident, that went near costing such a price as makes me shudder to recall the time. It fell out in this way.

Amongst the animals that from time to time I brought up to the hut were some she-goats, in the thought that Elfa would be glad of their milk. For a time we housed them in a rough pen that I put together hastily, and Elfa fed and tended them in it. In a time, shorter than I had thought possible, they grew to know her, and would wanton and frisk round her, coming always

Elfa

at her call; and then they were allowed to stray where they would.

By a fortunate chance I reached my own hut one afternoon earlier than usual. I had a certain task in hand there which I purposed to finish in the hour or two before the dusk, and before setting about it I climbed to my lookout in the oak-tree to see that all was well with Elfa.

But the instant I turned my eyes toward the plateau a sharp cry of sickening fear escaped me and I came near to loosing my hold of the branches.

Elfa was crouching in abject terror behind Karl, close against the hut, and a few yards away a huge brown bear was tearing to pieces one of the goats, which had probably drawn it to the spot. As it devoured its victim it kept turning its bloodstained jowl to growl and snarl at the brave hound who stood with every hair on its body erect, ready to sell his life in defence of the panic-stricken girl.

In a moment I was on the ground, and snatching up my firelock and a heavy club, and praying for speed and strength to carry me to the plateau in time, I rushed up the hillside through brake and briar with the speed and rage of a maddened lion scenting danger for his mate and whelps.

As soon as I reached a spot where my voice could be heard, I sent forth a mighty shout, to let Elfa know I was at hand.

Karl answered my call; and the next moment fierce growls from the dog—the brave hound's

Elfa

note of challenge and defiance when his blood was fired—told me that the attack from one side or the other was on the point of being delivered.

I redoubled my efforts, loosening, as I ran, the large hunter's blade in its sheath at my girdle; and never did my heart bound with mightier thankfulness than when I leapt upon the plateau and rushed between my darling and the huge, bloodstained, growling beast.

I took a moment to regain my wind, and called hurriedly over my shoulder to Elfa.

"Search quickly in the hut for my pistol and keep it in your hand lest I, or you, should want it."

"Heaven be praised that you have come, Ernst. I feel safe now, and quite calm," she answered as she ran to do my bidding.

The bear lifted his snout from the carcase of the goat as I reached the plateau and snarled savagely at me and at Karl, who was waiting for a word from me to fly at him.

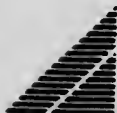
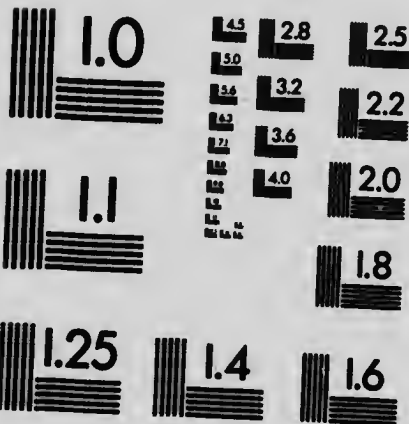
In this way I gained the breathing-space I needed. As my musket was loaded with shot only, instead of ball, I knew I could but wound him, and my thought was to blind him. I stepped toward him, and as he raised his head and reared on his haunches at my approach, I fired. I missed his eyes but I wounded him, and with a loud roar of pain and rage he came at me at once. He was full as eager for the fight as I myself.

I threw my musket down and, seizing the heavy club, rushed upon him with a cry almost as loud



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Elfa

and to the full as fierce as his. 'Tis a noble thing that great shout of battle, when all the fiercest energies in the body are girt and strung to the fullest tension, and the whole wrath that throbs and rages in a strong man's heart finds voice in that great challenge of defiance to the death. I had ever loved the fight, given only that the chances were fair and the foe a worthy one. I had a worthy foe now, indeed, and my heart leaped with sheer delight in the combat.

I put forth my whole strength as I whirled the club and struck with all my might at the shaggy head, aiming to bring the weighty end of the club on the brute's jaws; but I under-measured the distance and the blow fell on his head. It would have broken his jowl, had it fallen as I purposed, and it made him reel and stagger for an instant, until with a roar he came at me seeking to crush me with a blow from his huge paws. I leapt aside and rained blows upon his head and limbs and body, while Karl, like the clever hunter that he was, ran behind him and fastened upon his haunch to hamper his movements, while keeping out of my line of attack.

The shaggy brute was truly a noble fighter, and paying no heed to the dog's attack, knowing by instinct that the real danger lay with me, kept rushing at me despite the heavy blows I poured upon him, and I had to spring back more than once to avoid his ugly attack. My blows began to tell upon him at last, however, and I was thinking of calling Elfa to give me the pistol that I

Elfa

might finish him with a bullet when, in springing back to avoid one of his rushes, I trod upon the dead carcase of the goat, and fell headlong to the ground, my club flying out of my hand.

Before I could scramble up, he was upon me, with a snarling roar that sounded like an angry shout of triumph and vengeance. A scream of terror from Elfa, and maddened growls from Karl as he loosened his grip and came rushing round to fly at the bear's throat, sounded in my ears just when I felt the beast's fiery breath in my face, and his bristles brushed my cheek as he sought to fasten upon my shoulder with teeth and claws.

But I did not mean to be vanquished, and the peril I was in only served to quicken my wits and brace my nerves. I was feeling for my knife when my hand came in contact with the carcase of the goat, and quick as light I snatched part of it up and plunged it into the bear's mouth, and rammed it home with such force into his gaping jaws that he was half choked, and had to lift his head to cough out the mass of flesh and bone.

This enabled me to regain my feet, and we grappled in as close and fearsome a struggle as ever I had known. I had kept my hold of the goat's carcase, which had wrapped itself round my left hand and forearm, giving it protection, as I thrust the flesh again and again into the bear's mouth.

The fight was telling on him, and his strength was failing him somewhat. I judged that the shot wound I had given him, and the lusty blows I

Elfa

had afterwards dealt out with such generous force, were now making their full effect felt. But he was a gallant brute, and he fought with a desperate courage and fierceness.

The trick of mine in thrusting the goat's flesh between his jaws hampered him, and he champed and shook it with savage ferocity, and forced it out again and again. But each time I plunged it back with all my strength, trying to thrust one of the bones right down his throat, and fighting and struggling with such strength and power as I had never before had to put forth in any combat.

I could have finished the fight with my knife, but in his hug he had caught my right arm and pinioned it, and for a long while my efforts to free it were in vain. I was also spent with the desperate energy of the struggle, and was beginning to fear that my strength would give out when, as I was once again thrusting the flesh into his jaws, I felt the tension of his grip on my right arm loosen.

I seized the moment to draw my knife and plunge it into his stomach. He roared out with the pain, and made another frantic, maddened effort to overpower me. But in vain ; for at that instant I found the way between his ribs and thrust the keen, long blade again and again into his heart.

With a last roar he fell, carrying me with him, and after two or three convulsive movements the noble, big, gallant beast lay still in death.

Elfa had screamed again when she saw me fall the second time, and wishing only to reassure her,

Elfa

and not thinking for a moment of the marks of the conflict which I bore—for I was covered from head to foot with blood—I rose and went to her.

She cried out as I approached, turning as white as her own teeth, and seemed like to faint.

"All is well with me, Elfa," I said, and smiled.

"Your face, Ernst, your face is all torn," she cried, pointing to my scarred and seamed cheek.

I clapped my hand to it, as if to hide the hideous disfigurement from her, even at such a moment; and then I found that the flesh of it was torn and bleeding. In the last moment of the struggle the bear's claws must have scratched it.

And my heart leapt with joy at the thought of the good turn the big beast had unwittingly done me in tearing away the old scar that I had feared to show to Elfa.

"It is nothing, little one, nothing but a skin scratch," and I laughed then, right happily.

And that was how Elfa came to look for the first time in the broad light of day upon my poor scarred features.

Chapter VIII

NEVER before had I ever known how sweet it could be to have a hurt. Wounds I had had in plenty, and some bad enough ; but I had always chafed and fretted under the surgeon's touch and fumed and raged at the confinement, bitterly and wearily enough.

This time, ah me ! 'twas a different matter, indeed. True, I was not badly hurt. The bear's claws had stroked my cheek roughly enough, no doubt, and had torn the flesh in a manner that may have had an ugly look to tender eyes ; and my shoulder was robbed of a good length of its skin. But the stout leather jerkin that I wore under my hunter's tunic had served as a tough extra skin, and the wound itself was only slight.

But Elfa could not think this. She insisted that it was dangerous, and she threatened me with so many gentle punishments if I did not instantly have it dressed, that I could not help but yield even though laughing to myself. She made a winsome surgeon, and as I had no hurt worth worrying over, my eyes roved after her as she flitted here and flitted there, fetching one thing after another to

Elfa

dress the place. She was so busy with it all, and so full of earnestness, and wore so sweetly grave a look, that I was feign to enter into the spirit of the thing and play the patient with quite a solemn docility.

Old Judith, she told me, had shown her some wonderful simples for such hurts as lacerated flesh, and she was more pleased than enough when she found, or thought she found, some herbs needful for her rare specifics. She heated water and set these to brew, declaring they would cure me sooner than aught else : and while they were preparing, she set herself to bathe and cleanse my wounds.

Like the fall of snowflakes were the light movements of her cool and dainty finger-tips, as she deftly cleaned the wound and bathed it ; ever and again stopping to cast pitying looks into my eyes and ask if she were hurting me. What could I do but assure her that the ease she gave to the smarting was just what I had needed, and beg her to go on. I would never have stopped her, indeed ; and I began to think that a bear fight every day with such a course of treatment to follow it, would be a rare life to live.

But the brew of herbs began to steam, and then, declaring that it must be applied the moment that the water reached a certain heat, she left the bathing, covering over the hurt with what might have been a spider's web for all the weight it had as she imposed it, and went and stood to watch her decoction as it seethed and bubbled on the fire.

Elfa

While we were waiting for the compress to be ready and I was silently watching her with eyes of love, she turned now and again to speak some words of sympathy—for she thought I was silent with pain—and with little speeches, framed to cheer my spirits, she sought to encourage me, telling me wonderful things of the healing properties of the brew. I noted all the kindly intent that lay behind the words and loved her the more for it as I listened.

Presently she came and laid it on, shrinkingly and yet with such confidence in its virtues, and asked me if it soothed the hurt. Dear little heart, I would have answered yes, even had it been briars or sting-nettles instead of harmless leaves. And then, because she took such delight in the deed of kindness, I made little difficulties about the set of it ; partly to give her pleasure in arranging it all to my comfort, and partly that I might keep about me as long as I could the touch of her fairy fingers.

When it was all finished and she had praised me for being so still, she told me that I must lie quiet, so that her drugs should have time to effect the cure. I wished to set about the work of skinning the bear and getting rid of his carcase, and told her this. But she would not hear of it, and I had not the heart to cross her. So there I had to lie with one warm mess on my shoulder and another on my face, like a schoolgirl with a toothache, and play at being a wounded hero ; when at any other time, a well-oiled rag on the

Elfa

one spot and a dash of spring water over the other, would have been all the dressing I should have needed to let me finish the work which now I durst not even attempt "for fear of bringing the fever into my wounds," as she declared.

"I am doctor, now, as well as nurse," she said ; "and the doctor's orders are that you must lie quiet and the nurse's duty to see that you obey ;" and she laughed softly.

"And what if I do not obey either nurse or doctor?" I asked, bantering her.

"Then I shall be only Elfa again, and very sad and anxious, Ernst." And I had no answer for that save ready obedience.

I found obedience both pleasant and easy, however, when she came and sat by my side and talked to me ; telling me how she had been frightened when the bear had first been seen ; how she had longed for me to come ; and how all her fear had left her when she heard my voice from the wood and had seen me come running up to defend her. She told all this with such tender artlessness, putting in little winning words of flattery at my fighting, and showing in many ways how completely she had trusted me, that I could not but sigh and smile in pleased content. And when she left me and busied herself in getting food for us and for Karl, I lay back thinking of it all and hugging myself in an ecstasy of delight that now the great fear and difficulty I had had about showing her my face had been overcome.

After the meal, she sat again by my side and

Elfa

then touched with infinite sympathy and gentleness upon that very subject.

"Are you sure you have no great pain in your face, Ernst?" she asked. "It is a deep, jagged wound."

"No, Elfa, none. I have too skilled a doctor and too careful a nurse," I answered.

"When was it do you think that your face was hurt by the bear?"

"Almost at the last, I think, when I had set his feet moving in the dance of death as my blade reached his heart. But in truth, I felt nothing of any hurt at all."

"How splendid it must be to be a strong man and laugh at wounds and hurts. Had I had such a wound, I should have been full of fear and trembling as to the result to my looks. But you have never even mentioned that, Ernst. Would it grieve you much if my herbs were not to do their work fully and were to leave some trace behind on your face?" she asked.

"Do you think the elm-tree suffers in its vanity, when the lightning notches a scar on its trunk or sears away a limb?" I asked. "Forest folk must suffer forest manners."

"But you are not an elm-tree, Ernst," answered Elfa, demurely, playing with my words; "and you've not been notched by the lightning. You are a man whose face has been marked by a bear in a manner that may not directly pass off. Would a little scar on your cheek be very painful to you? It would to me."

Elfa

"That may befit the briar which would blanch the rose," was the way I answered and yet left unanswered the question.

"Do you know, Ernst . . ." she began, and stopped. "No, I won't say it and I won't think it."

"What is that, Elfa? Some kindly thought you are afraid to repeat?"

"Not kindly, but cruel," she answered.

"Then, of a surety let me hear it. A cruel thought from you would be like a burr-ball gathered from a peach-tree, and I would gladly risk a finger-prick to secure it," said I, laughing and forgetting all about my dressed cheek.

"You must not laugh like that, Ernst," cried my nurse, quickly noting that I was moving the wonderful balm. "If you do, I shall be obliged to go away and not talk."

"Let me have the cruel thought then."

She hesitated, starting to speak, and then checking herself, and she showed such timid confusion that I was resolved to hear the thought, believing it concerned me closely.

"You will think me both unkind and selfish ; but I could not help the thought coming to me. I was thinking that—that—no, I can't tell you, Ernst."

"I am sorry it was so desperate a thought," and I sighed and put such sad solemnity into my tone as I thought would move her.

"Oh, it was not so bad as you seem to think," she protested instantly. "I was thinking that—"

Elfa

that if you were to have to wear on your face a little mark as the result of the fight to-day, it—it would always serve to make you remember the time and—and that it was all through having had to defend me." She spoke this just like a child confessing a fault.

"And do you think I need a mark on my face to make me remember you?" I asked.

"That was not all. I thought that if—if you had to, I—I should be rather proud and glad of it, Ernst. And that was ungrateful and unkind. Are you angry?" she asked after a pause in which I did not speak.

Her words had stirred up hopes and feelings too strong and passionate for me to speak for the time.

"Are you very angry with me, Ernst?" she repeated, misreading my silence. "I am very sorry."

"No, I am not angry, little one. But here, put your hand in mine, for I have something to say." She did as I asked, readily and instantly.

"So you would like my face the better if it showed a furrow from that rough plough, eh?"

"Not like it better, Ernst," she said, simply.

"But I should be proud to think that you, great you, had taken a wound to wear upon your face in sight of all men for the sake of me. That's all."

"You would not turn your face away affrighted, if it were so?"

"Ernst!"

"But what if my face were so distorted with

Elfa

the marks that men made a jest of my looks. How then? "

"Men do not jest at wounds, whatever fools or cowards may do."

"Even so ; supposing, however, that the flesh in healing left gaps and seams upon my face such as made women quail and children hide their eyes in fear. Would that fright you, Elfa? "

"It would not frighten me, Ernst, but it would grieve me sorely, to think that for my poor sake you had to turn your face from any living thing. That would be a heavy sadness to me."

"But you yourself would not turn from me, child? "

"I, Ernst? Should you even ask me such a question. I thought you would have known me better," and she sighed as she withdrew her hand from mine.

"There is more in this than you can see just now," I said. And then I was silent. I had to do battle with a sore temptation.

If the hurt on my face healed so as to show the old scar, the child would think that all of it was the work of the bear ; and as her simply spoken confession showed, would look upon it as gained in her defence and rank it as a tithe to her goodwill. It was a rich prize for a lie of silence.

But I could not find it in me to trick and deceive her, even for such an end.

"Did you look closely into the wound when you dressed it, Elfa? " I asked, taking her hand again in mine.

Elfa

"Yes ; it was deep and jagged in places."

"Saw you no signs or traces of any former hurt? "

"No ; the flesh is badly torn ; and much of the outer skin is torn from the cheek."

"Well, it may be so," I answered, thinking that perhaps the traces of the scars I had borne on my face for so many years might have been scratched away by the bear's claws. "But a marred skin is no new comrade of mine, Elfa. Years ago when you should have been a tiny imp of mischievous happiness, the blade of a treacherous enemy found a resting-place in my cheek, laying it bare to the bone and writing on the flesh such a mark of shame and defeat, jagged, seamed, and seared, like lines of hate and wrath on a fury's face, as scarce a man could look on and remain unmoved. The ugliest scrawl the bear could write there would be as the limning of an artist to the slate scribble of a schoolboy, compared with what my face was but a few hours since. I may well think lightly of what may happen now."

"Oh, Ernst, how glad I would be if that were so ! " she cried.

"If what were what, child? "

"If instead of being marked and scarred for me, you were to find some of the old scars cleared away—just as the memory of such a time should be put aside." She said this, timidly, as if afraid to vex me. "What if, instead of being punished for saving me, you should be rewarded. Now,

Elfa

I am determined, indeed, that you shall keep quite still and give poor old Judith's remedy every chance of working a cure. Since all that is to be gained, I will be so strict, and so firm, and so—everything that is necessary to make you obedient. But is that why——” She dropped the quick, pleased tone as she commenced the unfinished question, and asked it in a slow, hesitating voice.

“What now?” I asked, gaily enough ; for my heart was wonderfully lightened by her words.

“Did you think—— Is that why—— I mean ; tell me again, will you, why you have always had to leave the plateau before dawn and only return after dark.”

I held my peace as our eyes met.

“Is that the reason—that you were afraid to let me look on your face in daylight? Did you think that I was one who would be moved because you had a scar upon your cheek? Oh, Ernst, Ernst ! That is the unkindest thought you could have had of me. That makes me sad indeed. Is that the reason?” Her eyes were fixed intently upon mine with a look of gentle, sorrowful rebuke.

“It was very nearly the reason, but I had no unkindly thought of you, Elfa,” I answered very earnestly. “Only such grim and bitter experiences as mine have been—and God guard you from all such—could make you understand what my feelings were when you came here and why I feared to let you see my face. You would have to know what it means to go through the world hanging your

Elfa

head that others might not see your features or holding it erect with such a threatening mien that made them fear to show their thoughts. You would have to see women grow pale and cross themselves at the sight of you and children run from you affrighted. Then you would understand that it was less from distrust of you than in mercy for myself that I turned from you in the light."

"There was no need for it, Ernst. You saved my life and comforted me with such a sense of safety as I had never known. You did me wrong to think I could hold you less noble in looks than you had proved in deeds. I am half-minded to say that, in your knowledge of what a man among men you are, you are only playing on my simplicity to draw in words from me the praises you know must be in my thoughts."

It was a pretty turn to give the thing, and it silenced me.

"Nor is that all," she continued, smiling as she shook her head. "You believe that in all the time I have been here I have never seen your face. Oh, Ernst, Ernst, how little you must know of women! To dream that you could hold your secret from my curious eyes! You forget the moonlight. I have seen your scars, not once only, but many a time, and have passed hour upon hour of wondering speculation as to how they were gained. If I had guessed what needless pain you were giving yourself, I would surely have told you;" and she laid her hand on mine with a gentle pressure.

Elfa

I returned the pressure, but was too wrought upon to speak.

After a pause she sighed and continued. "You must never have such thought of me again, Ernst. Those are the thoughts of which I told you. They seem to hurt me. Not only make me sad, I mean ; more than that, much more ; they chill me till I wince and shrink as if from faintness or some disorder."

As she said this, her voice grew low and faint, and she was shivering as if struck by a cold blast. I saw with no little dismay the chilling evidence of her pain ; as if the distress of the mind had reacted upon the body, as fright will sometimes age a timorous man and cold wither a too sensitive plant.

Her look of trouble wrung my heart and I made haste to try and chase it away by giving her thoughts a different turn.

"Nurse, has the compress on my cheek slipped from its place, or is it only that my cheek is flushing for want of a touch of your fingers?"

In a moment she changed and, with all her wonted quick sympathy in manner and voice, she bent over me to be sure that nothing was amiss, as I knew well enough.

"It was myself I doubted, Elfa, not you," I said very earnestly. "I will never wrong you in thought or deed again or be angered with you in all my life." And she pressed my hand and thanked me ; and so the matter passed.

But all the night the strange change in her face was before my eyes and kept me from sleep, and haunted me for many a day.

Chapter IX

IT was indeed a truly splendid service that the bear rendered me, and many a time have I paid the noble beast a heartfelt tribute of thanks.

Elfa's hope that the new wound on my face might remove the marks of the old, seemed to spur her to bring about such a result, and she tended me with a constant care and unremitting devotion. She watched the progress of the healing as closely as though the hurt were threatening to mar the softness of her own peach skin instead of promising to smooth out some of the roughness of my rugged bark.

Whether it was that some special virtue really lay in the herbs which old Judith had named to Elfa, or that the bear's claws had severed the ligatures and tendons whose wrongful knitting together had drawn my face awry, or that the constant dressing and care helped the wound, or again that all these causes worked together, I know not. But it is certain that as the new face-wound healed, the old scars and seams were no longer visible.

For myself, I was more than content to set it

Elfa

all down to Elfa. It was passing sweet to lie and watch her as she would sit in earnest thought, her white brow puckered in delicate ridges and her coral lips pursed, eagerly ransacking the corners of her memory for the remedies old Judith had mentioned. She was never happier than when she thought of something which gave her busy occupation in preparing a balm of special merit, an unguent of rare and soothing excellence, or a balsam of quite extraordinary virtue. And the gentleness of her touch in applying it was as light as her hope for its benefits was buoyant.

In all her treatment and nursing she showed a cunning resource and clever skill that filled me with never-ceasing wonder and delight.

Indeed, she made so much of the hurt and pressed with such winsome insistence upon the need for all this care and dressing that at times my very pride of hardihood shamed me into protest. I laughed at the notion that such as I should render myself up a subject for such arts and schemings and treatment just to save the hue and surface of an inch or two of skin.

"What would other hunters say of me, Elfa?" I asked jestingly; "could they but see all this salving and laving and poulticing and dressing and tincturing? Not but what many of them might like a spell of it, were you the physician and nurse."

"I care not what they would say, Ernst," she answered, a flush of colour mantling her cheek. "I have set my heart on this and mean to carry it to a good issue."

Elfa

"Then, I have no option but to submit," I answered, and laughed as if indifferent.

But it was only a lip-laugh. Down in my heart, deep down at the very bottom, slinking away right out of contact with all my conscious thoughts of hardihood and indifference, lurked quite another feeling. If I avow the truth—which at the time I hid even from myself—I was to the full as eager as the maid herself that her herbs and dressings and the rest of it should be successful.

The thought took a strong, firm hold of me that, just as the child had changed so much that was hard and rough in my nature, so it would be infinitely sweet to think she had cleared that devil's mark from my visage. It was not all vanity: yet he would be a strange lover who would not wish his looks to be as comely as possible: and I was sadly pierced and drilled with love darts.

Thus, whenever she assured me that the healing was making good progress, I was as pleased, for all my laugh of indifference, as any ballroom beauty at her lover's flattery, and my heart would throb and my nerves tingle for very joy.

At last the day came when, laying my cheek bare, she drew from her dress her hand-mirror and, holding it before my face, bade me look at myself and tell her how I thought the cure was working.

I gazed at my features in astonishment. The change was as the difference between the bark of a gnarled and knotted oak and the smooth cover of a shining beech. The zigzagged trenches and

Elfa

furrows with their old distorting lines of blue and red, and the ridges and mounds of gathered and contracted muscle and sinew had vanished, and in their place the whole cheek was smooth and matched in outline the form of the other half of my face. Some sort of scar would be likely to be left: but the old hideous disfigurement had dropped, like an ugly mask.

In my wonder, I looked so long and closely at my reflection, turning my head this way and that, in my eager scrutiny, that the child was pleased and with demure laughter chid me for my vanity.

"Fie, Ernst," she cried, the smile twitching at the dimpled corners of her mouth and quivering on her eyelids. "Fie. Such vanity must be rebuked. It is very wrong to pay such long tributes of silent admiration to one's own face. I must take away this cause of your offence and cover up again the looks that have so moved you." And she laid aside the mirror and re-covered my cheek. "I am shocked."

"It is your handiwork, not more than my altered looks which moved my wonder," I said. "You must have charmed away the old blurs. It is like the face of another man."

"I am so glad," she cried. "The old scars were never so grievous as you would have me think. You have let yourself be deceived, believing that others were quick to hold as bad an opinion as your own unkindest fancy."

"You deem that men are wont to hold too

Elfa

small and poor an opinion of themselves and their merits, then?" I asked, smiling.

"Worthy men, yes; unworthy men, no. But I have not to do with other men; only with you; and I think you have frightened and saddened yourself without a cause."

"Ah, child, you have worked a change in me far greater than you deem," I said, very earnestly.

"Not I myself. I have but helped nature to remove the foul effects of a man's wrongful deed," she answered with simple earnestness. "And as the mark has gone, so I would wish the memory of it to fade also. What scar may be left will all be due to me, Ernst, gained for my sake and coming from my treatment; so that the fashion of half your face will be my work. I shall thus be part owner of it, and shall have to see that you do not use it ill;" and she smiled at the quaintness of the thought.

"And how would you have me use it?" I asked, humouring her.

"Handsomely, as itself," she said, somewhat impetuously; and then, as if thinking her words had been too free, she paused and cast down her eyes in pretty confusion, while a blush spread over her cheeks, as the ruddy glow from the setting sun will steal over a fair landscape and redden it with a warm and fleeting tinge.

The next instant she laughed joyously. "I forgot," she rallied, "a moment since, you were feasting your vanity, Mr. Ernst; and here I am praising your looks, even to your face. I must

Elfa

not minister to such vanity again. But, tell me, can you guess why I am so particularly anxious that my nursing shall be successful? "

"That, indeed, I cannot. I know no more than good Karl there," I said, pointing to the dog.

"Though I'll be bound that it's a good reason."

"Dear Karl," she cried, calling the hound to her, and kissing him, burying her face in his coat, and playing with his long ears. It seemed as if she was glad to have something at hand while she spoke. "Try and guess, Ernst;" and she glanced up roguishly, as she bent over the dog.

"That your kind little heart wishes to please me? "

"Yes, that, of course. But more than that. A special reason."

"A special reason. Nay, then, my wits are too dull to keep pace with your sharp fancies."

"I'll help you," she laughed. "I have been your doctor, haven't I, and your nurse? "

"Surely; and a right winsome doctor, too."

"Well, what do doctors expect when they succeed? " and she laughed again and buried her face in Karl's coat.

"Why, fees, generally," said I, with a blunt, unsuspecting laugh.

"Well, and what would you think if your doctor suddenly grew grasping and avaricious, and your nurse followed suit, and they were both to expect ever such a great payment for their work? "

"Why, I should bless them both for being as roguish as they are clever, and tell them to name

Elfa

their fees, that I might pay them to the last fraction without a question."

"Take care, take care," cried Elfa, laughing and shaking her head and holding up a warning finger. "Perhaps they are both misers."

"No miser, were he ever so miserly, could name a fee that I would not gladly and instantly pay with a heart the lighter in proportion as the demand was heavier."

"Patients make promises which hale men fret at performing," she persisted, looking up again from the hound.

"Then the wise doctor seeks the fee from the patient," I returned. "What's the heavy fee, Doctor Elfa? 'Tis as good as paid before demanded."

Elfa did not answer directly, but bent over the dog, toying with his ears and smiling and blushing.

"Do you generally go far when you are hunting, Ernst?" she asked; and the question surprised me, who had looked for some request.

"A hunter's march is measured by the track of the quarry," said I.

"And are you always as long away as you have been since I have been at the hut?"

"No, not always. But the hands of a hunter's clock must generally go fast or slow with the movements of the game."

"And are the paths very rough and stony and difficult?"

"Old Karl there and I have trod many a league

Elfa

of them together: taking rough and smooth just as they came."

"I had to tread some very rough ones in my wanderings," she said, "and I got quite used to them."

"That is all well past now. For the future, we must try to keep your tender feet from being hurt on the rough ways." I fancied her face fell a little at my words, but could see no reason: so I changed the subject, as I thought, and said, "But tell me what is your doctor's fee, Elfa?"

She looked up at me with a half-wistful, half-roguish look, and her brow gathered as if in coy doubt.

"I scarcely like to name it, Ernst. Can you not guess it, now?"

"Nay, child, you have given me no hint."

She smiled at me again questioningly; and then, with one of the sudden changes of manner frequent in her, as a cloudscape will vary on an April dawn, she came to my side and took my hand, and spoke her request in witching accents of child-like importunity.

"Don't scold me, Mountain; and don't laugh at me, if I tell you that I am afraid to remain here now, alone. I want you to promise to take me always with you on the hunt. That's the fee. No, no, don't speak yet." She thought she could read an intent in me to refuse her. "Listen, first, to all I have to say why this will be best;" and then she plied me with reason upon reason to prove that she could help me: that I should be

Elfa

easier in mind if I knew she was safe; that she would be so obedient, so quiet, so contented; that her sharp eyes would aid me to find the game and her hands ready to help me stow it, and a hundred other sayings to a like effect. And she clung to my arm and gazed into my eyes with a look at once so witching and so pretty, that I was feign to stop her, lest the bigger feelings in me should be loosened, and my love for her come blazing out, when only a simple consent was wanted. And as she paused, after asking me once again not to laugh at her or be angry, I broke in.

"You shall do just as you will, Elfa," I said, very quietly, though my heart was beating wildly, and I could well have laughed aloud in my pleasure. I saw, however, that she was so moved as to have taken any sign of mirth amiss. "Is that all the big fee that you have to ask? Why, the very payment of it will but add to its amount."

At this her eyes sparkled with such beams of light, like the bright gleams of a dancing fire-fly in moonlight.

"And you are not vexed, Ernst, at my asking this?"

"Not vexed with you, but rather shamed at myself for not thinking that you might be frightened by this business with the bear, and not forestalling your request," said I readily. "But we big fellows are apt to grow selfish in our strength and to forget that, though to give and take buffets

Elfa

even with a wild beast may be a light matter for us, for others it is often more serious. You must overlook this clumsiness of thought in me and in return I'll try to make a clever little huntress of you; point out to you the tracks and trails and marks of the game; teach you such tricks of woodcraft and forestry as I know; show you how to find your way through an unknown country by sun or stars, or failing this, by the bark and foliage and shape of tree and shrub; turn for you the pages of the book of Nature, where every blossom tells the story of a life and every creeping thing suggests a lesson to be conned. That is, if you have a mind to learn something of this."

"I would love to learn it all—if you will be the teacher," she said, voicing softly the pretty flattery of the condition.

"Yes, I'll play the teacher, little flatterer," I said; and then we sat and talked and schemed how we were to carry out this hunt-companionship.

Surely a man must be in a parlous case when he seriously and deliberately believes that he will be adding to the success of his hunting by taking a pretty maid for a comrade.

I believed it, however, firmly; and the innocent delight with which Elfa entered into the project, racking her nimble wits to find suggestions and schemes, and almost dazing me with proposal after proposal as to how we could best do what she wished, proved so infectious that I caught the disease in its most violent form; and we laughed and jested and planned and were serious in turn,

Elfa

like a couple of children mapping out some greatly longed-for holiday.

As soon as Elfa perceived I was really earnest in my wish to take her with me, her glad delight brimmed over, like a swollen rivulet, and showed itself in a hundred winning ways; her voice grew low and caressing, her laughter frequent and joyous, and her manner a blend of gratitude, happiness, and solicitude, as she sought by every means at her command to let me feel how much she thought of what I had promised.

Between that time and the day when she decided—for she would not let me have a voice in the matter—that I was able to resume the hunt, we spent many a happy hour discussing the project, and devising and perfecting the details; for when I saw what pleasure this gave her, I encouraged her to speak of it at all times. It was agreed that at first our expeditions should be but short, and that, if we should have to go farther afield, I was to bear on my back a lightly built wooden pannier, on which she was to sit: such a device as is used by those easy mountaineering folk whose love of climbing is a thing apart from the toil and labour of it, and who travel more readily cradled on a guide's broad back.

I did not gain this point without a struggle; for Elfa withstood me stoutly, declaring she could never agree to lay such a burden on me. Nor did I gain my way until I said that, if she would not yield, I must fetch a mule from the town. She let me have my wish then, fearing to have

Elfa

any live stock about the hut lest it should serve as bait to lure another bear to the place.

Those were happy days, indeed; and I could almost have found it in my heart to canonise the bear, from whose martyrdom all this had come. But I did more wisely than that, for I used his skin when I had dressed it, to soften the slinging chair on which I carried Elfa.

Yes, it was a happy, halcyon time, and we traversed the whole district round for many miles together, in all directions, in search of game. At any rate that was our pretext: for, if the truth be told, we did but little hunting, and the whole tale of game would have shamed a child in his teens. Elfa was a winsome companion; but scarce to be deemed a huntress. Her heart was all tenderness and sympathy, and it pained her so to see life taken that she made me feel wellnigh a murderer if I did but wish to plant a bullet in a deer's heart.

She had a way of watching me and looking into my face with eyes that seemed tear-brimming with pity for any game that I was threatening, so that she set me rating myself for my cruelty instead of thinking just when to fire. Thus many a time I missed the moment and my shot went astray, and she was so pleased that the life had not been taken that at length this softness began to work in me until I would purposely send the charge awry. It was to me a greater joy to see her happiness, than to kill the game.

So it soon came about that we would spend

Elfa

the time in marking what we saw; I in describing all I knew of the wood and mountain and stream and pasture; she, listening and questioning, seeming to hang upon all I said. But she never was fashioned to be a huntress; and when I told her of any mighty hunt or combat, she would be all admiration for my skill and strength, but had ever a word of pity for the things I had slain.

And the more tenderness she showed, the more I loved her: although in all my life before, I had ever placed the rough and harsh and fierce before the soft and delicate and timorsome.

And all the time I was longing and yet fearing to tell her of my love: the moment for which came suddenly and, as it were, by accident, like so much that chanced between her and me.

Chapter X

OF all the phases of Nature none has ever had such power to stir me to my inmost depths as a mighty war among the elements, when earth and sky combine to form the battle-field where the waging forces war and hiss and scream one against the other.

At such a time, my spirit seemed to rush out upon the wings of the storm : a feeling, too bursting for utterance, would press and strive within my bosom, driving me forth to the highest point, the tallest hill, or loftiest crag, or topmost tree, where alone I could breathe freely, while the tempest crashed and blazed around me, rousing wild, weird echoes in my soul. Often at such times I have been moved to bursts of laughter and wild cries like the savage war-cries of old-time warriors when their blazing eyes fell first upon the foe.

I have stood oftentimes on the crest of the highest hill, perched on the tallest pinnacle that would yield me foothold, my chest inflated and heaving, my heart throbbing with the rapid rush of my blood, my nostrils dilated as if drawing in with my breath the frenzied strife-spirit of upheaving Nature.

Elfa

To my ear there was no more soul-moving sound than the whirr and hiss of the hurricane as it came sweeping up some long forest valley ; its path marked by the upward curl of the shuddering leaves, like white wisps of sea-foam before a heavy squall ; the boughs creaking and rattling under its attack, or crashing and splitting before its fury, and the very trunks heaving and groaning at its tyranny. I loved to mark how, when it reached the valley-head, it would seem to halt and hold its course for a moment, gathering its strength for a mighty effort, like a mind-directed army, and hurl itself with the fury of madness against the hillside, whistling and screaming and roaring its defiance, till it passed with sighs and moans, as if for dead strength defeated, and rushed round and about and over and away in search of some fresh fighting ground.

It was such a tempest with a right royal train of thunder-clouds and hail and rain that overtook us two, one day, as we were crossing a hill at the northern end of a long pine-clad valley.

The signs of a coming storm had been plain to read. A great hush lay on everything, and a heavy, stifling dulness held all nature in an ominous, brooding mood. The birds were songless, hunched with ruffled plumage in the shelter of the motionless trees ; the deer crouched panic-stricken in the thickets ; and even the vermin had run to ground.

At one spot I had noticed a couple of squirrels dart from their tree homes and scamper burrowing to earth, so changed by panic as to be heed-

Elfa

less of our passing. I had ever found that a certain presage of the heaviest weather.

So I led the way to a cavern which I knew in the side of the hill at the head of the valley and proposed a halt, telling Elfa that a storm was at hand.

She was not timid in such matters, she said ; but rather liked to watch the wind and lightning.

The storm gathered rapidly. For a brief span, the light changed to a yellowish glare, as the sun from behind the hill where we stood shone through a haze upon the huge bank of black clouds, which massed themselves before us and spread, with almost inconceivable rapidity, over the whole face of the heavens, making them dark with a grey gloom.

Then it burst with an awful suddenness which might well have caused a timid heart to cease its beating. The black mass opened, and from out of its midst came such a blaze of glory of lightning as lit up the whole form and shape of the clouds. It fell almost as it were before the very mouth of our cavern, lighting up all within and around and darting its lurid lances of flame in all directions over the hills and woods around. The storm had burst right overhead, and the crashing din of the thunder was as though the very rock above us had split in twain and was rolling down to destroy us. At the same instant, the rain and hail came like a bursting waterspout and raged and hissed and spumed all around us.

'Twas a right noble sight, and I felt my nature

Elfa

leap in answer to the tempestuous din, as I stood by the mouth of the cave watching the blue flames of light playing in all directions, and listening to the wrathful shrieks and screams of the wind among the trees, the great booming cannonade of thunder, and the crashing and smashing of the huge boughs of the trees as the lightning withered them and the wind tore them exultingly from the parent trunks.

A longing seized me to rush out among these huge destroying forces, to tread in the deadly footprints of the storm, and to follow on the track of the howling wind. I clenched my teeth and set my muscles hard like steel, revelling in grim enjoyment of the wild scene.

But I checked the impulse at the thought of Elfa, and I turned to her to see if she could feel aught of the wild riot that made my breath come and go in fierce glee, as I spread my nostrils to catch the storm glow, and set my nerves leaping and darting in sympathy with Nature in her hour of wrath.

The tempest was too rough and fierce for such as Elfa, however, and one of the flashes of the lightning showed her to me on her knees, crouching in fear as her lips moved in agitated prayer for safety and protection.

She was like a frightened dove, and trembled as though in a frenzy of terror.

I went quickly to her and knelt beside her, taking her hand in mine and placing an arm as if to shield her.

Elfa

"Are you afraid, Elfa?" I said, when the thunder and wind and hail would let my voice be heard.

She did not speak: but turned and clung to me and presently threw her arms round my neck as I knelt by her, and nested her face against my breast, to shut out the glare of the lightning.

"Hold me tight, Ernst. Keep the lightning away from me; I am afraid of it," she said, after a time, with gasps and sobs of terror, and when the lightning again flashed through the cavern she cried out with hysterical wildness. "Ernst, dearest, dearest Ernst, don't leave me. I only feel safe when with you. Put your arms round me, hold me to your heart; shield me, dearest, shield me, for you are so strong and brave. Ernst, my love, my life, take me in your arms and shield me. Ah, that is right; now I am safe." As she said this, she had clambered into my arms and lay in them like a child.

The storm had made her beside herself for the time with terror; and I drew back to a part of the cavern where the glare of the lightning was least vivid, and stood with my back to the opening pressing her head against my heart. She still clung to me, calling my name with frantic passion, and used such terms of endearment as opened up the flood-gates of a love passion within me to the full as fierce in its kind as that which raged and fumed and dinned without.

Then she fell into a state of half-sleep, half-stupor, and when the storm ceased, she lay still just

Elfa

like a cradled babe in my arms, pale and troubled, with the tears starting from under her lashes, just as I had seen her the first day in the wood.

She loved me !

God be thanked, she loved me !

I knew it now, though only in the hysterical terror of the storm had she shown it.

Before she woke, I sank on my knees, still holding her in my arms, and sent up such a thanksgiving from my soul to God, as no recording angel had yet read in my heart.

At the end I looked upon her lovely face and whispered in such faltering accents as a softened sinner might use for his confession, vows of deep, unalterable love and care and thought for her.

Not for her ears, were the vows, but just to ease my labouring heart by putting its pent-up feelings into words.

How can I tell what I felt. To me it was ecstasy ineffable just to gaze upon her face and let my looks be the fiery messengers of my soul's emotions ; and to know that in the heart whose gentle fluttering I could feel as it lay against my own, there dwelt a love answering to mine even as pulse was now throbbing to pulse.

I did not kiss her ; though I longed with wild yearning desire to feel the soft touch of the lips on mine. I knew she loved me ; and I loved the knowledge of her love : but it had come in such a way and at such a time that it would have been base in me to use it.

I could wait

Elfa

It was a maddening delight to give rein to my fancy and think how I would lead her to confess the love openly. I gazed at her lips, smiling as I hazarded silent guesses as to how they would frame the sweet avowal.

God, but that dim cavern was like a heaven to me !

Presently, she showed signs that she was awaking ; and as I thought it might embarrass her to find herself in my arms when she woke, I laid her gently down on the floor of the cave, on a couch of leaves, and bidding Karl stay by her side, moved to the opening.

How surpassingly fair and brilliant was everything. The storm was quite over ; and the sun was shining again with a glory whose lustrous splendour was caught and held in miniature in the myriads of rain-beads, forming crystal festoons on every bough and twig and leaf. The birds were straining their throats in lusty thanks that the danger had passed them by ; and all life in its million forms and shapes was once more active, watchful, vigorous, and happy.

And in all the music of nature there was in my ears but the one entrancing strain and rhythm, which thrilled in my soul and filled my heart as with luscious and intoxicating rapture of melody :

" I am beloved."

Presently, I heard the leaves behind me rustling, and then a sigh came stealing across the cavern to me, as Elfa moved and woke.

" Ernst, Ernst ! " she called.

Elfa

I turned and answered ; and then was conscious of a feeling of embarrassment, different from any I had ever known with her, even at the first ; and I found myself picking and hesitating among the words I should use.

"Where are we?" she asked, as I went to her. "Has anything happened? What is the matter, Ernst? Tell me?" she cried, reading I think something of the strange feeling that held me ; for in kneeling by her, my face was turned to the entrance of the cave and the light fell on it.

"Nothing is the matter," I said. "We have been overtaken by a storm, a couple of leagues or so from the Grossberg. The lightning startled you, and you have slumbered." The noise of my voice, as it went rumbling through the echoing cave, filling the place with my deep, hollow tones, sounded strange to my ear.

A long pause followed in which, while wanting to speak, I could find nothing to say in all the multitude of confused thoughts that flitted through my mind. And to fill the gap, I patted and caressed the hound, who looked up at me and licked my hand and then laid his nose upon Elfa's arm.

"Was I frightened at nothing else but the storm, Ernst?" she asked.

"There was naught else that I noticed," I said.

"I have had such a terrible dream ; and yet such a delightful one ;" and a vivid blush laid a soft ruby mask on her face, and she glanced up at me with coy witchery and happiness. Then, after

Elfa

a pause, in which I stayed tongue-tied like a prisoner, she added, "You don't ask what it was ;" and her pretty face was wreathed in dimpled furrows of childish petulance.

"What was it?" I asked, so gravely and solemnly that I could have smitten myself : though I was powerless to force my voice to run in a lighter tone. And this was the more unaccountable, seeing that never in my life had I felt more happy than then.

"What was it?" she echoed ; sinking her sweet voice to a guttural depth and shaping her face in a winsome mockery of my grave features, and then burst into a trilling laugh. "Why, Mr. Dark-and-frowning-gl m, it was—but I won't tell you. It is too good, at least the end of it is, to be spoken of at any time but when we are both in such a merry mood as those birds I hear carolling out there. I'll tell you part : I was in a storm and in danger ; and was afraid of death, sudden, appalling, awful death, when some one came and saved me."

"Who was that, Elfa?" I asked, trembling like a storm-scenting hare.

She sat up on the bed of leaves and took my hand and peered half-seriously into my face, while a roguish smile crept over her features till the whole of the dear face was rippling and dancing and quivering with laughter as she replied, casting down her long lashes, and speaking slowly and gently :

"Who should it be but one who has always

Elfa

been ready to save me ; who has watched over me and protected me and tended me ; and who offered his life to save me from the bear, like the true, kind, loving faithful—old Karl that he is ;" and stooping and kissing the hound, quickly, she let fall my hand, jumped up and ran lightly to the mouth of the cave, laughing like a mocking sprite, and leaving me confused, happy, disappointed, hopeful, and fearing, all at the same instant.

But when I read that incident in the light of what she had said in her fear during the storm, I was more than assured that she loved me : and then more angry than ever with myself for having let pass so good a chance of drawing a confession from her.

As I rose to follow her, I first sighed with prodigious gusto, and then laughed at myself for the noise of the sigh ; and slinging Elfa's carrying chair on my back, I took my gun and followed her, watching her as she ran blithely and merrily along under the trees, now in the sunlight, now in the shadow ; her quaint, strange costume of leathern bodice, short skirt and leggings, showing off to curious advantage the lithe, active, sinuous grace of her movements and the matchless beauty and symmetry of her supple figure.

The hound had first stayed with me, but when he saw her moving on alone, he bounded off to her side, without a word or sign from me, as if knowing she was not to be left by herself. She welcomed him with a ringing, musical laugh, and frolicked with him, and ran laughing through

Elfa

the wood, with Karl cantering gravely by her side like a guardian, and she turned ever and again to glance back to see if I were following and to beckon me to hasten after her.

Presently, she waited for me and her soft cheeks were flushed and her eyes aglow with the exercise.

"Has anything happened to make you sad, Ernst, that you look so grave?" she asked, glancing into my face, as I joined her and walked at her side.

"Am I grave?" I asked. "I do not feel so. I have never felt happier."

"What is in your thoughts, then, that makes happiness so solemn?"

"I was thinking of you, little one;" and at the answer she cast her eyes to the ground.

"I did not vex you just now in the cave, did I? I did not mean to do more than tease you," she said, just glancing up to smile at me.

"Nay, Elfa. I should be a churl indeed if that could vex me. If ever you want to vex me, you must seek some other weapon than a jewelled playfulness such as that."

"Then what has made you so grave and solemn? I saw the look on your face when I awoke just now in the cave. Tell me, please." She put such tender emphasis into the plea that I scarce knew how to answer, not daring yet to tell her all my thoughts.

"Suppose it was something so good about you that I dare not tell for fear of spoiling you?" said I, smiling.

Elfa

"Would it make you grave to think well about me? Fie, Ernst. I do not think that!" She laughed with low and musical pleasure. "Nothing you could say would spoil me—though it would surely please me, if it were pretty and good."

"Supposing it were that a great joy had come to hush me into soberness because in your perilous dream danger you had been rescued by—my hound, Karl; and had felt so safe because you were protected and tended and loved by—my hound, Karl? What then, Elfa?"

The blushes were burning on her cheeks as she answered, merrily and gaily:

"Why then, I should say that you ought to be glad and not grave; and ought to laugh and be merry; and not walk alone like a stately, massive, towering tombstone with an epitaph of poor dead and gone merriment written in your expression."

"Good, Elfa, good," I cried, lightly. "Grant that I am a solemn-looking tombstone for a moment: but covering not the ashes of pleasure, but the lingering remains of doubts and fears that have vexed and plagued me, clustering round a cherished wish. May it not be the very newness of the confidence and joy that makes me wonder gravely if it can be real?"

She looked up as if to question my meaning.

"But you said you were thinking of me," she cried quickly. "What doubts and fears could you have about me? And what have I done, what could I do in the cave during the storm to kill them? It could not be——" and she broke off

Elfa

suddenly, and such a flush spread over her face as I had never seen.

"Could not be what?" I asked; not knowing what to say in my blundering confusion at the thought that I had let something of the truth escape me.

My confusion was nothing, however, compared with the sad havoc which Elfa's half-expressed thought was playing with her own composure. She was leaning against the trunk of a tall pine by the side of a small hill-bound lake near which we had stopped; and as I gazed at her I could see she was struggling hard to regain her calmness, for the colour kept coming and flitting in her cheeks, her bust rose and fell in quick agitation, and the hand which hung down clutched tightly a fold of her leather kirtle.

"Tell me," she said at length, in a voice that was strained almost breathless, and unlike her own. "What were these doubts and why did you change them? I don't understand you."

As I stood still by her, resting my two hands on my gun, and tried to puzzle out what to answer her, it flashed upon me like a glint of sunlight what her broken question meant. She had been dreaming that she had caressed me and was afraid lest something of the dream had really shown in her acts and had made her appear unmaidenly.

As this thought struck me, a smile broke across my face and I looked at her and asked:

"Will you tell me your dream in the cave just now, Elfa?"

Elfa

"No, no, no, no," she repeated, blushing more fiercely than before, and speaking with vehemence.

"Are you afraid lest—Karl should be flattered?"

She flashed her eyes into mine for a second, and shook her head without speaking.

"Still teasing me, eh? Well, shall I play the soothsayer then and tell you what you dreamt?" I asked.

"No, no, no," she cried, as before, hiding her face in her hands.

Then I drew nearer to her and my heart was beating with such a force that I could feel its throbbings from crown to sole.

"Shall I tell you my dream, then, Elfa; no dream born of the storm but of a strange new sunlight that only lately has burst on my path?"

"Sunlight, Ernst?" she asked, raising her eyebrows as in puzzlement.

"Yes, Elfa, the sunlight of your pure nature," I cried, my deep, heavy voice vibrating with stress of feeling. Then like a crushing avalanche, my long-pent passion broke its bonds within me, overwhelming all thoughts and feelings, and found its expression in words that rushed like a torrent from my lips, knowing no restraint. What I said I know not: for passion had made me beside myself: all I know is that at the close of it when I caught her soft faltering answer, and saw the bright flush which shone on her face like the red light in the northern sky, I stretched forth my arms to her and she came like a dovelet to the mother's call. With a gentle fluttering sigh of

Elfa

ecstasy I pressed my lips to hers in a long, long passionate kiss that thrilled me till I trembled.

Then such bliss was mine as I had never thought to known on this earth.

We were both too passionful for words : and we stood locked together in that first lover's embrace, conscious of naught but the love in our hearts, and drinking in the deep, deep draught of contented, peaceful, ravishing happiness, only breaking silence as we sighed some lovers' rapturous endearments.

How long we stood, I cannot tell. We took no heed of time, nor thought of how the sun was sinking behind the purpled hills, the pine shadows growing longer and longer on the bosom of the little mere, and the birds singing their evening hymn on the branches.

It was Karl, the clever, thoughtful hound, that first made us think of the waning daylight ; for he rose from the spot where he had lain sleeping, and shaking his shaggy sides he came to us, and when we paid no attention to his whining, fawned upon me and thrust his nose against Elfa's cheek, as it lay nestled against my heart.

She patted him and caressed him laughingly ; and at the sound, I gathered my woolly wits somewhat together.

" 'Tis time to go, sweetheart, so wise old Karl warns us : we are far from the hut and the night is falling fast."

"Let us go," whispered my love. "Ah, Ernst, Ernst, my darling, my darling," and she threw her

Elfa

arms around me in a last embrace, and whispered, "Let us make haste; let us hurry to live till to-morrow that I may wake and know it is not all a happy, happy dream."

"Come then, sweetheart," I cried, returning her caress and moving slowly away.

"What place is this, Ernst?" she asked, after we had gone a few steps. "Has it any name? I would like to remember the name as that of the sweetest spot on earth to me."

"I know of none that it has: but I myself have a name for it," I answered, as a whimsical thought struck me.

"What is that?" she cried eagerly. "That will be sweetest of all."

"'Tis the Valley of the White Roe. This is where I snared her."

"Where, where? Show me," and her face grew radiant with joy.

"There is a legend that you may care to remember in time to come. Here is the spot," I said, pausing by the side of the mere. "If you stand here and look straight down to the water's surface you will see the reflection of the white roe, and you will then read all her history at a glance."

"Where? Show me, Ernst, show me," she cried, with the pretty imperious gestures that she would ever display in small matters.

I placed her carefully by the edge of the water, lingering a little longer than was needful just to enhance the mystery, and told her to shut her

Elfa

eyes and bend over the lake, nor open them till I gave her leave.

She was excited as a child might have been ; and waited impatiently until I gave the word for her to open her eyes.

She gazed down at the water, and when she saw nothing but the reflection of her own fair features, she was puzzled for a moment and thoughtful. Then, guessing the trick, she laughed joyously and turned and threw her arms around my neck ; and showed such infinite pleasure that I knew she had guessed the whole secret—that I had loved her from the very first.

And in after years, if we ever spoke of that spot, it was always as the Valley of the White Roe.

Chapter XI

THAT night while Elfa slept I paced up and down the plateau, and fought out a battle with myself, whether I should tell her all the history of my life.

Now and again, as occasion or the turn of conversation had served, I had given her glimpses here and there into the past. But I had been silent altogether about the gloomy secret of my father's crimes; and now I wrestled with myself whether I should tell her all before I made her my wife: or whether I might keep that secret locked close in my memory.

I was very loath to speak of it. Not that I feared she would part from me on its account: I did not harbour that thought for a moment: I was too sure of her love. But I dreaded lest the shadow of the curse might overcloud somewhat even her guileless innocence; and sadden the fresh young cheerfulness of her nature.

We had been close companions long enough now for me to find ample time and occasion to watch Elfa's moods and study her ways: and love had taught me to understand how essential a part of

Elfa

her nature was this shrinking of hers from all that was harsh, cruel, and unkind. The wit of old Judith had been keen enough to detect this fragile sensitiveness; and the woman's words, in bringing home its reality to her, had been shrewd and cleverly pointed.

It was a bird of the south that she resembled: and upon her all roughness and harshness, even of words, acted like cold upon the blood, staying its flow and killing its active principle. The old witch had said that Elfa's body would wither up under the influence of anger and cruelty: and all I had seen of my darling since, had made me understand the cunning truth of the words.

She was a gentle, loving, full-hearted woman, and in whatever called for the play of infinite patience, tireless compassion, sweet solicitude, and unwearying service, her womanliness had no limits. But her nature was not moulded for any but gentle ways and soft treatment. Before wrath and unkindness she would cower and suffer and pine. She had no power to withstand and resist rough force. She was like those slender, delicately fashioned glasses that will ring and vibrate with tuneful echo of a certain note; but if the tone be changed to another, blatant, discordant and prolonged, the mere sound will suffice to shatter them in a thousand fragments.

It was just this lovable weakness with its full trust and confident appeal to my strength that had touched me most nearly; and had helped to make her so inexpressibly dear to me. And

Elfa

this it was also that which made me unwilling to tell her of the dark past of my life.

As I pondered the problem that night, full of a wonderful feeling of restful love, my thoughts fastened upon a new idea, finding it full of pleasure.

It seemed to me as if Heaven, tired of plaguing me with ills, had sent this dainty, delicate creature to be mine, and to win me from brooding ways of darkness and wrath to a life of happiness: demanding as the price of my happiness a change in all my moods and temper. Happiness was to be mine only so long as I showed to her who had brought it to me, such kindly care, loving forethought, and constant forbearance as I never yet had known how to show to any human being.

God had launched this fragile little bark on the stormy sea of my life, and had charged me with the duty of shielding it from tempest and fury. As I treasured it, so would be the span of my life, if life be measured by happiness.

It was a quaint conceit, and it filled me with a rare delight, and moved me strangely. It was indescribably sweet to me that so soft and precious a being should have been driven for shelter into the rough anchorage of my life; and should trust to me for protection. I threw myself on my knees and thanked God for the new influence thus infused into my life; and with every solemn form of language I took the charge upon me, and pledged myself to hold Elfa ever in the light in which my later thoughts had placed her; and called

Elfa

on God to take my life if ever I should treat her with aught but gentle consideration; or even wrong her by angry thought or harshly spoken word.

This vow of mine gave me fresh peace and pleasure, and when I rose from my knees my new resolve flooded every nook and cranny of my mind with a dazzling promise of the radiant sweetness of the life that was dawning.

And when at length I cast myself on the ground, content to sleep now that the path ahead was shining with a golden light, my dreams of Elfa were calm and quiet and happy; and I did not awake until long past the dawn.

It was rare, indeed, for me to thus play the sluggard, and when at length I opened my eyes, they fell first upon Elfa's face, which had been filling my dreams with such alluring phantasies. She had crept softly from the hut at daybreak, wondering that she did not hear me astir, and when she had seen me still asleep, she had seated herself at my side and watched me and waited while the sands of her patience ran out, so she prettily said, and my closed eyelids provoked her till she stooped and kissed them.

It was this kiss that waked me.

I sprang to my feet; and then she laughed and clapped her hands.

"Did I frighten you, Ernst?" she cried. "I did not mean to wake you, but I have sat watching you, till the longing to kiss you grew upon me and I could not resist it. I thought you were

Elfa

sleeping too soundly to feel such a kiss as that. But if my kisses scare you, why, I shall make quite a coward of you in time; " and she blushed.

" 'Twould be the first time I had willingly turned craven, Elfa," I answered, as I stooped and caressed her.

" I am sorry you woke, Ernst. Do you know why? Do you know our old legend? " she said, turning her laughing eyes to mine.

" No, little one. Is it about another mountain? If so, the mountain can bend down now without any fairy's aid."

" No, no. This is only what the village girls tell to one another. When they are—are what we were yestereve in the Valley of the White Roe—when they are—betrothed." She uttered the word coyly and softly.

" And what do they say then, sweetheart? " I asked, as she paused.

" Why, that when two lovers are betrothed "—this time her voice was a little firmer and clearer—" they say that the one who first kisses the other without that other's knowledge, will always rule in the home."

" Ho, ho. So you want to play ruler over me, do you? Want to be a hard taskmaster, eh, little tyrant? " I laughed. " Then I wish I had not waked; for I think I should like the rule. A slave's lot with you as mistress would be no very hard one. But I doubt if you could act the tyrant half so well as I could play the slave."

" No, I'm afraid I could not," she said, shaking

Elfa

her head with a look of half-whimsical seriousness, "for I don't like even the words for you and me."

Then she set herself to prepare a meal for us, and I was quite content to play my part of slave by making a fire.

Afterwards, I mentioned a plan to her which had suggested itself to me. It was that we should that day go to one of the villages or small towns and stay there until we could be married. It took me a long time to work round to the pith of the project; as I did not know whether she would be as eager as myself for the marriage to take place.

"There is no reason against it," she said simply, when I had mentioned it; "if you are willing to have a bride without a dowry—or perhaps I ought to say, without knowing whether I shall have a dowry."

"I shall have a dowry rich enough for me," I answered earnestly. "Your love, Elfa. But you, are not you afraid to trust yourself with such a rough hunter; and share such a poor home as this," I said, pointing to my hut. I had never said a word to lead her to think that I had any means or possessions but such as she could see.

"The hut is the first spot on earth where I have felt quite safe and at home," she answered gently and lovingly. "But if you were without a shelter in the wide world, and I had to tramp by day and beg our bread and sleep by night on the cold ground, I would follow you, Ernst, if you would let me: and I should then feel safe

Elfa

and happy in your care;" and she threw her arms about me and nestled closely to my side.

"Besides," she added, after a pause, "when you are really mine—really and truly mine, so that nothing can part us again—we can go to my home and find out what has become of my little fortune. But we won't go before you are mine, because they might try to part us."

"Ah, there is nothing on this earth shall do that, Elfa; nothing. Those who try will have to reckon with me, now; and I am not so soft in other hands as in these," I cried, taking hers and kissing them. "But, now, I will tell you what I think. We will go to Massen to-day: it is some six or seven leagues: and there a priest shall make us man and wife as soon as may be. Then, if you have a mind to see other parts of the country, we will roam wherever inclination leads us: you and I and old Karl together. What say you?"

"Are you weary of the Grossberg?" she asked.

"No, no, Elfa, not weary of it; but even a hunter may be pardoned for following the fashion of better folk at such time as he takes a wife," I answered gaily.

"Then, I would rather be here for a while, Ernst. I love the place; ah, you cannot think how dear every spot is to me. Wherever I look there is something to remind me of you, of your looks, your acts, your words, your footsteps. It is the frame of the life-picture of our love. Let us come back here."

Elfa

"I too, would rather be here than elsewhere, sweetheart," I declared. "I only thought to give you pleasure in what I said."

"I want no pleasure other than to be alone with you, Ernst," she answered: and in this way we settled our plans, and soon afterwards set out on our way to the town.

The town was that to which I had journeyed on the day after I had found Elfa, and on the way I pointed out to her the place where I and the rogues who had tried to steal my pack had come to blows; and she listened to the story, questioning me with such closeness as to how it was that I came to leave the bundle by the wayside, that before I knew where my tongue was running with me, I had to tell her all the little episode of my gazing like a child at my features in the brook.

And she took such a delight in it all, and laughed and prattled and insisted upon my showing her the brook, though I had some difficulty in finding the spot, and was altogether so merry and light-hearted over it, that I puzzled over the cause and asked her. And then she came close to me and with pretty blushes confessed that she was pleased because it all showed that she had had my love from the very moment of her coming to me.

And with that I fell to questioning her as to when she had first begun to care for me; and it all seemed so strange and new and wonderful, that I thought no other love in the world could ever have leaped up ready formed in two

Elfa

hearts in like manner; little deeming that we were but travelling by just the same path which lovers' feet have trod since the world was young.

Ah, me, my heart was light and gay that day.

When we reached the town, Elfa began to be nervous and fearsome and kept close by my side, and walked with head bent down, as if afraid of meeting people's eyes.

There were many who looked at her, aye, and stopped and turned to gaze after her when we had passed; and it may well be that we both were marked out from other folk, alike by our looks and our garb and our disparity of size. Elfa's lovely face, flushed as it was with the walking and with the excitement was a sight to tempt the eyes of the gods to turn earthwards; and her dress of leather, with scarce a trace of such adornment as is customary with maidens of her years, added to the quaintness of her gentle, modest looks.

For myself, I had a somewhat new experience. I found the people neither turned away in fear, as in former times had been their wont, nor looked with smiles of greeting in my face as latter times had found them doing. They seemed to have but scant attention for me and passed me by to gaze upon the beauty at my side.

When I saw this, and saw, also, that Elfa was disturbed by it, I hastened to seek out a lodging where she could tarry till we should be made man and wife. I found it in the house of the woman where on my former visit I bought for

Elfa

Elfa such raiment as the woman's store provided. I left her there, whispering to the woman that she should supply for Elfa all such food and fitting garments as the child should mention, or herself should think needful. I gave her a hint of our purpose in coming to the town and placed in her hand a sum of money which I let her understand was meant to purchase her discretion quite as much as her wares.

Then, promising the dear child I would return with all the speed I could, I hastened forth to seek a priest.

There is one argument, and one only, that I have found ever powerful with the fathers of every Church; and that is gold. And the priest in Massen was no exception. He was a kindly looking, mild-faced, gentle-voiced man, who listened to me with quiet courtesy as I stated what I wished.

"What is your calling, my son?" he asked.

"I am a hunter in the region of the Grossberg."

"What is your religion?"

"I am a hunter," I said again; "and for many long months at a stretch, have never come under the shadow of a church nor within the reach of a priest."

"What is your name?"

I started at this. I had forgotten that I should have to tell this, even to the priest.

"Ernst von Schalckfort," I answered: and he saw my hesitation.

"Von Schalckfort?" he asked, emphasising the

Elfa

title and starting a little, as he looked curiously at me. "Are you——?"

I did not let him finish, but broke in upon his question.

"Father, you have doubtless many poor around you here in the town; I wish to place in your hands a sum of money to be used for their welfare"—and I gave him an amount large enough to surprise as profoundly as it pleased him.

"My hands are free from stain and my life is pure enough," I said. "The past is dead, and no man knows of it. For years I have lived a lonely life as a hunter; till now this maiden has come to bless me, to soften my ways, and light my life. On the word of a man who has never stooped to lie, I declare to you that there is no bar why we should not be man and wife; and what we wish is that you should make us so."

"Herr von——"

"Hunter Ernst, if it pleases you, father," I corrected.

"Well, Hunter Ernst, if you wish it so: I accept your word. What is the maiden's name?"

"Nay, and that I know not," I answered, half smiling at my own ignorance. "I only know her as Elfa."

"I must know what it is, of course. I would rather that she came to me and, after I have spoken with her, I will tell you at what hour to-morrow you can be married."

Then I went to fetch Elfa, who was not without

Elfa

nervousness when I told her what the priest had said.

When she returned to me, he was with her and, drawing me to one side, he spoke to me in terms of such praise of my darling, that I could have loved him for his words. He bade me cherish her and guard her and love her ; "for a nobler, gentler, lovelier, purer spirit I have never known," he said.

Then he fixed the hour for our marriage.

And on the following day we stood before him, and after he had made us one, he blest us and spake such words of kindness to us both, that Elfa wept tears of happiness, which I kissed away from her cheeks as soon as we were alone.

Thus we became man and wife.

Chapter XII

IT was middle summer when Elfa became my bride, and the weeks that followed passed like an idyl or a dream. The days glided by and found us ever busied in some happy expedition, or planning some coming pleasure.

We were like two merry, loving children who find themselves free to follow just the whim and humour of the moment, and whose thoughts and wishes are ever in harmony: the sole desire of each to study the other's pleasure.

The hut was large enough for us, because we scarcely used it save as a night shelter. We rose early and after a simple meal wandered off to pass the day among the mountains; scaling the summit of some lofty peak to gain the view over the country round: or lingering along one of the lovely valleys, that wind in and round the thousand hills. Elfa's love of Nature was to the full as deep as my own, and we found a mutual delight in following the chasing waves of light and shadow among the glades, watching the rippled sunlight on the surface of some land-locked lake, or sitting silent as we marked the ways of the little wild creatures of the woods.

Elfa

We had an abundance of subjects to discuss, moreover. Our future had to be planned, and many a sweetly grave debate was held as we sat together in the shady shelter of some mighty forest giant about where our life was to be passed and in particular where to go when the summer had passed.

On these journeyings, I would take both gun and rod ; but save to furnish some dainty morsel of fish or bird for my sweetheart-wife, I might have been a townsman for all the havoc I wrought among the game.

Even Karl would seem sometimes to express a sort of grave surprise and to rebuke me. In the first days, believing that the hunt was to be earned he would scent the game and come and warn me a way I had long known how to read ; and when, instead of laying myself out for the hunt, I merely patted him, he could not understand. But when, as I did sometimes, I sent a shout ringing through the wood loud enough to scare all the game within half a mile, he would look up into my face in puzzled reproach and shake his shaggy ears as if to disclaim all responsibility. After thus expressing his rare disgust, he would come to heel with a gloomy despair that was comical to see ; and all that day he would do no more hunting.

When first Elfa noticed this, she laughed gaily and infected me with her merriment, so that once or twice we urged the old dog on to a scent, just to see him show that look of disappointment. But he soon learnt the trick ; and when I put him to

Elfa

a scent, he would look up wistfully and anxiously into my face, asking me plainly in his brute language whether I was in earnest. He could read something in my looks, or laughter, or what it may have been, and then he would turn and look at Elfa. As he gazed at her, his great grave face would seem to change, just as though he were smiling ; and he would wag his tail and go and fawn on her and show his love for her plainly enough ; but he made no attempt to follow the scent.

His manner to Elfa said as plain as words, "I love you dearly ; but you are no hunter ; and the master is trying to fool the old dog just to make you laugh. We shall never do any hunting while you are with us." And in a short time he ceased altogether to look for game—except for his own love of sport—and never came to tell me of a single find.

The days and weeks slipped away in this happy fashion almost too quickly to count, until the nipping air of the nights warned me that, as I had now to think of another whose welfare was of greater import than my own, I must make arrangements for my dear wife's comfort.

I had been content to stay at the hut, even in the hardest winters : and had been content with the crude shelter it afforded. But with Elfa, it was another matter. Moreover, it was not always the safest of spots for such as she. When the cold settled down in earnest among the hills, the wild beasts were apt to grow over-venturesome, and

Elfa

many a brave tussle the dogs and I had had, both by night and day, on the plateau with the wolves and even with such bears as had not coiled themselves up for their long winter sleep.

I had revelled in the time. It had been my custom to bring from the town enough supplies to last me through the winter months, when eked out with the flesh of such big game as fell to my gun. I procured also two or three other hounds, cunning hunters and rare fighters all; and the beasts that came my way, from fox and deer to wolf and bear, were always welcome and rarely had a chance of retracing the path.

Many a time the snow on the plateau had been red and sodden with the tramped-in blood of the brutes that came to die there, after a right splendid battle. The baying of hounds, the crack of gun or pistol, and the swirl of club or axe, was the ever-ready answer to the challenge of any old Bruin's growl, snapping hyena's bark, or hungry wolf's howl. The concert was music to my ears in those rough, wild times, and my heart and hand were ever ready for such frays, and the more desperate the struggle the better I liked it.

But one week of that rough-and-tumble work would have dimmed my little bride's spirits for a lifetime; and would have set her heart palpitating and fluttering in a wild fear that had been like to kill her.

As the autumn advanced and the cold threatened to become severe, we planned to leave the hut on the mountain, and make our way down to one of

Elfa

the lowland villages in order to find some house that would serve us. We were neither minded to live in too great a throng and press of folk: though perhaps, from different causes. In me, the old desire of solitude was not dead, although dying under Elfa's influence: while in her the womanly wish to see and be seen was not yet awakened.

We found a place that pleased us both. A small, strongly built dwelling, more than cottage but less than house, with many a nook and gable and quaint corner, that lay on the outskirts of Rosenthal, a hamlet on the edge of a far-stretching wood, where a wide valley that sloped down from the towering mountains opened itself in a small plane of level land. This was caused by a road, rude, rough, and solitary, which ran from Massen to another town through a number of villages, dotted upon it like knots upon a curling whip-lash.

An orchard went with the place, and some land, and a cow-byre, a shed or two and a stable. The rooms were fitted and furnished with a sort of crude homely comfort, wanting little to make them habitable. The owner had left it suddenly from pique or freak, and it was to be hired just as it stood.

It was well enough for our purpose, and compared with the old mountain hut it seemed like a palace.

Elfa was pleased with its quaintness, but like the little prudent housewife that she was, was afraid

Elfa

of the cost of it, and opened her blue eyes wide when I spoke of sending to Massen for whatever we should need to make the place bright and cheerful—for I had a fancy that the nest should be as pretty as the bird herself.

"A hunter's wife has no right to trouble her head for such dainty things as you speak of, Ernst."

"But where is the hunter's wife, sweetheart?" I asked, laughing. "So far as I can see there is no longer even a hunter. Ask Karl, there, what he thinks."

"Karl, is hunter Ernst become Elfa's Ernst only?" she asked, laughing merrily. "And has she turned him into spendthrift Ernst? And is he going to spoil Elfa in revenge? Good Karl, but you know the hunting is only given up for a time, don't you? and that after the winter we shall all go back to the dear old Grossberg and—"

"Do as much hunting as we have since the lily came to throw its white arms round the mountain, eh, Elfa? No, child, I think the hunting is nearly over—except as a pastime; and compared with the life the hound and I have lived, that is very much what a sham fight is to a pitched battle."

"But I thought—I mean, how——?" and she knitted her eyebrows with a puzzled look.

"You thought I lived by my hunting and wonder how we are to live without it? No, sweetheart, I am over well stocked with that which most men spend their sweat and toil to gain and,

Elfa

having gained, die before they learn the only pleasures it can give. It was no lack of gold that drove me to the forest to live. I have never cared for money for myself : but now I am right glad that I possess it. So spend away what you will, Elfa, and as much as you will, for the sack is deep enough to tire your little hands in the emptying."

She smiled in answer to this ; but as I looked closely at her, I saw a thoughtful expression behind the smile—like dark frame to a pretty picture. And then I regretted the hint at the secret cause which in years gone by had driven me to a hunter's life.

I had my way ; and the place was made bright and cheerful and full of comforts against our going to it. And this we fixed for a month from the day we had that talk at our new home that was to be. But before two weeks of the four had sped, we met with a grievous happening which frightened Elfa sadly—the first shadow of grief to dim our happiness.

As the nights lengthened in the lingering remnant of autumn, the air grew very raw and biting, and I began to look out for the tracks of such wild beasts as I thought might be driven out of their lairs in our direction. I was uneasy ; and mentioned something of my thoughts to Elfa. But she only smiled, protesting she had no fear with two such champions as Karl and me to defend her, and declared that she would rather stay as long as could be.

Elfa

I had noticed too that when I had given up the hunting, Karl had grown less watchful than before ; he slept more and came oftener into the hut than formerly. This increased my disquiet : nor was it without cause.

One night, when I was sleeping and the hound had crept inside and lay near us, I was awakened by an angry, smothered bark from him as he rushed out of the hut, growling fiercely with the sound that I knew to indicate the presence of some wild, unbidden visitor.

I jumped up in an instant and seized my gun and thrust my hunting-knife into my belt, while Elfa sat up in fear and called to me to know what had chanced. I stooped for a moment to soothe her, saying that the hound had scented some big game and it had excited him.

"Stay here, quietly, my dearest," I whispered. "All will be well in a moment : but do not stir from the hut till I return." Before she could promise, the sounds of a terrible conflict came from without and I could detect the howl and snapping of wolves. The noise raised Elfa's fears to a greater height, but I could not do more than reassure her with a word as I rushed from the hut.

The moon was shining brilliantly, and by its light I saw the dog putting all his fearsome energies into a deadly combat with three long, lean, gaunt wolves. Terrible odds for the good hound ; but he had the heart of a lion.

I rushed forward and sent forth a great shout, meaning to draw the brutes to me. One of them

Elfa

left the dog, and looked round at my shout, and the next instant he lay dead on the plateau with a bullet in his brain.

Then I tried to call Karl away : as he and the other two wolves were rolling over in a way that baffled even my quick eyes to tell which was wolf and which was dog. I clubbed my gun, and seeing at last a chance I brought it down with all my force on the back of one of the savage brutes ; he snarled fiercely, but kept his place in the fight, though I knew I must wellnigh have broken his spine.

I called again to Karl ; but he did not come away although the struggle was nearly over and the yelping and snapping and barking were fast growing weaker. Then a chance came to me for a blow at the third wolf, and with a cry of rage, for my blood was fast rising, I struck him with all my force on the head, splitting it wellnigh from neck to nostril. He rolled over without a sound.

Again I called to Karl.

He did not answer : it was ever his way when I called to him after a fight, that he would give a low whining bark, as if to assure me that he was unhurt.

I stooped down over him and saw what had happened, and why the wolf whom I had first struck had kept in the thick of the fight.

Karl had fastened his teeth in the brute's throat and had hung on while there was a pulse of life left ; and the other wolf had fastened on the dog,

Elfa

and thus tearing and worrying and blood-letting, they had fought till life had nearly ebbed from all.

I stooped and patted the dog, and my heart seemed to swell in my breast when I realised how sorely my noble, faithful, loving companion was wounded. A rage seized me for the moment and I vented it on the carcasses of the wolves, clubbing and trampling and kicking them in a frenzy of fury.

When this blind wrath had passed, I took up the old dog in my arms and calling to Elfa that he was hurt and to get a light, I carried him into the hut and laid him down gently to examine his hurts.

He was grievously wounded; and the blood was pouring from a terrible gape in the throat which the fangs of the beast had opened; and from the way the blood spurted, I could tell that an artery was severed.

He licked my hand and turned his eyes up to mine, but had not strength left to move his head: and he licked Elfa's hand when she went to him, and looked also into her face; but he turned back to me again.

He licked my hand again, and sought to champ it in the old playful way, but lacked strength even for that. Then he made an effort to raise his head once more, groaning with the attempt, and even while I was seeking to staunch the blood which flowed from the throat gash, he gave a last deep sigh and was dead.

I gazed at him, my heart sore and aching in-

Elfa

tolerably. He had given his life for me ; but I could not avenge him. I could not fight with death. I could but lay my hand on the dead body and yield myself to the confused rush of recollections of all that he had been to me in the past years. That was as bitter a moment as I had ever felt.

As I knelt there in my grim, silent sorrow, full of this melancholy musing, I felt suddenly the soft warm arms of my darling wife steal round my neck ; her sweet face came rubbing against my cheek, like the doe against the buck when storms are in the air ; her kisses fell upon my brow and lips, and her voice breathed tender words of sympathy into my ears.

"This will grieve you sorely, Ernst," she said, the tears in her voice and in her eyes as she spoke : and I could feel she was trembling. "It is I who have brought this trouble to you, husband, by my wilfulness in not going from here when you wished."

"Nay, nay, little love," I said, feeling then in full how tender is the sympathy of love in grief. "It is but a mischance that must ever wait at every turn of the wild life of the hunt. He was a noble hound and a right loyal friend, and has died a gallant death in defence of those he loved. A death I myself would rather die than any other. Good, faithful, lion-hearted Karl !"

"Do you know how I read the death, dearest?" she said wistfully.

"Read the death, child?" I echoed.

Elfa

"Yes ; there is a message in it to us both," she answered, with one of her quaint conceits. "No sorrow is without a warning. It is the breaking of the last link that chains you to the old rough life, dearest, and it warns me how much more than ever you must be to me and I to you. We must be all in all to each other now, husband."

She spake with such gentle seriousness, offering, half-timidly, this little plea of consolation to wean me from the thought of the friend I had lost, and her gestures and manner were so full of subtle sympathy and deep love, that I gathered her in my arms with my heart full of thankfulness, that even my very grief had held the promise of a blessing in thus calling forth the proofs of my dear wife's love.

But after that night we both felt we could not bide longer in the place. Thus, in the morning, after I had found a spot and buried the hound, we gathered such of our belongings as we wished to take with us, and went away to our new home ; both alike silent, thoughtful, and saddened ; and neither possessed of any wish to return.

Chapter XIII

LIFE in our home at Rosenthal ran a pleasant, fair, and easy course.

Elfa found constant cause of delight in her new character of housewife. The deft hands were always busy with some housely task, her feet ever briskly pattering over the house. Every day gave her some fresh idea for increasing the comfort or heightening the adornment of the place ; every hour had its tasks and duties ; and she moved busily about from room to room, with a jest and a laugh and a song ; always with the one leading thought of how to make the house a home, bright, happy, and comfort-yielding, in the truest and highest sense.

And in all this there was a ceaseless solicitude for me and for my happiness which touched me infinitely. She had a semi-fear lest in the sloth and dreaminess of the time I might stagnate and grow dull, because of the change in the nature and style of the life. Often, she would urge me to the hunt and would herself accompany me, or feign a pretext and coax me to walk with her to some distant village ; and in this way kept in

Elfa

my life something of the spirit of the bracing, open-air freedom to which recent years had accustomed me.

It was in the long winter evenings, however, that Elfa brought home to me the great contrast between that time and the old solitary life on the Grossberg. In my mountain hut, the long hours of darkness in winter had often been wearisome. I had tried to help their flight by dressing the skins of the animals I had slain; mending my weapons, or moulding my bullets in preparation for the chase; and doing such camp work as I could find for my hands. But many and long had been the gaps of enforced idleness when I had naught else to do but to lie back upon my couch of skins and brood darkly over the past.

My winsome little wife changed all that, however. As soon as the dusk gave way to dark, she would speed the flames of the log fire in the open hearth of the room where we sat, trim and light the bright lamps, close the latticed shutters of the windows and draw the curtains; and setting her chair close to mine would read to me or, with some piece of woman's work, knitting or sewing, on her lap, would tell me stories out of the far-away past, or sing me songs, old, quaint, and tender, in her soft, music-making voice.

She chose such tales as she knew I would like to hear; nearly all telling of great deeds of valour; of the might and prowess of dead and gone heroes in old campaigns; of battles and tourneys and combats, where hero faced hero with

Elfa

such gallant courage as made my blood heat only to hear the story told. Tales of lovely women turned by wrong and insult to raging fiends ; of the days of chivalry when men of stalwart stature and prodigious strength set out in quest of love and adventure, motivated by single-hearted honour, or went forth in anger to punish the doers of treacherous wrong or selfish greed. Narratives they were, so the gentle teller told me, culled from the history and poesy of many nations when the earth was younger, when might was the law that ruled and right the cloak it wore, and when the thews and sinews of a hero were held of some account in balancing the world's affairs.

They were brave old times indeed. And as the great feats of strength and the deeds of war and bloodshed and darkness, wrought either for love or hate, flowed in simple language to the calm melody of Elfa's tones, my own fierce and wild imagination lent itself to vivify the pictures which she drew so skilfully, touching them often, as I shrewdly think, with the pencil of her own clever conceits.

Of all the stories that she told, none had power to move me like those which dealt with the dread doings of the wild, fierce days of the Niebelungs and the Rhineland heroes. How much was fable and how much history, I knew not, nor, for that matter did Elfa : but to me, all those fearsome heroes were real enough. As she read or told the tales with many a quiver and shudder and many a pause of wondering dread at their grue-

Elfa

some blackness, the contrast between the softness of the speaker's voice and the weirdness of the theme, was strange enough. To hear Elfa raise a silvery, low-voiced echo of those stern old times of violence and blood, was like standing by a deep but smooth-flowing stream where it nears the brink of a dark abyss and falls suddenly ; and its tumbling, foaming waters send up fierce and rumbling echoes all suggestive of the dread unfathomed depths below, mingled with the pleasing, purling kisses of the light surface spray.

Sigfrid and Kriemhild, Gunther and Brunhild, Volker, Rüdiger, Gernot, Dietrich and above all, that stern, bloody, daring, desperate Hagen, were with us both like creatures of life. We spoke of them, of their loves and strifes and hates, of their looks and words and thoughts ; and often in excitement I would start from my chair and posture and fence and crouch in mimic conflict, and as though the foes were indeed upon us.

I never tired of listening, nor Elfa, when she saw how it pleased me, of telling these old stories. One there was indeed that I asked for evening after evening ; ever finding in it some novel charm and allurements. It was the story of the Niebelungs, where Queen Kriemhild, seeking vengeance for the murder of her husband, lured the Burgundian heroes to her court ; trapped Hagen into an avowal of the murder, and then compassed the death of the whole band in the banquet-hall of the palace. Never surely was known a more desperate fight than that ; and I thought of

Elja

it so often, rehearsing it in gesture, that I could have played the part of that grim old butcher, Hagen, to the life—or rather, to the death—as he and his band fell upon Kriemhild's followers and slew them till the floor was covered with their corpses.

A shield full of gold is the Queen's guerdon for the man who shall strike down Hagen. A vain offer, although the carnage and butchery break out again and again, raging until not one of all Kriemhild's men is left alive within the walls. Then the stern and terrible band close their ranks and no bribes, nor taunts nor jeers can tempt a single Hun to approach the doorway where stand those who have waged the fearsome fight throughout the livelong summer day.

Night falls ; and in the stillness is heard the grim sound of the blood as it runs its sluggish course down the gutters out into the courtyard. "Fire the Banqueting-hall" rings out the shrill, passion-hoarse voice of the terrible Queen : and the tongues and sheets of flame lick and roar over the whole of the stately pile until the heroes within are scorched by heat and parched with thirst.

"Let the living slake their thirst in the blood of the dead !" cries Hagen ; and he is obeyed. Then they fight with the fire as they have fought with the warriors ; and, amid the falling beams and masonry, they press and crouch and cower close against the stone walls, with shields uplifted, battling for air.

Elfa

At length the short summer night, that has seemed endless through its horrors, rolls away and the dawn streaks the east with long lines of clearing light ; and in the dim greyness, amid the blackened beams and glowing embers, the scorched masonry and smoking ruins, stand the last thinned remnant of the fearsome band, grim, defiant, dauntless to the last, bent on fighting to the very death.

Such stories as this stirred every fibre in my body and made my nerves tingle and vibrate with a rush and surge of hot emotional passion. I grew to love the tales as I loved the pretty teller, and to long for the hours of evening to come. I marvelled at Elfa's memory and at the ready manner in which she would produce the richest stores from that full garner-house to delight and thrill me with them.

The months sped on thus until, one jewelled day in the young summer, when all nature was robed in sunshine and smiles, the love-bond between us was cemented by the fulfilment of a promise of which she had blushinglly whispered me some time before. There was a brief span while I sat alone with my anxious thoughts and nervous dread until the danger passed and a fat, dimpled, laughing, crooning king baby had come to hold in his creasy fingers rule over the whole household.

Elfa as wife and companion had wound herself into all my being, till I had thought nothing could add to her charm and my love. But Elfa as the mother of my child, nursing it, dandling it, fondling it, bringing it for me to kiss and be

Elfa

proud of it, with such a beam of mother's happiness and joy radiating her face and lighting her eyes, was like a revelation to me. And when I would stoop and play with the mite, thrusting my great finger at him in jest till he caught it and held it, crowing and laughing and kicking as he tried to carry it to his lips, the mother's love shone clear and deep and full in Elfa's face.

Thus it was with us all through that summer and autumn : the child growing apace and thriving prodigiously ; a source of never-ending sweetness and pleasure to us. We had grown accustomed to the new home, and moved perhaps by the spirit of content which was upon us at the time, we determined to settle in the place, and I began to make arrangements to buy it.

This business took me several times to Massen during the late autumn ; and it was on my return from there that something came to change the course and current of our lives, suddenly, and it had wellnigh been fatally.

I had told Elfa of the extent of my wealth, and amongst other things had given her jewels and valuables such as I knew a woman might well love to possess. These things were rare enough in the lonely district where our home was fixed, and I have since believed that the knowledge of our possessing them may have led to the event at which I have hinted.

I had paid a visit to Massen to the notary in reference to the purchase of the house ; and as, like many others, it was a bootless one, the matter

Elfa

having made no progress at all, I was free to return earlier than I had expected and found myself nearing home while it was yet light ; some hour or two before I had expected to return.

I was thinking of my loved ones and of the smile of surprise and welcome that would light up Elfa's face at my unexpected return ; and suddenly it struck me to make the surprise the greater by approaching the house by a back path so that she should not see my coming.

To this end I sprang across a low hedgerow and, crossing a couple of meadows, stole up under the cover of the leafless orchard trees, to an entrance at the rear of the house. No one was about and I smiled gently at the success of my little play.

The door stood open and I paused to listen, expecting to hear the sound of Elfa's voice, singing or prattling with the babe. But all was still and even the serving-wench was not at hand.

The first sound I heard was the tread of feet somewhere in the house above : and then a door opened, and I took it to be Elfa.

But the next second, my heart leaped within me as I heard a shrill cry for help in my darling's voice followed by gruff tones and the cries of men.

What I felt at that moment, no words can really tell. My heart was like ice with the chill of fear for my sweet ones' safety : while my brain was on fire with the flame of mad rage against those who had thus stolen in to violate my home.

I dashed up to the room and a shout of furious

Elfa

wrath burst from me as I found three ruffians in the room, menacing Elfa:

She stood at bay, clasping our child to her breast with one hand, and holding a dagger in the other; her lovely face set and stern with a mother's rage and yet white with a woman's fear.

As I entered one of the cowards struck a blow at her daggered hand, which would have broken it, had she not lowered it suddenly at the sight of me, and let fall the weapon. The villains saw me, too, almost as soon as they heard my shout, and as they started in surprise, Elfa seized the moment to run to me.

The three rogues glared round sullenly at me, like trapped fools; and when they saw the look on my face and the fury that blazed from my eyes, and marked my towering height and sturdy limbs, they turned from the room and bolted like scared rabbits, through a door that was near them. The fools had but trapped themselves in their eagerness to fly, for the door led into a large square room from which there was no other outlet. So I fastened the door and turned to Elfa.

"Are you hurt, sweetheart?" I whispered, as I folded my arms round her. "Is the babe hurt?"

"No, Ernst, thanks to Heaven for sending you back in time. But oh, I am so frightened, husband," she cried.

"There is no need for fear, now, my darling. I am here. It is they who need to pray now, not you." I spoke calmly, though the fury was hot upon me: and Elfa seemed to guess something of the hidden feeling.

Elfa

"What are you going to do, Ernst?" she asked anxiously, as she clutched me by the arm. "You are not going into that room?"

"What does the eagle who returns to find some cowardly vermin robbing the eyrie and threatening the eaglets? By God, it were better for those knaves never to have been born. Stay you here, child, and keep quite calm and put away your fear."

At this moment the imprisoned rogues began to make a lively clattering at the door of their prison; and Elfa started and winced at the noise, like a timid doe.

I had my staff in my hand and I went at once toward the door. Then one of them called to me and said, in as bold a voice as he could command, that if I opened the door and let them pass, they would depart without hurting me or mine: but that if I would not, they would break down the door and then kill every soul in the house.

That threat was all that was needed to fill the measure of my wrath to overflowing. Rage possessed me: although as was ever my way when peril threatened, I was calm outwardly and held every faculty under perfect control. Three men, even such cowards as would try to strike a defenceless woman and to murder a babe, were yet odds enough to inspire caution. Moreover, the villains might be armed: but in my then mood I would have faced a hundred such as they in defence of my dear ones.

They renewed the clatter on the panels, and under cover of the noise I softly unloosed the fastenings and threw the door open. Then with

Elfa

a shout I rushed toward them with my staff uplifted. The suddenness of my movement dismayed them, and they fled back into the room.

Then I fastened the door again ; this time on the inside of the room ; and faced them, towering before them, my eyes ablaze with wrath.

"Now, you vermin, that come stealing into a man's house to fight with a lone woman and a child, you shall try the temper of your weapons on a man," I cried : and not one of them durst move against me.

I looked for the man who had tried to strike Elfa. He was standing to my left and had picked up the dagger which Elfa had dropped.

I stretched out my hand toward him with sudden and fierce menace ; for my blood boiled at the thought of his having dared to raise his hand against my darling wife, and my voice was hoarse and guttural with passion.

"As for you, you shall die : you, that dared under my very eyes, to seek to strike my wife and child ; you shall die. Do you hear ? If you've any wish to gain the mercy of Heaven for your black soul, seek it speedily : for you'll find none at my hands."

The villain turned sickly white at my words and clutched the dagger he held with feverish tremor.

"Ernst, Ernst, do not shed blood," came Elfa's voice quivering and tremulous, from the other side of the door. "For my sake, Ernst."

"Mind you the babe, Elfa," I cried, somewhat

Elfa

impatiently, in my anger. "Leave me to deal with these as I will. See, you wolf," I cried to the man again, "the gentle creature whom you tried to kill—by God, the bare thought of it makes me mad—pleads for your beggarly, coward life. Well, you shall have it. I will not soil my hands with such carrion as you : but now I charge ye two"—turning to the others and speaking in a voice of thunder—"if ye want your freedom, bind that villain and scourge him till he cries out for mercy and I bid you cease. Quick, decide ; or, by the Heavens above us, the sands of my patience will run out and then you may look to yourselves."

The pair of knaves glared sullenly, first at one another and next at their comrade. Then they made a step or two as if to go to him to do my bidding : and at this the third rascal raised the dagger and threatened them.

They stopped in fear and looked round at me. My looks were fierce enough to frighten them and they spoke some hasty words in a tone so low that I could not catch their purport.

But the third man threw down the dagger and seemed about to submit himself to them. They stood all three together for a space, and then very suddenly they turned and rushed on me in a body, the biggest and burliest rascal snatching up the dagger to plunge it into my heart.

A shout escaped me, when I saw their rush, as if my soul rejoiced at the fight.

It was soon over—almost before any real struggle had begun.

Elfa

A single sweeping blow from my staff shattered the arm of the villain who threatened me with the dagger, and a buffet on the jowl from my disengaged fist sent him staggering and reeling across the room, dazed and dizzy, groaning with pain and spluttering out blood and teeth from his broken jaws. Almost at the same instant such a kick as a horse might give almost broke the knee of another and a blow of my staff, following this, wellnigh cracked his skull and sent him down like a felled beast.

This left me free to deal only with him who had tried to strike Elfa : and as I seized him, a groaning cry of fear broke through his chattering teeth. Rage and fury consumed me ; and when I felt my grip close on him like a vice, I had to curb the impulse that was strong in me, to pinch his wind-pipe till I stopped his breathing. He was like a puppet in my grasp and I shook and buffeted him till he was giddy and sick. Then I dragged him to the door and called to Elfa to bring me a stout, long-thonged, heavy whip I had : and with that I lashed him over the body and face and legs till he writhed and twisted and screamed with the pain. And at last I hurled him from me to the other end of the chamber, where he lay huddled up, shaking and starting like a frightened sheep.

"Have they hurt you, Ernst?" cried Elfa, whom the noise of the struggle had frightened into tears.

"Nay, Elfa," I cried with a laugh. "But they can boast a pretty crack or two amongst them : for I can swear to a smashed pate, a broken arm,

Elfa

and as well-whipped a hide as all Austria could match this day. But now I've a whimsical idea. I'll see these gentry home. Get me a long, stout cord—the longer and stouter the better."

When she brought it, I tied the rascals in a row, with loops round their necks, and made them rise : and they looked three such downcast, shame-faced, and woebegone knaves, that I was fain to laugh.

But Elfa stood by, pale and trembling and sad-looking.

"Now, march," I cried, "and make straight for the nearest guard-house. If you move a foot out of the way, you shall feel how a curling necklet of this whip-lash can smart."

I hastened back as soon as I had placed the rogues in safe keeping : and found Elfa was really ill from the fright she had received.

She begged me with tears not to leave her alone again ; and in the night, with many words, all of which helped to show her fears, she urged that we should not dwell longer in the house, but seek some place less lonely and desolate. She could never again be aught but full of fears, she averred, unless I were to be always at hand : and then I promised that so soon as she was well, we would go away and search for some other spot where we could settle : and with that she fell into easy slumber.

Little did I think to what that promise would lead.

Chapter XIV

ELFA was desperately unnerved by the fright which the thieves gave her, and many a day passed before she entirely recovered from the shock. She could not bear me out of her sight ; and oftentimes in the night the horror of it came back in dreams, and she would start and catch up our boy and cry to me for help in a very frenzy of alarm.

This continued, but at gradually lengthening intervals, long after we had left the solitary house at Rosenthal and set out in search of a new home. Of its kind, that was as great a change in our lives as when we had left the rugged old Grossberg.

I was advised by the doctor to do everything in my power to give her occupation and so distract her mind from the trouble, and we went lingeringly from town to town and village to village, following no plan or route in our travelling, except such as chance or the whim of the moment suggested. We had no purpose save that of strengthening anew her sadly bruised nerves : with perhaps an under-thought that we might chance upon some place where we might be attracted to settle.

Elfa

It was during those months of wandering that I first began to be sensible of a shadow that was slowly but surely falling upon us and threatening to darken our lives; but whether the change was in Elfa or in myself I could not decide.

It seemed to me, when first I began to be vaguely sensible of it, as if the sweet, contented, whole-hearted companionship of the time at Rosenthal had formed the summit of the mountain of our happiness, and that the way beyond was to be less sunny, full of treacherous spots, and flecked by dark clouds.

How this new feeling, or fear, in me arose, what caused it, or when it first began to affect me, I know not. Some indefinable, impalpable division appeared to be growing up between my beloved wife and myself, which baffled description and even eluded definite consciousness. As, when a storm is impending, the instincts of the creatures of the wild are receptive of the subtle warnings which Nature gives long before there are any external signs visible to man, so seemed to me this feeling of vague apprehension.

Later on, I came to know well enough what it was: and the knowledge cost me many sad, thoughtful, weary hours.

Though Elfa had always been to the full as contented as I in the quietude of our former life, her content had quite a different origin. She had never been in the world: I had been driven from it. I had never seen her among strangers, and we mingled now with many; and I watched her with

Elfa

curiously mingled feelings. I had been too long a silent, lonely man to shake off set habits of solitude and take kindly to a life with my fellows. Slow to think and speak, albeit quick to act, I was unversed in the topics which serve to form the ground and bond of common interest among casual acquaintances. Book knowledge, such as I had ever possessed, had long been forgotten. The wars which had just ended in the overthrow of the self-made Emperor whose ambitions had drenched all Europe in blood, his exile, the effects upon our own land, the gossip of our Viennese Court, the drama, the newest writers and painters—all these were like an unknown tongue to me : nor had I the wit to fence with others' knowledge, and to parry thrusts at my ignorance. I cared nothing for them all, and was rather glad than otherwise to show my indifference.

But Elfa had all a woman's aptness in such matters. Often would I sit in wondering amazement at the deft and clever skill with which, while making no pretension to any great knowledge, she used her natural wits so shrewdly that none could rightly tell how much, nor yet how little, she knew. No one would try to press her hard, indeed ; and she had a pretty knack of asking for information and yet giving the impression of knowing beforehand all that could be told. Thus those whom she questioned were led to answer in a half-apologetic, half-deprecating way, as if they felt she knew in reality more than themselves ; and what she once heard she never forgot.

Elfa

She would come to me afterwards and tell it all to me and ask me if she had acted wickedly in not confessing her ignorance ; and would assume such an air of smiling penitence, as she hung her arms round my neck, that I was always glad when these little encounters had taken place.

Sometimes, she would look wistfully, half-chidingly, into my face and ask me why I never joined in these talks ; was I vexed with her for having done so ; was I happy or wished to go away, and why I looked so grave and sad? And if I did not answer—for I could not always find words to humour her—her face would cloud and sometimes with a sigh, but always with a kiss, she would slip from my arms and bring our little lad to me, whispering to him to look stern like me, and to scold me for looking so. She would try by a hundred pretty devices to brighten and cheer me, until, failing, she would turn away and bend over the child, kissing and petting and caressing him, the tender love of the mother hiding the regret of the wife.

Very slowly and with infinite pain to myself, I grew to find a connection between the fear which troubled me and a change which I thought I could detect in Elfa. It seemed to me as if the pleasure which she took in the new life with its novel scenes, its rapid movement, its constant amusement, its varying gallery of fresh faces, its complete varlance from all her experience, and its absolute contrast to all the time we two had passed together, was an ever widening and deepening

Elfa

barrier between the old life and the new. And my brooding fancies made it easy for me then to think that as her pleasure in the new life grew, so would grow her dislike of the old.

As I watched her, I seemed to note a constant craving for fresh excitement. Thus she would urge me to leave a town at which we had but just arrived ; or would hurry from occupation to occupation and pleasure to pleasure with an unrest as new to her as it was disquieting to me ; while at other times she was subject to moods of seriousness akin to melancholy. I grew to observe her moods and actions, her looks and words, much as in the old time I had studied the ways of the game I hunted. There was no lack of love and tenderness and forethought for me : but often I thought I could detect beneath the surface many signs that troubled me.

These plaguing doubts of mine were at first but as the gossamer threads of a spider's web, and I could brush them away easily enough : nor did they leave any rankling afterthoughts. Afterwards, however, they grew more poisoned and poisoning : they were like the long floating filaments which a poisonous jelly-fish will coil around a swimmer with a thousand smarting kisses, each of which will prick and burn and tingle afterwards at every touch that serves to stir the rankling venom.

I grew to brood upon it more and more ; and in long wakeful nights and whenever I was alone, I strove and wrestled with the puzzle.

Elfa

The first definite shape that my fear assumed was one which would have been natural and ready enough in the days before Elfa had come into my life. It grew out of my remembrance of old Judith's words : that Elfa was not suited to mate with one whose nature was rough and hard like mine. The thought preyed upon me that, despite my efforts to be kind and gentle with her, the coarseness of my nature and the rugged fierceness ingrained in me were working harm upon her, silently and unconsciously, and alienating her from me. They threatened to kill her love. I dated this back to the moment of the attack by the robbers ; for it was then that she had first seen me in mad wrath with my fellow-men, wantoning and rioting in the dealing of heavy, savage blows, full of menace and the lust for revenge : a creature that well might scare so frail a being as she.

A prey to this distracting fear, I would sit and watch her, and my moody imaginings led me to see in her the signs of withering decay which the old harridan had prophesied. And in this moodiness, I learned to misread the varying expressions of her face : wistfulness became regret ; laughter, a mask of fear ; tenderness, dissimulation ; banter, distrust : until my melancholy fed upon itself, and I could discern in her a readiness to turn away and shrink from me at every sign of the roughness of my disposition.

From this came the thought that the curse of old which had blighted my life was still dogging

Elfa

me. Happiness had come to me for a brilliant spell : but was passing away, to leave me more desolate and miserable than ever : as the brilliant passage of a fiery meteor across the dark firmament will seem to leave the gloom which it has lightened more dense and depressing behind it.

This increased tenfold my dread lest Elfa should learn the story of my past life. Whenever we went to a new town and mingled with fresh people, I feared that we might light upon some one who might recognise me, as the priest at Massen had remembered my name. I was appalled by the thought of such a shock to her ; and thus, by degrees, I came to watch her words with closeness and with such moody distemper that I grew to distort many things she said, till I found in them a gloomy confirmation of my fears. Thus if she expressed her horror of some deed of blood or evil—as she did more than once when reports of such happenings reached us—I would take her words to myself, and ponder them and chew them over and over until I shuddered in my secret pain. What would she think if she knew that I was the son of a murderer and my own hands were stained with the blood of more than one man who had fallen by my sword in the duel?

Then I fell foul of myself for having made her my wife without telling her all ; and out of this I wove yet another web of self-torture. I poisoned my own mind by thinking that Elfa was brooding and wondering about that past history of mine ; and that her fear concerning it, added to what she

Elfa

herself had seen at Rosenthal, had made her sorry that she had ever wed me.

That thought overwhelmed me with both bitterness and sadness. It took a hundred grim shapes in my mind, each drawing to itself a group of ugly conceits to plague and harrow and distress me. As the microscope will often show a heaving, seething mass of living corruption where to the naked eye all seems fair and bright ; so this distorting gloom of mine sought in the simplest actions of our daily life for the trail of the deadly bane that mocked at my hope of peace and marred my chance of happiness. And what it sought, it found easily and readily.

It was not possible that such a nature as Elfa's should mate with mine ; and I told myself that the change in her was but the dawning recognition in her own mind of the true feeling with which she had wedded me. She had been too young, too innocent, too ignorant of the world, to know her own heart's real desires. She had come fresh from a life of misery and hardship to find quiet and safety with me ; and had mistaken her gratitude for love. Now she was awaking to the truth. She had not known me for what I really was ; and now, contact with other men, to whom I offered so ill a contrast, had let her see how stern and harsh and uncouth were all my ways. She was growing to fear me.

Her wayward restlessness and yearning for change, so strangely mingled with her spells of melancholy, I read as signs of the conflict in her

Elfa

heart. She knew how sorely the loss of her love would wound me, and she was struggling, like the thoughtful, gentle being that she was, to hide the knowledge from me. More than that, she was even striving to escape from her own thoughts lest she should betray them and her own misery to me. And in this way, every move we made from town to town became a source of added doubt and pain to me.

Yet at all times, whatever my mood, my love for my dainty, darling wife never wavered for an instant. I felt an intense pity for her, divining how hard it must be for her to be tied to one with whom she had mated in the misbelief that she loved me. I think that I loved her the more, if that were possible, when I saw her brave efforts to conceal from me the blighting canker of her secret.

I sought to ease her task, setting a careful guard upon my lips and looks when with her. But there were times when the ordeal passed the bounds of endurance and drove me forth to indulge my sorrow in solitude.

What the end would be I feared to imagine ; but I had no idea of harm or ill to me or mine until the day came when the devil gave an evil twist to my vague wonderings and gave form and shape to the current of my thoughts.

A black day that for me !

We had been roaming in our easy planless way for many months when we found ourselves in the quaint mountain-locked town of Festen ; and the

Elfa

beauty of the district round tempted us to linger for a long time in the place. We reached Festen in the summer-time ; and as the town was but little frequented, we met a ready welcome from the people staying at the hotel.

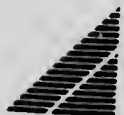
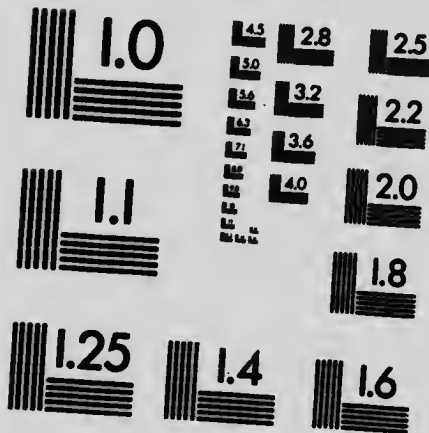
This welcome gave Elfa much pleasure: and in a few days, by virtue of her grace and brightness, she was held in such high esteem and friendly consideration, that she was like a petty chieftainess in whose movements those of all the small circle were centred. I saw her eyes grow brighter, her laughter merrier and more frequent, and her spirits more buoyant than for some time past ; and I was more than content that the company of others should help to lighten the yoke I had placed on her neck by marrying her.

A small garrison was quartered in the town and by the officers Elfa's arrival was greeted with especial pleasure. For her sake some of them sought to extend even to me their courtesy, nor did my want of answering cordiality check their efforts ; and many were the amusements and pleasures organised mainly on Elfa's behalf.

There was one of them, a Captain von Unger, who showed a greater pleasure than all the rest in being with Elfa. It was he who made the first approaches to us and brought his comrades to our rooms. He was tall, handsome, and gallant-looking : the type of what a soldier should be : and sometimes I felt I could have envied him his smooth fair skin, regular features, bold blue eyes, wavy locks and tawny sweeping moustache. That



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Elfa

I noticed him so closely was due to Elfa herself, who drew my attention to him in many ways with frank and artless admiration. I had no thought of ill.

We had been in Festen many weeks before a single thought entered my head that there was aught but simple friendship between them : and then a seeming accident prompted it.

Elfa and I had planned to take a little walking journey ; and for some days beforehand she had shown a more than wonted interest in the project, saying it would be pleasant and like old times to be alone together on a long walk, that of late we had been but rarely by ourselves—which was true enough—and that she was wearying somewhat of the company of strangers. But when the day came she said she was not well enough to go with me, and pressed me to go alone, saying she would rest and keep her room throughout the day : so that she might be herself again to welcome me on my return.

I yielded a tardy assent. I was loath to leave her : although I longed to stretch my limbs and brace my muscles and set my torpid blood flowing by a long brisk tramp. The listless sloth of a town life tried me sorely. Thus, I set out alone.

But I did not go far. I could not. It seemed a churlish act to leave Elfa when she was ill and so when I had scarce covered a couple of leagues, I turned and retraced my steps, thinking to surprise and hoping to please her with my quick return. I was in a more cheerful mood that day than usual.

Elfa

Ah me !

I hurried eagerly to our rooms ; but neither Elfa nor the child was there.

She was better, I thought ; and was glad she had recovered so quickly. Wondering where I should seek her, I glanced from the window ; and saw that which in a moment shattered my happiness ; and flooded my mind with the sinister light of a dread revelation.

The window commanded a view of the hotel gardens, beyond the courtyard that lay immediately beneath ; and there I saw Elfa, walking beneath the trees laughing and talking very merrily with the young officer, von Unger ; while the child was at play with the nurse close by.

For some moments, I stood watching her pleased smiles and laughing, blushing face as she glanced at the handsome young fellow, who, with heightened colour and a somewhat embarrassed look, would return her glances and smiles with now and then a serious expression as if in earnest pleading.

I watched them till I could bear the sight no longer, and turned away, a broken-hearted, miserable man.

By a flash of instinct I understood all now : the change that had so puzzled me ; the growing division between us ; her variable moods and constant unrest ; the real nature of her secret ; and the true cause of all. Not only had her love for me ceased, but, God help me, it had been given to this other. No, not given, wrung from her by

Elfa

the man who had only this very day so wrought upon her that she had lured me to leave the place that the two might be alone.

Then I was beside myself.

I rushed out of the house and away ; anywhere, I cared not whither, lest we should meet and she should know that I had learnt her secret and perchance read the feelings that were devouring me.

To this hour I know not where I went, nor how far I walked, nor yet what I thought. I plunged along at headlong speed, like one insane : and when, late at night, I found myself again in the town, I awoke to a sense of dull, heavy, suffocating misery, streaked with sharp shootings of fierce anger against her for her deceit, and of furious brutal jealousy of the man with whom I had seen her.

My sorrow had come, indeed ; and I cowered beneath its weight.

I dared not trust myself to enter the hotel at once ; but paced the streets of the silent town, fighting and wrestling with the demon that raged within me, till it would have been joy, unutterable and indescribable, to lay violent hands on my life and so escape the tortures that I endured.

But it was part of the curse upon me, that I could do nothing but suffer in inactive silence. In every former crisis of my life the resource of action had always been open to me : but here and now, I dared not let fall even a sign of all I suffered. Nay, my love bound me like a

Elfa

slave to try and play a part ; to act, and speak and be as though I knew nothing.

When at length I entered the hotel, I hoped that Elfa would be asleep, and I crept into the room like a thief.

"You are late, Ernst," she said directly. "Have you been farther than you meant to go ? I began to be afraid for you : and could not sleep for my fears. Was it not foolish ?" and with that, she rose and came to me : she had been sitting in her chair, reading.

"Yes," I answered, trying to command my voice. "I am later than I purposed. You know my old bad habit to lose the count of time."

There was that in my voice which caused her to look up quickly, into my eyes, and she started at what she saw there.

"What is the matter, dear one ?" she asked anxiously. "You are not well, or desperately troubled. Your face is white and drawn ; and your voice is not like your own. What is the matter ? Have you met with any accident ? Has anything happened ? Tell me, tell me, dearest husband ;" and she clung to me and kissed me and laid her hands on my face caressingly.

"No, nothing has happened. I am tired : that is all," I answered, fighting for a steady tone.

"Ernst, you have gone all the day without food : and you have overwalked. You are too reckless of yourself, sweetheart, now that you have to think of me. Tell me, have you had anything to eat ?"

Elfa

I tried to laugh at her fears : and the mere effort showed how her sweet solicitude could win upon me.

"Nay, Elfa ; have no fear that my strength will fail for a lost meal. In truth, I gave no thought to food."

"I knew it, I knew it," she cried, and began to scold me laughingly. "How dare you come back with such a look on your face to me? I have a mind to—to, I don't know what. You are—everything that you ought not to be : and I'm glad now that I prepared a punishment for you. Come into our little room ; but stay, first, husband, and look at our darling little lad."

She paused a moment by the child's cot, holding the lamp over our boy, as she glanced from me to the lad and back from him to me, with a look of such happy, loving pride on her face that I marvelled. Then she drew me into the small chamber that was next to ours, linking her hand in mine as we walked, and laughing mightily as she showed me how she had had a dainty meal of meat and fruits and wine made ready against my return.

"Now for your punishment, Sir Ernst," she said playfully. "The sentence of the court is that you be condemned to make as right hearty a meal as you used to do in the dear old days on the Grossberg, when you used to run away in the sunlight and only come back at dusk. And while you eat, I am going to chatter and tell you all I have been doing the livelong day :

Elfa

I haven't been a prisoner after all ; but have been up and about, gossiping and talking and romping with little laddie : and oh, Ernst, I have been so sorry I didn't go with you and have longed and longed and longed for you to come home—just like I used to in our hut-home : when old Karl was with me instead of our boy, to help me get rid of the long, long hours of your absence."

Then she threw her arms round me and kissed me—kissing the wrinkles out of my tired face, she said—and told me, without a question or hint from me, every incident of the day, all the people she had seen, including the young officer, much that they had said, how she had played with the boy—every detail of every hour of the day.

And I—well what could I do, but sit and listen and be charmed and for the time be won away from the ugly thoughts that had plagued me. She could move me as with the spell of a wizard.

Chapter XV

THAT night as I lay wakeful and restless by the side of my sleeping wife, the moody thoughts took hold of me again and tormented me with even greater force. I had then to fight against a new and more devilish idea than all—that on my return, Elfa had made this show of affection in order to lull any suspicions that she may have thought my altered looks and voice implied.

At dawn I rose, unrested in body and weary and bruised in spirit as the result of the conflict. It was agony to me to lie still and think ; and the old lifelong desire to be doing something, if only walking, drove me out into the open air.

As I went, the grey light came stealing into the room and I stood for a moment by Elfa's side gazing down at her sadly enough with a heart full of love for her, trying to think in what way I could best serve her. Before I left I stooped and lifted a truant curl that lay coiled like a band of gold on her white neck and kissed it. Then I hurried away.

It was a melancholy walk that I had : but my thoughts seemed to advance a stage. They were

Elfa

clearer and less wild than on the day before and during the darkness. All anger against Elfa herself passed. I saw everything that morning in a gentler light. I could not blame the child for what she could not help. The blame lay with me for having married her without foreseeing what must come of so ill-sorted a union. She was to be pitied, not blamed. A nature such as hers could no more control her feelings, than I could have controlled mine before she had come to the Grossberg.

I had done her a cruel wrong in binding her, all ignorant of the world as she was, to my side and thus making her love for another man a sin. The sin was more mine than hers ; and, God help me, the punishment was and should be mine as well.

I must find some way in which to free her from the bonds which galled and wrung her so cruelly and forced her pure and innocent nature to stoop to deceit.

Then I set my wits a-scheming to devise some method by which I could end the difficulties and dangers to her which my blind, selfish love had caused.

There was but one way, as it seemed to me.
My death.

If I were dead, she would be free ; and death held little terror for me.

But it must be so compassed as to leave no trace that it had been self-sought. And I set to pondering how this could be.

Elfa

Here, however, my love for her began pulling me two ways. I was wishful to help her, even by dying for her; though I was full loath to leave her, for the sake of the great love I bore her.

Yet this thought was very welcome, and tended to soothe me mightily. It offered me some definite course of action. It was something to do; something to be working toward; something to plan and to guide and motive my thoughts and acts. It was a resource; a last and desperate one, truly; but yet one which might atone for the wrong I had done Elfa, and might in the end secure my darling's peace and happiness.

I was thus calmer when I returned to the hotel; although my face wore but a gloomy look, I fear. Elfa had but just risen and at the moment she asked me little more than where I had been and what had caused my unrest. But after we had had our first simple morning meal, and she had sent away the maid with our lad, she came to where I sat, looking moodily out of the window, and began to question me closely.

She approached me from behind and before I was aware of what she purposed I found her arms round my neck and her warm cheek nestling against mine, as she kissed me. Then she climbed upon my knee and leant against my heart, placing my arm round her, took my hand and held it tight between her own.

"Do you know what this means, Ernst?" she whispered.

"That you have some favour to ask, child?"

Elfa

If so, it is granted before you put it into words," I answered.

"No, there's no favour. I've climbed up here because I'm going to play detective. My ear is at your heart, to listen if your pulse is steady; my hand will hold yours, to note if you start; my eye will be fixed on your face to see if you change: so that I can catch you in a moment. So, beware;" and she smiled up into my eyes. "On second thoughts there is a favour, Ernst, so I'll take your offer. The favour is that you tell me what is the matter with you. I know there is something, husband; and it grieves me. I have read it in your face many times; and, for a long while past, have heard it in your voice, and noticed it even in your quiet, silent reserve. What is it? You will surely tell me, my dearest one?"

"There is nothing the matter with me, Elfa," I answered.

"Even as you say that, Ernst, your voice and manner tell me that there is. Are you not happy?"

"Happy? Yes, of course I am. How could I be otherwise with you, sweetheart?" I said, forcing a smile.

"Your eyes are not smiling as you say that," she answered wistfully. "Are you wishing for anything, or regretting anything, or grieving at anything that may have happened?"

"What should I wish for, Elfa, except perhaps that the days might be longer for me to have more

Elfa

of you ; or grieve for, save that I was verging on two-score years when you came into my life to change and brighten it? "

She paused and shook her head slowly at this reply and then lifted her face to be kissed. "Do you really love me as much as that implies—as much as ever, my dearest?" she asked softly.

"I love you more than ever, little wife," I answered, as I bent and kissed her on the lips. Heaven knows that was but the bare truth.

"Then why not tell me what makes you troubled?" she whispered. "Ah, Ernst, I do wish you would tell me. It is sad, so sad to feel that you have a set of thoughts which I do not share. Are you sure that you do not grieve because our life is so different from the old free hunter's life on the Grossberg? "

"Quite sure, child; all I want is that you should be happy; you and our little lad."

"Bless his heart," she cried, her face breaking into smiles, but growing serious and thoughtful again as she continued: "Is it that you are thinking of anything before that time, Ernst? Don't be angry with me for asking you; and don't tell me, if you would rather not."

"Do you not wonder, sometimes, that I have never told you anything of the years before I ever saw you?" and there was some change in my voice which she was quick to notice.

"I am but a woman," she murmured, pressing my hand to her soft cheek; "a woman in curiosity, but a wife in confidence and trust, I hope."

Elfa

"Do you mean you wish to learn the history of my life?"

"No, Ernst," she answered quickly. "No, I only mean that if there is anything that grieves and troubles you, I would like to help you bear the burden. But not, if you would rather not tell me."

"I will tell you all, some day, little wife," I said, after a long pause. "But my life was wild and rugged, with much of fierceness and tumult in it that would match but ill with your gentle and tender nature. I would rather forget much of it myself than share the knowledge of it even with you."

"I am content, dearest, since it saddens you even to speak thus of it, as I can tell by your voice. Yet it is so difficult for me to think of you as anything but kind, just as you always are to me. I cannot understand that your past can have been so wild as you say. Yet of this I am certain—it was no fault of yours. It could not have been."

"No, it was no fault of mine, at least at the outset, for it was part of my heritage and came to me with my name. Yet once you have seen me moved to furious wrath—I mean at Rosenthal when . . ."

"Ah, don't speak of that," she broke in excitedly, wincing and trembling as if in pain, and clasping her hands to her face. "I cannot bear to think of you as I saw you that day. You were terrible and terrifying; and it frightened

Elfa

me. But you are not often like that, my dearest? " she murmured after a pause; and when she unclasped her hands, her face was white and drawn and full of such fearsome anxiety that I hastened to reassure her.

" No, no, Elfa. But at that moment, remember, I returned to find those villains threatening harm to all that I hold dear in life. Who could be a man and not be filled with wrath and fury at a sight which well might turn a coward's blood to flame? "

The mere reference to the past had so distressed and agitated her that the confidence which had been half-drawn from me died on my lips.

How could I dare to tell her that I was the son of a murderer whose cruelty had roused the deepest hate and fury of his fellows and whose memory was loathed as an accursed thing; that I myself had all but slain a schoolmate when yet in my teens; that the whole course of my early life was strewn with acts of reckless rage and furious wrath; and that I had been detested as much for my own violence as for the name I bore?

Heaven help me, I dared not tell her; and I was thankful I had stopped before saying more. But even in the midst of my thankfulness, I felt that the division betwixt us must go on growing and widening: for I saw now, or thought I saw, that she had been brooding over the remembrance of my wrathful visage and terrible fury on that day at Rosenthal.

Elfa

She lay in my arms and grew calmer after a time.

"I can never bear to think of you in connection with any such fearful deeds as that, Ernst," she said, with a sigh. "I think it would kill me at a stroke if you were ever to look at me as I saw you glaring on those men. The memory of it makes all the veins in my body seem like a tracery of ice in which the current of life freezes, my heart almost ceases to beat and a dull stupor deadens every sense but fear and horror. Yet you are so good and so gentle with me : and I know you love me. But old Judith was right : I should die, aye, and should be glad to die, if you were ever with me as with those men that night."

"There is no fear of such a thing, little wife," I said, kissing her and pressing her closely to my heart.

Presently she sighed. "There have been times, lately, when I thought you were angered with me," she murmured. "I read your silence and sadness as signs of this, and I have been wretched, so sad and troubled, Ernst. I have been afraid"—here her voice fell to a low, half-hollow whisper—"lest some time might come when you should turn on me the terrible light which I saw that once in your eyes. Ah, Ernst, I would rather you should kill me first ;" and she threw her arms about me, half-hysterically, and kissed me again and again with passionate fervour, uttering many loving endearments.

Elfa

"We must not talk of dying, you and I, Elfa," I whispered, "we have our little lad to think of and to live for, sweetheart."

And even as I spoke, the handle of the room door was rattled and the joyous voice of the child called to Elfa to let him in.

She laughed, with suddenly regained happiness, and called out in reply and with a kiss slipped from my knee and ran, herself like a child, to open the door. She caught the boy up in her arms, laughing and crooning and fondling him, and brought him to me and set him on my knee where she had just been. She knelt down at the side of us and prattled baby talk and played with him, pinching his rosy fat cheeks, kissing his chubby hands, pulling at his dangling legs, and caressing and teasing and tickling him, till he lay back on my lap roaring and shouting in his glee, with his arms and legs outstretched, the brightest and merriest little baby monarch that ever delighted the hearts of his subject parents.

Chapter XVI

THIS scene with Elfa, like so many others at that time, cheered me at first, but afterward left me heavy with grief. It showed so clearly the second fork of the tongue of sorrow that had stung me. Her almost passionate dread of contact with all that was rough and harsh, and the fear which seemed to have fastened upon her, lest she should find me what in secret I knew myself to be, added a pang to the grief that already rankled and pained me.

I read it as the proof that Elfa had grown afraid of me. She could not love where she feared, I told myself; these passages of tenderness showed how she was fighting to be loyal and true, even when her heart had played the traitor; but if once she learnt the story of the black past, even the desire to be loyal, which she had made so sweetly and touchingly plain, would faint and die even as her love had died.

Thus the dread lest she should hear that story took stronger hold than ever. From a vague, uneasy, indefinite apprehension, it changed and shaped itself in clear and precise outline in my

Elfa

thoughts. There could be but one of two dire results, either of which must be to me as deadly as death itself: either the separation between us would be complete and she would be driven from me; or she would remain by my side, mine only in name, a shrinking, fading, withered creature, waiting only for death to loosen the bond that bound her. She would grow to hate me in time; for hate is the certain offspring of fear: and looking forward to the years ahead, I sought to picture to myself what such a life would be for her, until I shuddered at the prospect.

Thus was the old curse renewed in all its wonted force. Whatever I touched, I destroyed. Even the tender blossom I had plucked and laid in my bosom, thinking to wear it always near my heart, was destined to wither under the blight of my care. My very love was a curse.

It is little wonder that I turned with a sense of relief from the prospect of so gloomy a future to the other picture. If I were dead, the whole of the grim array of terrors might be averted from Elfa. She might then never learn that she had wed with a murderer's son; or at least could only learn it when she was freed from the clamping pressure of the union, and perhaps, amid the happiness of a more fitting marriage, when the knowledge would scarce ruffle the fair surface of a happier life.

Thus I could see no outlet of escape but my death; and in the days that followed, my thoughts were more and more concerned with this resolve to die. I grew to look upon my death as the ransom

Elfa

which I was called upon to pay for lifting the curse of blood from my wife and child: and that hope made me ready enough to die. There was no sacrifice I would not make cheerfully, to save my darling babe from such a lot as mine.

After the scene with Elfa, this view of death, as the price of the happiness of both my loved ones, strengthened rapidly; and I began to consider the steps I must take to get my affairs in order for Elfa and the little one to have everything after my death without trouble; and I cast about for the best means of compassing my death.

It was an easy enough matter to die. A sip of colourless liquid, a prick with a dagger point, a necklet of hemp, or a plunge into a cool stream, and all would be over. Nor had death any terrors for me. I had looked the grim old spectre so many times in the face that the edge of his fatal scythe may well have been notched in sweeping at the tough strands of my life. It was no fear for myself that held me back: but I had to think of others.

If it were known that my own hand had at last done what others had often tried and failed, the ban of the suicide's memory would lie like a black shadow over my wife and child. It was this that gave me pause. One death I thought of at times with a rare longing. To die fighting for my darlings' sake; to take a death wound in defence of them; and to know, as I watched the life stream ebb from my veins, that I had fought in the cause of Elfa's love and died for the sake of

Elfa

her safety. That would have been a welcome end: for I should have served the purpose that I had and yet have had my sweet ones' presence to the close of all. But it could not be so. I could die for them and would: but it must be alone, away from them, secretly and by stealth. And that part of my fate it was which alone had power to make me sad.

I busied myself therefore in seeking some means and gave as much thought to the manner of dying as others are wont to give to the manner of living. At length I hit upon a simple plan. I would throw myself from some lofty precipice so that others should believe I had fallen in climbing; and I had begun to mould the project in my thoughts and seek a likely spot, when Fate stepped in to thwart me. Instead of ordering the run of things, I was caught up in a whirlwind of events and swept forward in the storm as helplessly as a dead leaf is swirled about by an autumn gale.

One day, some week or two after the talk with Elfa, I was sitting in moody thought by the open lights of a small flower house which overlooked the gardens of the hotel, when the sound of voices came up to me from below. I paid no heed until a word caught my ear and drew my attention.

It was the name of a town, Aschern; the town from which Elfa had come and where her holding of land was situate. We had taken no steps as yet to find out the real value of her possessions: there was no need for haste, since I had wealth

Elfa

in abundance: but we had spoken of it; and in a vague and general way it was understood between us that we would go to the place in the course of our travelling. Moreover, my new resolution had quickened this intention in me, though I had said nothing recently to Elfa.

"When do you start?" was asked by one voice.

"I am not certain, but very shortly."

"Well, Aschern is a curious spot to choose even for a holiday." A light laugh came with this.

"It's almost a dead town. Are you to be quartered there permanently?"

"Not permanently, perhaps. But I have very strong private reasons for going there, at all events for a time." I recognised the voice as that of the handsome young officer, von Unger.

"Ho, ho," laughed the other man. "Very strong private reasons, eh? Five reasons are there: five little innocent pretty letters of the alphabet; first 'w,' then an 'o,' and 'm,' and 'a,' and 'n,' to finish up with? Ah, von Unger, you're a gay Juan: but a devilish close one. Take my advice, man, though; be careful that there are no grim dragons about with biceps of steel to guard the peace of the fair one."

"All right," laughed the young officer, gaily enough. "I'll take care; I may have a guardian fairy on my side;" and then the two friends moved away.

For the time I paid no heed to the matter, nor thought that it would linger in my memory. It was naught to me what the young gallant did,

Elfa

whether he stayed or went; or if he went, whether it was south or north, west or east. My new resolve had seemed in many ways to kill the interest that I held in what happened around me.

After a time I left the place where I had been sitting and went out into the air. As I was pacing one of the shaded paths, a baby shout called on me to stand, a violent assault was made against my legs, and my little lad charged me at full tilt and clung to me, looking up at me with merry cries and laughter and clamouring to be lifted up.

I caught him up and danced him, tossing him up in the air and catching him in a way that he loved, and then set him astride on the bough of a broad-leaved maple, where he sat and babbled his pretty commands like a tiny kinglet on a leafy throne.

I looked round for Elfa, and after a time saw her at some distance away, walking demurely, with sober, thoughtful, serious mien, by the side of the young officer, von Unger. I sighed very heavily as I thought she had been so deeply engrossed with him as to have forgotten even her baby boy.

The child seemed to feel in some way the sadness that came over me, for he put his tiny arms out to me and patted and stroked my face and beard, and then laid his soft cheek against mine and kissed me. I lifted him on to my shoulder and played with him at being his horse and he clutched the ends of my long moustache for reins, and in this way, the boy laughing and calling and making many childish noises in his mirth,

Elfa

we romped together, drawing nearer and nearer to where Elfa was, till I thought she must have heard the noise we two playfellows made.

She did not notice us, however, until we were quite close and then, though the mite of a rider in search of safe holding for his hands had thrown his arms wellnigh over my eyes, I saw her start and change colour and appear confused for a moment. But the next instant, she left her companion, who turned away immediately, and came running to the boy, answering the loud calls he had set up at sight of her.

Then the imperial mite of majesty on my shoulder ordered me to set him down that he could play and romp with Elfa in her turn. I stood by, watching them: drinking in the sweet sound of the child's happy laughter, and revelling in the seeming delight of the mother, but crushed and bruised under the thought that her love for me had shrunk and dwindled in her heart, even as my share in the lives of those two was growing less and less with every waning hour. But I was calm enough, outwardly.

Ah me! That moment of quiet sadness was wellnigh the last touch of peace I was to know until the end came with all its passion, wrath, and strife.

When the child had finished his play and was resting, eating contentedly some sweetmeat that his mother found for him, Elfa came to me and linking her hand in my arm drew me to walk with her to and fro beneath the trees.

Elfa

We paced some time in silence.

"Ernst," she said, at length. "We have been here a long time. Are you not wearying for a change?"

"Scarcely that. Wherever you are happy, I am content," I said.

"You make me play the courier always and arrange the route of our journeys. You have never yet told me where you would like to go."

"I have no home, sweetheart, save where you and the little lad are. But are you wishful for a change? If so, we will shoulder the knapsack and march."

"Yes, I should like to go, I think." She paused and added, in a somewhat halting, hesitating tone, "I have a fancy, Ernst."

"That is good," I replied, taking no heed of her manner. "It will save us the trouble of plan-making. Where is it that your fancy points?"

"I should like to go to Aschern, Ernst."

"To Aschern?" I repeated, and turned aside that she might not see the sudden gust of fury which shook me, as the recollection of the young officer's words flashed across my mind. He too would go to Aschern.

A fierce impulse possessed me to rush after him and vent my passion upon him, and I turned in obedience to it. But I checked myself instantly and with a great effort mastered my rage, as I recalled that only a few minutes earlier I had been telling myself that my sole object in life now was to strive to secure Elfa's happiness.

Elfa

I had no right to be angry; on the contrary, the very fact that Elfa cared for him and that her happiness depended upon his welfare must be his protection. God, that thought was a very foretaste of hell itself! His vaunting, foppish, mincing words and laugh dinned in my ears like the jibes and taunts of a mocking fiend.

The crisis lasted but a second; but for that instant the man's life hung on the barest thread. When I turned again to Elfa I hoped that she had been too engrossed by her own thoughts to notice the seething squall which had so tossed and shaken me.

"When shall we go, Elfa?" I asked.

She started and looked up as if the embers of passion glowing in my tone had startled her. But I was wrong. She was too preoccupied. She smiled as she thrust her hand and arm farther through mine and nestled more closely to my side.

"You are always good to me, Ernst. You spoil me: following every whim without even a question," she said.

"What questions should I ask, child? Where I have no reason, it would be ungentle to cross such a wish as this of yours to go to Aschern. We have always meant to go there."

"You do not ask me why I wish to go just now, Ernst?"

"To what purpose? When have we ever sought a reason more solid than fancy for packing up our baggage?" I was anxious that she should

Elfa

feel no sort of need to hide her real purpose by making out some specious tale.

"But what if I have such a more solid purpose?"

"We both have that in regard to Aschern, Elfa. An heiress must needs go to look after her inheritance. And as for me, although I am no fortune hunter, still I am a miser, a greedy, grasping miser, where your good and that of our lad is concerned. So I ask again when shall we start? I am ready when you are." I was surprised to find how lightly I could speak; but my love was a shrewder power than my wrath just then.

"I should like to go soon: not to-day, nor to-morrow, but on the following day. Why I wish to go, for I have a reason, I will tell you when we are there. What say you?"

"Nothing, but that I might have been a soldier in my readiness to march at short notice."

No more was spoken then; and three days later we were on our way to Aschern.

Chapter XVII

THE journey to Aschern was in some ways the most singular experience of my life, owing to the strange feelings which possessed me. There was a curious sense of unreality about everything as if it had been a dream. I have always been a very vivid dreamer ; and I can liken that journey to nothing so aptly as to one of those dreams in which the sleeper, partly with and partly against his will, is hurried along a course to some fate lowering in the distance which he courts and yet would struggle to avoid.

We were two days upon the journey, travelling partly by diligence and partly by postchaise ; but I can recall but few of the incidents. I had a part to play so foreign to me that its unreality affected everything I did or said. It seemed to be myself, and yet not myself, who spoke to Elfa and played with the child.

The people who entered the diligence and left it were more like the disconnected phantoms of a vision. The districts through which we passed, the villages where we changed horses, the mountains, rivers, valleys, towns and hamlets were all as part of a dream panorama. Now and again

Elfa

when we rested a longer time than usual, I left the carriage and paced up and down, heedless of everything in my self-centred contemplation, and with the same uncanny feeling that it was the same inn, the same yard, the same ostlers, police, and people.

I felt as if I was being borne onward to a destiny which was both irrevocably appointed and absolutely inevitable. I neither knew nor cared by what means that destiny was to be fulfilled ; I only knew that there would be no rest or peace of mind until I reached the goal. I was like some remorse-bitten sinner who hopes to purge away his offence by pilgrimage to the shrine of a patron saint and plunges along ceaselessly and restlessly to the end of the journey with no thought save of the shrine where alone peace will be found and where his crime will fall from him.

I was perfectly calm outwardly and, despite the weird sensation of unreality, I spoke and acted much as usual. There were times when I caught Elfa's eyes fixed in anxious, troubled questioning upon me ; but she said nothing to show that aught was amiss in either my conduct or speech.

I knew that I had all but done with life ; and my feelings were akin to those of a strong man who suddenly and all unexpectedly learns that he is the victim of a secret disease and that death is at hand. In the face of that grim certainty, his interest in the world around him is killed at one stroke. So it seemed with me. The end for which I was waiting was now close at hand.

Elfa

I was conscious of no sentiment of wrath against the man who had come between Elfa and me, no unkindly thought, indeed. The apathy of the fatalist had fallen upon me, paralysing all contemplation of resistance. I remember, indeed, that once when I was looking from the window as the carriage wound its way along the side of a mountain at the foot of which a narrow river ran its snaky course, the scene was suddenly and vividly pictured on my mind and I found myself wondering how it would look when Elfa was making the return journey without me and with that other by her side.

Most men who have ever had to face death have felt a touch of that vague regretful wonder as to whether things will go on just the same if they should die and what others will be doing then. To most it is a sad enough feeling : but to me, amid that fevered unreality and mental stress, it was welcome and comforting, rich with its promise of peace and rest.

I was anxious that Elfa should feel as little as possible of the fatigue and weariness of the journey and did my utmost to beguile the many hours we were on the road. But all the time I was conscious of the same strange feeling of aloofness and detachment ; as if we were playing at making a journey to amuse the child, or as if it were a dream. They both slept much ; but we had many hours of talk. I told her many stories out of the old hunting life on the Grossberg ; stories of the chase, of big game, of adventures, of my dogs and guns,

Elfa

and many incidents of the time. But it was mere talk for talk's sake ; there was no heart in it and but little earnestness ; and all the time it seemed as though my voice were the voice of another discussing myself and my affairs and my life with her.

I was easier when they slept ; the child at full length on the cushioned seat or in my arms, and Elfa resting partly on me and partly in the corner of the carriage. But I did not close my eyes once during the hot afternoon and long evening of the first day ; nor through the close summer night at the inn where we stayed ; nor in the long cool dawn and morning of the second day ; nor yet in all the hours till evening came again. I had no sense of fatigue. My one thought in all the hours I sat silent, half-dazed and bewildered, was that some power, stern, irresistible, and fearsome, was carrying me forward to the end which would be revealed to me in due time.

Toward eventide of the second day as we approached the town, Elfa grew somewhat excited. Here and there she thought she could recognise some landmarks, which she had noted in her rare excursions in old times. She laughed gladly as she pointed them out to me and propped up our little one by the window, telling him to look now here, now there at some object. And in response to her he would imitate her gesture with his chubby forefinger, and then clap his hands and laugh in glee as he leant back against her or plucked at my sleeve to laugh with him, as if he caught the infection of her pleasure.

Elfa

Now and again, she would point to some tree or hill or stream, and tell me what memory it roused in her : and she seemed so happy and so glad to see it all again, that I, forgetting for the moment what I knew to be the real cause of her coming, was glad also that we had come. Yet only for the moment, could I forget why I, too, had come.

That is a curious grip at the heartstrings which a man feels when he sets his nerves to face a danger where he knows the odds are all against his life. And when the coming of death is certain, and the hour is prolonged until thought and imagination have full time to play upon the nerves, there are few men who will not have their moments of weakness.

I am not ashamed to avow that I had mine. My resolve to die was fixed as an unalterable decision, and I was content and willing that it should be so ; but there were moments when with all my fervour I shrank from it and fought against it with eager searching desire for some alternative ; and in the first three days of our stay at Aschern, this feeling was strongest.

Elfa was so gentle, so caressing, so thoughtful of me ; she affected such pleasure in drawing me to take an interest in all that had an oldtime interest for her, that I could not but feel how sweet she had power to make life to me. My boy, too, who loved me and loved to be with me ; who chose me as readily for his great uncouth playfellow as he chose his mother for his com-

Elfa

forter ; and who would sit contentedly on my knee by the hour together, babbling his childish wonderings and wishings and questionings, filled life with such warmth and glow and colour, that a sterner heart than mine might well have wavered.

When we three were together alone, the child on my knee and Elfa resting her head against me or playing with the boy, or speaking in low sweet wifely confidence and conference, I was weak as melting snow : the frost of my resolve thawed by the sunlight of her presence. She seemed full of utter content and quiet bliss, as if the whole circle of her happiness were centred in our loves and bounded by our mutual interests, that I would doubt even my own doubts.

But when she left me, the keen frost set in again with iron rigour ; one by one the facts, as I knew and had seen them, froze into their old hard forms. She had come to Aschern only to be near the man who had become so much more to her than I was ; and she had her part to play even as I had mine. Her struggle between loyalty and love was perhaps harder for her than mine for me ; and it was only her gentle concern for my pain that set her striving so hard to conceal the truth from me. At that I was filled with regret for the momentary weakness of my rebellion against Fate and all wish to live perished. But I was very sad.

As soon as I reached Aschern, therefore, I set out in search of a place where I could carry out the purpose I had formed. I climbed several of

Elfa

the hills around the town, and on the second morning after our arrival I lighted on just such a spot as I needed. I had now so persuaded myself that my death was ordained by the will of Fate that, although I had ever jested at such folly as omens, I took this quick discovery of the spot for a sign that my purpose was to be fulfilled at once.

It was a place which in all respects lent itself well to my plan. Some half-league to the north of the little town the road ran in a narrow chasm between two bleak precipitous hills of unequal height. Near the crest of the taller a rugged spur of bare rock jutted out forming a narrow ledge almost overhanging the road with a sheer drop of some hundreds of feet to the ground.

To reach this platform needed a cool head and the steadiest nerves, for the sides of the bluff gave but a hazardous foothold ; and a single false step meant certain death. Not a shrub, nor stump, nor point of rock, scarcely so much as a hand-grasp of herbage was there to check the fall from the ledge right down to the ground. Moreover, the road was in constant use so that, should a mishap overtake a climber, it would soon be discovered.

The instant my eye fell upon the spot, I knew I had found what I sought and I scaled the hill from behind and clambered out to the ledge. There was no set path ; but my feet had been too well trained to mountaineering in my years of hunting for the climb to offer much difficulty.

I stood on the jutting spur and gazed down at

Elfa

the road beneath, which wound along the valley to a point where the hills dipped abruptly and a rolling landscape, fair and broad and wooded, spread away to the horizon. It was yet early in the morning and the clear gleaming splendour of the sun illumined the whole champaign with its glory ; while on my left as I turned and looked toward the town, the smoke of the few early fires was wreathing slowly upward in the bright, breezeless air.

It was here that I was to die. No power on earth could save the life of one who should leap or fall from where I stood. Bathed in the gorgeous sun rays, I leant against the cliff with folded arms and head bent in heavy meditation, pondering on the strange turn which fortune had given my wheel in sending me to die in such a place and in such a fashion.

I lingered at the spot grimly interested in speculating where I should fall and how be found. Presently I turned and sought for a loose stone and, judging about the spring that I should make, sent it spinning over the precipice ; a plummet to sound the abyss of death. I watched it as it struck once the face of the bare rock and with one rebound fell to the road beneath with a crash, the dull echo of which reached my listening ear. It was a sharper crash than the muffled thud which my great body would make, was the thought I had as I moved away to return to the town. But even then I did not recoil nor shrink in the slightest from the death I had planned. Indeed, my resolve

Elfa

was deeper and firmer than ever ; and on my walk I recounted in my mind all that I had yet to do, and how I best might speed the doing of it.

When I reached Aschern, it was nearing mid-day, for I had stayed longer than I thought on the hillside, and life was in full tide as I passed along the narrow, winding, ill-paved streets. I quickened my steps, then, thinking Elfa might wonder at my lengthened absence ; and the next instant I smiled and sighed as I reflected how soon there would be neither coming nor tarrying of mine to set her thinking.

I was crossing the market-place at the southern side of which stood the hotel where we were staying, and as I glanced across the square I saw that which brought my heart to my throat as I halted for a space against the railings which fenced the courtyard of one of the public buildings.

In the shadow of the long, brown, ugly church that flanked one side of the square, were Elfa and the young officer, von Unger, engrossed in earnest talk as I had seen them in the garden at Festen.

Well as I had schooled myself to bear aught that had yet to be borne, for the moment I could not withstand the rush of the same wild passion which had swept over me when I had last seen them together. The sight of the man maddened me. I had known the purpose of her coming to the place and I had freely put my neck in the noose that now wellnigh choked and suffocated me. Yet to think of evil is one thing, and to come face to face with it, to have it pressing upon your brain

Elfa

through the nerves of your eyes is altogether different, as wide apart as shadow from substance.

Moreover, the last two days of Elfa's soothing companionship had raised in me a desperate hope that after all I might be mistaken. I knew better now: and the final blow that shattered the fond illusion drove me wild with furious desperation. Like the fumes of noxious gas all the old desires to seize and kill the man mounted to my brain, till I quivered in the throes of passion. The storm passed after a time, but left behind it effects which I could not wholly quell.

It shook me to the very heart's core, made me restless and uneasy, and robbed me of the calm which I had striven so earnestly to gain. As when, in a tempest some bulky giant of the forest has been riven by the lightning, the great tree, robbed of its sturdy, solid strength, will throb and quiver at every buffet of the easy breezes which would have spent their force against it in vain; so this storm seemed to have laid me open to feel such influences as, before it, would have broken themselves emptily against my will.

After I had regained some measure of self-control, I crossed the market-place toward Elfa and her companion, taking care so to time my approach that they might have a chance of seeing me from some distance. I had no wish to come upon them unawares; but despite my intent, they did not see me until I was close upon them. They both started nervously, with hurried glances one to the other and then to me.

Elfa

Elfa welcomed me with a smile, and the young officer who had coloured somewhat greeted me with courtesy and offered me his hand. I could not take it ; and so affected not to see his gesture, merely returning his salute and speaking to Elfa.

Whether he thought that I refused his hand purposely, or merely that I had not seen the offer of it, I neither knew nor cared ; but when I turned again to him, his colour deepened and he appeared as if he would speak somewhat eagerly to me ; but checked the impulse, glanced again at Elfa, and was silent in some confusion.

"When did you arrive?" I asked him, as neither of the pair seemed to find it easy to speak for the moment.

"I came late last night," he said. "I was hastening this morning to your hotel to pay you a visit, when I was fortunate enough to meet your good wife here in the market-place."

"Fortunate, indeed. We shall be glad to renew so pleasant an acquaintance. Are you staying any length of time here?"

"I don't know. I hope . . ." and then he hesitated, glanced again at Elfa, smiled, and left the sentence unfinished.

"Herr von Unger has special business in Aschern," said Elfa, smiling in answer to his smile, and thrusting her hand into my arm. "He hopes to be here a long time, I think."

"Then we shall have the pleasure of seeing you again, captain," I replied, feeling that I dared

Elfa

scarcely trust myself much longer in his presence. He understood me and went away.

"Is he not handsome, Ernst?" said Elfa, as we walked away together; "and as noble as he is handsome, I know. A good, true, brave fellow."

I made no reply; and fortunately, she did not wait for one.

"But there, that is enough of Captain von Unger for the present. I have something to say to you, sir. Where have you been playing truant in this way; stealing away in the early dawn and leaving me asleep and never coming back till ever so long after breakfast-time? Doesn't your conscience smite you for deserting your wife and child, and leaving them to grow ever so hungry waiting breakfastless till Nature could wait no longer: and frightening me with all sorts of fears? I have a good mind to be very angry and scold you: only a scolding mind is not a good one; and now that I have you back again, safe and sound, I am too pleased to be able to feel angry;" and she finished with a trill of laughter to the full as joyous as any I had ever heard from her lips.

What was I to think? What could I think? except that either Elfa was the most consummate hypocrite that had ever played a part: or that I was the most blundering fool that ever wrecked his own life on the rocks of morbid imaginings.

But then, the glances I had seen pass between the two; their whispering together, their mutual confusion, their nervous starts! Ah, no, there was but one meaning possible.

Chapter XVIII

THAT day was fated to compass within its brief span the supreme crisis of my life. It had thus had a fit beginning ; and almost every hour of it was marked by its own peculiar phase and special experiences.

The strong tumult of feeling which had so shaken me did not subside even under Elfa's influence, although I thought I could detect an added tenderness in her manner. With this there was an under-current of joyous excitement ; and I set down the heightened colour, merrier laughter, and half-suppressed, half-over-brimming brightness to the effects of the meeting with him whom in my thoughts I had now grown to call—her lover.

Moreover, my discovery of the spot where I had planned to die, had brought home the plan so much more closely to me that I seemed to have even less part and share than before in all that was passing around me. I spoke but little, and sat rather moodily watching Elfa and the child ; for even the babe could not warm my nerveless sympathies into active life. Thus the hours lagged heavily on, and at length, feeling I must be in the air, I rose and went out.

Elfa

Involuntarily, my feet turned to the northern road: and plunged in heavy thought I strode along, scarce conscious of the direction I was walking, until I found myself once more under the shadow of the crag where I had stood in the morning; and at my feet lay the boulder I had hurled from the rock above. I noted that it had been moved from the spot where it had fallen, and I was thus grimly reminded, that even so my body would be found and removed within a few hours of my "fall" from the cliff. There seemed no escape for me that day from thoughts of death.

When I turned, with slow and heavy steps back to the town, I was ill at ease, the turbulent remnants of the morning's storm still seething and simmering within me.

Near the outskirts of the town lay a beer garden, and as the white, thick dust on the roads and the hot, heavy, dull air had parched my throat, I was tempted to enter the place, which was nearly deserted, in quest of a draught of wine.

I seated myself at a small table in a corner of the garden and having ordered a flask of wine I drank a deep draught of it, and then relapsed into the state of brooding thought in which so many hours of that day had been passed.

It was so foreign to my habit to take wine at such a time in the day, that I was overcome with drowsiness soon after I had drunk it and fell into a slumber. When I awoke, there were many people in the garden, sitting at the small tables: for it was a place of common resort; and as

Elfa

I had no mind to linger among a crowd of royster-ing drinkers, I roused myself and prepared to leave.

I had just beckoned to a waiter intending to pay my reckoning, when some words fell upon my ear which brought me to my feet in amazement and heated my blood with sudden wrath until great beads of sweat gathered on my brow.

I had heard my own name, Ernst von Schalck-fort : not the shortened form of Schalck which I had used with Elfa and by which I was now known : but the full name which I had heard from no man's lips for many years, save only from the priest at Massen.

The voice of the man who uttered it had also a familiar sound in it : a hated, hateful tone which roused the echoes of the feud of years long past, in which my face had been scarred and I myself wellnigh slain by the dastard villain who had dealt me that foul, treacherous blow.

It was the voice of the man himself, Max Grubel.

We had met at last ! This was Fate, indeed !

Through long years I had nursed that sense of wrong and had sworn to take the villain's life, if ever our paths should cross. Until Elfa had come to change me and, with her sweet, soft touches, had gently rubbed away the traces of that black time and destroyed all conscious desire for ven-geance. But now and here, even in the very moment and almost on the very spot where Fate had decreed that I should die, we had met, and vengeance had become possible.

Like lightning gleams, these thoughts darted

Elfa

through my brain and released the long-stored current of all the ugly intents of old, till it rushed and burned within me, blasting all my new and gentler self with its deadly force.

Whatever came of it, I felt that I must wait and listen : and I clenched my jaws and spread my nostrils with the stern wrath of old as I breathed an oath into my beard that he might look to himself, if he did or said aught to call down on his head the storm that was raging in me.

The waiter, whom I had called before I had heard the voice of my enemy, came and I ordered coffee, scarce thinking what I said or did. Then I pulled my hat somewhat over my eyes and leant back against the tree on the other side of which sat the man on whose words I was waiting ; and I drank in every syllable that fell from him.

All the years that had passed had not changed him : he was the same mouthing, braggart liar I had known ; with the same insolent air of bullying superiority. His very voice had the same insufferable, overbearing tone ; and I quivered with anger at the lash of his boastful, lying words just as in years gone by.

"Yes, I have had many a brave brush in my day, though I was never in the army like you, Captain von Unger."

I started at this as though a whip of scorpions had fallen across my back. The man who knew my history was here in close converse with him who was the friend and intimate of my wife from whom I was to give my life to keep the story.

Elfa

Fate was mocking me now, in all sooth.

"Nor a hunter like you, Herr von Gunsthal," continued the hated voice; "but of all the encounters of my younger days—my wild days, as I call them—none was so stern and violent as that by which I drove that dangerous desperado from the district which he then polluted and plagued with his presence."

"Ernst von Schalckfort; von Schalckfort," repeated the man, who was a stranger to me. "I know the name. Was there not a notorious murderer of that name?"

"Notorious, indeed," replied Grubel, with a malicious laugh. "Infamous, brutal, callous, and bloody, were better terms to describe him. The man I speak of was the son of the murderer. The father was a villain who lured men to his house and murdered them in cold blood and with ferocious cruelty for the sake of their wealth. 'Tis too long a story to tell; for his foul crimes covered a period of years before they were discovered by the act of the son, a child in years though a man in ferocious villainy and treachery, who betrayed his parents for the sake of some reward. Young as he was, it is credited that he himself had already taken some share in the awful deeds of blood."

"The lying devil," came in a hiss through my teeth in obedience to the thought that shot like a throb of torture through my brain.

"That cannot be possible," exclaimed von Unger.

"Possible, my dear captain; not only possible,

Elfa

but certain," said the scoundrel, with another laugh. "And his whole life afterwards bore out the promise of his childhood. After his father had had his villainous head struck from his shoulders—for the murder of his wife, by the way—the son, with all the hardihood of his race, came amongst us all and brazened it out with unabashed front and unblushing face. As a schoolboy, he struck down a mate and all but murdered him, merely because the lad would not mix with him. And this continued for years."

"But if this was so, surely no one would speak to him," said von Gunsthal.

"That was the cause of my fight with him. He was almost a giant in size and strength; and he used his strength unmercifully like the brute he was. If he but fancied a slight from any one about him, he would either set upon him with devilish ferocity, striking and beating and half-killing him on the spot; or challenge him and under the thin veil of a duel, drive his rapier into the other's heart, often with a foul stroke, too. Thus he held the whole countryside in awe of him. It was this I could not endure. I am a man of peace, but I swore that I would free the place from such a pest or die. When he crossed my path, he seemed to recognise that at last he had met one who was not afraid of him. I challenged him, and from the first he showed his fear; and would have slunk from me. But I left him no excuse. We met and fought a long and fierce duel. We were both wounded in more than one

Elfa

bleeding gash : for I had sworn that I would kill him or not leave the ground alive. But I did not kill him : though I struck him to the ground with a blow that all but split his head from forehead to chin, and cut the flesh from his cheek with a gashed wound that bled till he could not see to continue the fight. Such a wound as leaves its scar till death ; and after that, we were troubled no more by him."

"Did you never meet him again?" asked von Unger.

"No. While he lay fighting his way back to life, pressing affairs called me to another district. I heard that at one time there was a threat of some trouble, but it was given out that I was to be sent for, and when I arrived, he had fled the country. I tried to find him, for I always wished to finish that duel in the manner I had sworn, but he hid himself completely and disappeared without trace."

"As there's a devil in hell, you shall have your wish," I swore in my soul ; mad with fury and heedless of all save the craving to cram his foul lies down his braggart throat. But I did not move : I would have no riot in the place ; so I sat on and listened.

"What a terrible story," said von Unger, thoughtfully and somewhat sadly. "But I can scarcely credit of any one all that you impute to him. I should think, rather, that he was maddened by the sense of injustice at the awful inheritance of bloodshed that had come to him ; and that this

Elfa

violence was rather the only manner in which he felt he could resent it. Clearly, he was as brave as he was strong ; and we must remember he was fighting single-handed against the whole world. It was a hard, sad fate."

I could have blessed the young fellow for those words, but there was no room in my heart for any feeling but rage against the man who had so foully traduced me.

"Did it happen here?" asked the third man.

"No, no, far away from here : but the tale as I have told it, is known to hundreds of people." He paused, and added in a different tone, as if von Unger's words had made him wish to change the subject. "No, I came here to Aschern on quite another mission, some few years since. Not Mars—or whoever may be the god of vengeance—but Venus and the little god of the bow and arrows brought me here."

He paused and laughed in his self-worshipful, arrogant way, and although his companions asked no questions and showed no interest, he went on with the story.

"That was rather a curious affair, too. It seemed that that little exploit of the duel reached the ears of a fair cousin of mine here ; and nothing would please her but that she should see me. None of us are quite proof, I suppose, against the little archer's arrows, are we ? Well, at any rate, I was not. My cousin was beautiful, as well as young, innocent, and in search of a hero, and—well, it ended as such little affairs will end. My fair

Elfa

coz had a small estate of land here, long thought to be valueless, but as it turned out, right in the heart of the richest lead-mining centre, and from having played a sort of Cinderella part, she became rich enough for a heroine in the Arabian Nights. I was the Prince Charming ; we were fondly in love and on the eve of being married—she had even made over to me her wealth—when she was spirited away : and I was left with no consolation but her money-bags. I tried all means to find her, and more than once thought I had succeeded. But no ; I have never seen her since ;” and he forced a melodramatic sigh. “Quite a romance, was it not, gentlemen? Poor little Elfa !”

I sprang to my feet with an oath, overthrowing the table in front of me and scattering the cups and glasses in all directions at the discovery. The man whom I had vowed to kill was the same dastardly scoundrel from whom my darling Elfa had had to fly.

The waiter came hurrying up as the people turned their heads and stared in wonder at the disturbance. But I was cool enough in my manner and explained the accident, giving the man a gold piece to pay for the damage I had done.

Von Unger had also risen excitedly at the same moment, and this served to keep the attention of the three men from me.

“What is the matter, von Unger?” asked von Gunsthal.

The lieutenant sat down again before he answered : and then spoke with a forced laugh.

Elfa

"I am sure I beg your pardon for my infernal stupidity," he said. "But I thought I had been stung by a wasp—and I can't bear wasps: they are quite a pet aversion of mine. I beg your pardon, really."

I could hear that he was trying to school his voice to be calm; and the next instant I knew the cause of his excitement.

He had guessed my secret.

"You have indeed had a romantic life, Herr Grubel," he said next. "That is a curious name you mentioned, if you will permit me to repeat it; that of your lost cousin, Elfa. I have very rarely heard it before, have you, von Gunsthal?"

"No, indeed. I was just repeating to myself," was the reply.

"Elfa Mähling is the full name," said Grubel. "The Mähling family is well known here; as is indeed the unfortunate story of my cousin. Like yourself, however, I have not heard of any one with the same Christian name in this district."

"I have the pleasure of knowing a family of the name of Mähling," said von Unger, with obviously forced calmness. "Well, it is all a strange story, a very strange story, indeed. What is the name of the man whose history you told us? Schalck, did you say?"

"No, Schalckfort, Ernst von Schalckfort is the villain's name. A name to be remembered, if only to be cursed," said Grubel, brutally and angrily. "A huge, burly ruffian, full of blustering bravado, and with a swarthy face, on which

Elfa

my sword has written its mark deep enough to let all men know that the big frame only holds a coward's heart. By Heavens, but when I think of the villain, the old desire to meet him comes back to me. But the story seems to have interested you, captain."

"Yes, it has, deeply," answered von Unger in a tone in which it was easy to read how strangely the story had moved him.

"Well, some day I may be able to tell you the sequel to it," returned Grubel, with a boastful, self-satisfied laugh.

"My hand has strangely lost its cunning if you live to do that," was my thought, as I sat on, waiting for the three to move.

Von Unger took no further part in the talk. His thoughts were probably too full of what he had just heard concerning me. Would he use it to my discredit with Elfa? Let him. I cared not. I cared for nothing now, ~~aced~~, and could think of nothing but how to punish the scoundrel who had once tried to murder me, and who since had sought to murder my repute. By God, he should die the death. I swore it to myself, over and over again, in my silent soul-absorbing wrath.

I was all my old self again. Like a broken dream, all the time between had slipped from my memory; and I sat, still as the tree-trunk at my back, nursing the wrath which raged like a fever pulse in every sentient nerve, as I recalled every wrong he had done to me, and every outrage he had offered to Elfa.

Elfa

Even thoughts of Elfa urged me to kill the man, for his offence against her was as rank as that against me ; and every light laugh and ribald speech that came so glibly from his lips, acted like stinging pellets on a wounded tiger and made the flame of my fury leap higher and fiercer within me.

I thanked my old master, the devil, for sending me this creature on which to wreak the anger that had long been so pent up in my heart.

Soon afterwards von Unger excused himself and went away. A little later, Grubel rose saying it was time to leave, and he and his companion, whose name alone I knew, von Gunsthal, went off together.

I waited until they had passed out of the garden, and then followed at a wary distance. I intended to let them reach a spot where the path to the town passed through a small wood before overtaking them—a quiet, secluded place, well suited for the purpose in hand.

Grubel was talking noisily as he walked, and throwing his hands in all directions with profuse gesticulation, as had always been his way. He seemed in high glee, and several times his coarse bursts of rude laughter grated on my ear. Little did he guess that Fate was close on his heels and that the sands of his life had run out save for the few last grains.

As the two drew near to the spot I had chosen to settle my account with him and I narrowed the distance between us, his voice and laughter grew more and more distinct, adding fuel to the

Elfa

fire of my rage. My heart-beats quickened as I closed up and came within touch of him.

He did not hear my footsteps. He was in the midst of telling a story to his companion, and just as I reached him, he burst into loud laughter at some exploit of his own.

Before it had ceased, my hand was on his shoulder. With such a grip as he had never felt, my fingers closed on him and I swung him round and glared into his face.

"Stop, you, Grubel ; liar and villain that you are ; I have something to say to you." I rolled out the words in my deep bass voice, and with an accent and look that were as stern and fierce as my mood.

The coward writhed under my clutch ; and when he looked at me, the laughter and the anger which had followed at my interruption, died away together giving place to a look of sickly, pallid terror, as a dull light of recognition crept slowly into his eyes and over his face.

Then from his blue and quivering lips dropped in faltering, muttered tones, the syllables of my name.

"Ernst—von—Schalckfort?"

"Yes, Ernst von Schalckfort—whom you have wished to meet. We are face to face at last."

He made no reply, though his craven lips moved with the effort to frame some words : and he kept his frightened gaze full on my face : as some coward vermin surprised by a deadly snake, glares at it with glassy eyes, bound in a helpless, fascinated palsy of fright.

Chapter XIX

MANY moments passed before Grubel could gather his dazed and terrified wits sufficiently to make even a surface show of indignation; and all the time I kept my clutch on his shoulder, tightening the pressure till my fingers sank deep into the flesh, and feeling a positive ecstasy at the pain to body and mind alike that I knew I was causing.

His first effort was an attempt to dislodge my hand. With a contemptuous thrust I pushed him away from me and laughed a grim, savage, ugly laugh at the way he staggered across the path and nearly fell.

But the movement seemed to set his sluggish blood in motion, for he approached me with a sort of shamefaced defiance, although his voice was hollow and husky with fear.

"What do you mean by assaulting me? What do you want with me?"

"Your life," I answered sternly.

At my words the corners of his mouth began to draw down as if in a sneer, and he was turning with a half-apologetic gesture to his companion, when the mood of cynicism failed him.

Elfa

"I don't understand you," he stammered.

"Yet my words are plain. I will make them plainer. I have sat within a yard of you for the last hour and more in the garden yonder, and heard the whole of the lying tale you have told. You dragged my father's name from the grave and lied about the nature of his crimes, and you used his crimes to blacken me. You dared to mention my mother's name and to say she first shared the crimes and then was murdered by my father. You lied; for you know as well as I know that she died many months before a crime was ever breathed against my father. For that you shall answer. You dared to say that I—a child of seven years of age—gave up my father to justice for the sake of a reward. You charged me with having wilfully murdered men under the thin veil of the duel: you know as well as I that every man who ever fell by my hand, fell in fair and open fight. Lastly, you boasted that you had played the champion to rid the district of a pest and that you met me in fair fight and overcame me. That is the most braggart lie of all: for you know full well that the blow with which you struck me down and sought to take my life, was given when my guard was down and before either of us had even been grazed by the other's sword. You yourself, a murderer in all intent, have dared to brand me in public as 'a murderer who had fled from before your righteous vengeance.' That is why I want your life: aye, and by God, why I will take it."

My tone was calm and even, although full charged with concentrated passion, and the craven wretch shrank and trembled before me. His features twitched nervously and his head turned restlessly to right and left, as if seeking some means of escape; while his lips, parched and bloodless and quivering, parted now and again as he rolled his feverish tongue to moisten them.

"Really, if I was wrong in what I said, it is all so long ago, that I may have——" he said nervously.

"Silence," I cried savagely. "Within an hour you have uttered the wish to finish that interrupted duel. This gentleman is my witness," and I turned to von Gunsthal, who was looking on in silence, with a set, stern face. "Have I not cause to demand a meeting?"

"Without a doubt," he answered instantly. "I know nothing of the matter beyond what I have heard this afternoon; but there can be no question of your right."

"But I am a man of peace; I am not used to fighting; I have not touched a weapon for years. Besides, my position will not let me meet a murderer's son."

He shrank back in fear before the light of rage that flamed in my face and blazed out of my eyes at this.

But von Gunsthal answered:

"You have already fought once; so that you cannot make such a claim—if you are a man of honour." His tone was cold, judicial, and biting.

Elfa

"Greater provocation I have never heard in my life. Moreover, you have publicly expressed a desire for the meeting."

"Yes, yes, but that was in the heat of talk: that is quite a different thing from going out to be murdered in cold blood."

"There is only one excuse that can avail you," said his companion.

"What is that?" he asked eagerly.

"That you are afraid," was the hard, contemptuous reply, in a tone so sneering that it conquered even the coward's cowardice.

"I am not afraid. I will meet you," he said, turning to me and trying to assume an air of bravado; yet in such a sorry panic that the sweat of fear had clammed every pore of his livid skin.

"Good," I cried, curtly. Then I turned to Herr von Gunsthal. "I know no one in Aschern; if you act as Herr Grubel's second, can you bring with you some one who will act for me? If not, I can fight without one. Meantime, I must be my own second. There is no need for the meeting to be delayed. We will meet within an hour at a spot about a mile along the northern road where the rocks to the right begin to rise at a sharp gradient. Will you engage to bring this—this *gentleman* to the ground? Otherwise I will not trust him out of my sight. He has had too many years' practice in running away."

The coward made another outcry against this, adding protest to protest and excuse to excuse, to

Elfa

gain delay. But I would not yield, save to allow an extra hour, vowing I would dog him through the town, nor leave him for a second if my proposals were not accepted. I gained my way and then we parted.

I watched them as they walked away; and so far as I could note, neither spake a word. Grubel's tall, broad, ungainly form had lost all the swing and vigour which had marked it but a few minutes before. There was no play of gesture now: and he moved along with his head bent down, his hands crossed behind him, and his limbs dragging, as though the nerve force had suddenly ceased to act upon the muscles.

He looked like some arrested malefactor shambling along by the side of his guard and captor, every movement of whose tall, lithe, active figure seemed pregnant with contemptuous distrust of his charge. At least, that is how my fancy read the scene to me.

I waited, leaning against a tree with my arms folded, until the two figures had passed out of sight; my hate feasting itself upon the miscreant's misery and dejection as my eyes followed him to the last. And when I could see him no longer, I turned away and began to ponder what I had to do.

First, there was the chance that the devil might serve me another ugly turn and call me to my account instead of my adversary. It was but the barest possible chance; for although I had not handled a rapier for years, I could always make

Elfa

a pretty play with it: while, as for a pistol, my life had hung upon a shot in far too many a tussle with savage beasts, for my skill to play me false before a thing like this mannikin. Yet there was the bare chance; and I recalled what I had to do in view of it. It was but little. I had made my will and had sent it with all necessary papers to the priest at Massen; and there only remained for me to write a note telling Elfa of this, and so arrange that it would be sure to reach her, should I fall.

One other matter there was. I determined to take with me to the ground a pair of companion swords which I always carried in my travels. I had no mind that there should be any miscarriage of the affair on the score of weapons by which this Grubel should escape me at the last moment.

These were at the hotel, and I was loath to return there. I shrank from meeting Elfa while this passion was consuming me and my grim purpose was set and fixed to take a human life—albeit the life of such a craven slanderer as this miscreant.

I had some fear that if I encountered her at such a crisis, she might unsettle me in my purpose and that I might seek to lift the dull blood-coloured curtain which seemed to have fallen upon all other thoughts save that of my resolve. I had no mind to be robbed, even by her, of the sweet cup of revenge which was now at my lips.

I believe that at that moment, despite the clearness with which I thought of every detail of what

Elfa

I had to do, the steadiness which marked my slow, deliberate movements, and my appearance of unruffled calm, I was almost a madman. Every fibre of my great body seemed to vibrate with the pulses of my blood-flow and my brain was stirred to vigorous activity in registering even the most trifling detail and circumstance of the passing moment. And yet in the midst of all this nerve excitement, there was the one stern, fierce, implacable resolve, which held all else subject and dominated every feeling, thought, and movement.

I went back to the town and as I passed through the streets, now thronged with groups of loiterers drawn out by the cool, refreshing breeze of early eventide, my eyes took note of everything and my brain registered even such trifling details as dress, gesture, looks, and attitude. It was always my habit to observe with a hunter's keenness: but now I was sensible of the strange feeling of detachment which had troubled me in the previous days—as if I had no part or lot in it all and were a mere phantom in the midst of life. Yet I noticed, or so believed, that many fell away before me affrighted as had always been in the old time; and I set this down to a return of my old wild looks due to the rage that consumed me. But I gave no heed to it.

As I neared the hotel, I saw Elfa for the second time that day in close converse with von Unger. But I felt no anger against him now; all such feeling was concentrated upon the villain I was going to kill. Even the thought that the young

Elfa

officer had made haste to use the knowledge he had gained about me and that he had hurried to Elfa, did not draw my mind for the tithe of a second from the contemplation of my vengeance. I had no room in my fired brain for any other wrong or feeling save that.

I went to my room and wrote the letter I had planned: telling Elfa that in the event of my death she must seek out the priest who had married us at Massen, and that he had my will and every document she would need. I wrote as calmly as if it had been the merest courtesy note to a stranger, and sealing the cover placed it in the pocket of the hunting jacket that I wore.

Then I took out the pair of rapiers and scrutinised them closely, feeling the edge and points, and testing the temper and suppleness. In spots they were dim; and I polished them carefully, wrapped them up and tucked them under my arm and took up my hat to leave.

As I did so, the door of the next room—I was in an inner room—was opened and I heard our child's feet come pattering across the floor, and his voice as he laughed and shouted in merry glee.

I started involuntarily at the sound. My mind had been so busy with the past and so engrossed by my present purpose, that I had clean forgotten the little lad's existence. I could not see him in this mood and at such a moment.

I turned therefore to a second opening direct into the corridor, and something like an oath broke

Elfa

from my lips on finding it locked and the key gone. I could not bear to have the child's innocent fingers touch me in my savage wrath. But there was no help for it. I could not leave the place except by passing through the room where the little fellow was ; and if I were not quick, Elfa herself might come in.

Even with the thought, came the sound of her voice speaking in tones to the child. I waited, undecided what to do. I tried the door again and nearly wrenched off the handle in a vain attempt to force it open.

Time was passing, and the hour for the meeting was drawing near.

A moment later there came a hush in the next room. All was so still that I thought the two had gone out again ; and I crept stealthily to the door that divided the rooms and peered through.

What I saw moved me to the heart's core.

Elfa and our little lad were kneeling side by side : she in silent prayer, he also silent, and with his hands held up in front of him, imitating the mother's prayerful attitude, and looking wistfully at her, waiting for her to repeat to him the words of his simple evening prayer according to her custom.

My eyes devoured the scene. I could not move. I could scarce draw breath through my tightened, heaving chest. My feet were lead, and my will powerless to move them. I could do nothing but stare like one distraught.

Almost instantly came the leading voice of the

Elfa

mother, followed by the lisping and broken, but serious accents of the boy.

"I thank Thee, O God, for all Thy love of to-day. I pray for safety in the night. O God, bless dear father and love him: watch over him and guard him from all evil, and keep him always in Thy ways. Bless mother, and help her always. Bless everybody, and love us all three as we love Thee and try to do Thy holy will. Amen."

The babe repeated it all, word by word, and at the close paused a moment in silence, gave a little childish sigh, and then rose to his feet to be caught up into his mother's arms and kissed again and again. Directly afterwards, he burst out into a happy laugh and asked for some sweetmeats.

This laugh broke t' spell with me, and I pulled the door open and entered the room.

As soon as he saw me, the boy gave a shout of joy and rolling from Elfa's lap came rushing to me: but halted suddenly half-way, and turned again to Elfa, affrighted as I waived him off with a stern gesture of impatience.

"What is the matter, Ernst?" cried Elfa, rising and standing between me and the door gazing at me in wide-eyed concern. "What has happened? What have you there, dear?" pointing to the rapiers under my arm. She knew well enough what they were.

"Ask no question." I spoke peremptorily and with sternness, for a reaction of harshness had come upon me after the scene by which I had been so moved. The thought of her falseness

Elfa

burned me like a torment. Had she not left her lover but a few moments before? Wrought upon and partly unhinged by the events of the day, I was steeled against her influence ; and my anger grew quick and hot.

"I *must* ask you, Ernst," she said ; resolute, but pale.

"Stand aside," I cried harshly with an angry look.

She shrank and cowered before my look for an instant, covering her eyes with her hand ; but then she rushed to the door and standing in front of it, barred my way.

"Do not look like that at me, Ernst. I cannot bear it," she cried piteously. "Where are you going? What are you going to do?"

"I have told you not to question me," I said with the same sternness.

"But I must question you? What is it? Have I done anything to grieve you? If so, tell me ; for God's good sake, tell me : but you must not look at me with that dreadful light in your eyes."

"Search your own conscience for a reply," I cried, my anger and impatience mounting at what I read to be the signs of her consciousness of wrong. "Stand aside, I bid you, and let me pass."

"Ernst, husband, I dare not let you pass. Tell me, what are you going to do with those swords?" She shuddered as she asked this and pointed again at them.

"Do you dare to disobey me?" I thundered in fierce, rough tones. As I looked at her with the

Elfa

light of wrath in my eyes, she blanched as white as snow, and clutching frantically at me she gazed again into my face in silence. Then I felt her clasp grow weak ; she tried to speak but her quivering lips could do no more than mutter, while over her face and eyes there came a look of such terror and anguish and pain as I had never thought to bring to her face. Her hands relaxed their hold and she slipped and fell at my feet unconscious.

I picked her up and laid her on the bed and, ringing to summon help, hurried from the room.

As I turned my head, the little lad, whom my angry tones had sent trembling to cover in a corner, crawled up beside her, and lay with his chubby face against her cold, grey cheeks. He called to her and kissed her, and when no response came, his grief burst out in loud, passionate sobs.

And that scene of love and suffering, was impressed vividly on my brain as I hurried away on my mission of vengeance and hate.

Chapter XX

I STRODE through the streets at headlong speed, striving to banish the memory of that scene in the hotel and to force myself to think of naught save the purpose I had in hand.

But my efforts were vain.

I could not get out of my eyes that look of horror which I had brought to Elfa's face. It haunted me. Wherever I turned my gaze I saw it reflected in a hundred disquieting forms. It looked out at me from the faces of the passers-by ; the stones of the street wreathed themselves into quaint distortions of it ; the clouds caught the impression of it in weird, fantastic shapes ; and every flower and shrub and tree mocked me with images of it half-hidden within their petals, leaves, and boughs.

Elfa seemed to be everywhere ; and everywhere distraught with pain and terror.

The soft evening summer breezes carried secret voices to my ears and breathed into them the sounds of the prayer I had heard from Elfa and the child ; broken by the sobs and cries which my little lad had vented when he had crept to the side of his

Elfa

unconscious mother. More than once, the yearning seized me to abandon my quest of vengeance and rush back to try and comfort both my grieving loved ones.

I was unnerved. All the force of the stern resolve I had formed was in danger of melting away ; and the thought of taking life was growing abhorrent.

I hardened my heart against the impulses inspired by the moments with Elfa and the babe, and pushed on doggedly to the place of meeting ; believing that the sight of the villain I was going to fight would requicken in me the desire for his life.

When I reached the beer garden, where I had sat and heard Grubel tell his lying tale that afternoon, I entered and called for a draught of old wine, thinking it would warm my cooling blood. I drank it eagerly, like a thirsty man ; although I was far from feeling either thirst or hunger. It refreshed me, and I pushed forward with all speed fearing I should be behind the time appointed for the meeting.

I was first to reach the place, however ; and clambering to a stunted rock by the wayside sat down, baring my head to the evening breeze to await the coming of the others.

The first glimpse that I caught of Grubel in the distance served to rouse me ; and every step that brought him nearer seemed to fan the flame of the anger that had so nearly flickered out.

Von Gunsthal greeted me courteously and intro-

Elfa

duced a Herr Ruckert whom he had asked to act as my second ; and the latter explained briefly the arrangements he had agreed to with von Gunsthal.

We were to fight with rapiers, and they had chosen a spot which lay some few hundred yards to the right hand of the road. It was a well-picked ground ; and as I learnt afterwards had been the scene of many a fierce encounter.

The few preliminaries were quickly settled, and it was with a grim, stern joy that at last I saw the pale face of my enemy glowering at me and trying to keep his shifty eyes resolutely fixed on mine across the points of our swords.

Von Gunsthal held the two swords together for a moment, asked if we were ready and, springing back, gave us the word to go.

To give the villain his due, he was no mean swordsman ; and from the outset he attacked me with the fury of desperation. At first I did not seek to press him, waiting to gain the measure of his skill. He was too eager, and more than once so overreached in lunging that, had I minded, I could have sent my blade through his heart.

Unlike him, I was as cool and wary as if I had been in a fencing booth ; and now that I had him at the point of my sword was minded to play with him a space. Moreover, although my anger had risen, I felt an unwelcome reluctance to take his life. I could not account for the feeling ; but, whenever a chance opened of plunging my sword into his breast, some influence seemed to make

Elfa

me hesitate. And this patience went very near to costing me my life.

As I was parrying a desperate lunge into which he threw the whole of his energy and strength, his blade fell with such force on the flat of mine that my rapier broke in twain, and before von Gunsthal could intervene to stop the fighting, the villain made two quick treacherous thrusts right at my heart. The first I parried with the broken blade ; but from the second, I had to spring back ; and it was just the turn of a hair that his sword was not groping among my heart strings.

A loud cry burst from both the seconds at this act of vile treachery, and von Gunsthal dashed in and struck up my opponent's sword.

He made a hundred writhing apologies, protesting with many gestures and oaths that he had not noticed the breaking of my blade. Then he tossed his sword away, saying that the duel could not continue, as there were no other rapiers on the ground.

To him I said nothing, but handed the swords I had brought with me to the two seconds, telling them to choose one for each of us.

"After what has passed," said von Gunsthal sternly, "it is not for you, Herr Grubel, but for your opponent to decide whether the fight shall go farther. What do you say, Herr von Schalckfort?"

"Certainly, it shall go on," I answered. "That is only one more wrong for me to punish." And then, despite the coward's protests, the further

Elfa

details were arranged, the swords chosen and handed to us, and we were again placed in position.

The dastardly attempt to kill me in that way enraged me so that, as soon as the word was given for us to engage again, I changed my tactics entirely. I forced the fight to the utmost, and before we had exchanged a dozen passes I sent his weapon flying out of his hand, and with a look of fury drew back my sword to plunge it into his heart.

But at the very instant, while he cringed and shrank before me like the craven worm he was, a strange thing happened. The prayer scene as I had witnessed it came like a vivid dream picture across my vision, and in my ears rang the child voice of my boy as he had prayed :

" Bless dear father and love him ; guard him from all evil."

My hand fell powerless at my side : I felt that I could not take even this villain's life while that babbling blessing was sounding in my ears.

" Will you save your craven life, and confess that you have lied ? " I cried as I raised the sword to threaten the shrinking wretch.

" Yes," he faltered.

" Is it not true that you tried to murder me before, as you have to-day ? "

" Yes, it is true," came from his trembling lips, while he looked up at me with such fear and hate as might torment a thwarted devil.

" Do you retract the lies you spoke to-day ? "

" Yes," he murmured for the third time.

Elfa

"Then you can take your coward life, with just the brand of a craven braggart," I cried ; and, with the words, I raised my sword and smote him with the flat of it across the cheek.

He gave a cry, and, like a smitten sheep, fell to the ground in his fright.

"You have heard his confession, gentlemen," I said, turning to the two men, who had stood in silence during the scene.

"Yes," said both together, while von Gunsthal added, "and I am only sorry you have spared his currish life."

With that I turned and prepared to leave the ground.

Chapter XXI

I SCARCELY know how to speak of the hours which followed the duel with Grubel; the medley of conflicting feelings which oppressed me, the tumult of antagonistic hopes and desires, the strange phases of extremes of pain and pleasure through which I passed, the hopeless indistinctness of thought, and lastly such a blurring of mental perspective with an utterly baffling intermixture of real and unreal, true and false, fact and imagination.

After the duel I left the place alone, although Herr von Gunsthal and his friend urged me courteously to allow them to accompany me. At any other time I would have agreed. Von Gunsthal's bearing toward me was entirely changed and his strict and punctilious formality gave place to courteous consideration, and he left me in no doubt as to his reasons.

"My principal is not hurt, Herr von Schalckfort," he said, as he gave me his hand at parting. "It was only cowardice which made him fall. I can understand that you may not wish just now for the company of strangers; but

Elfa

I hope we shall meet again during your stay in Aschern. I should wish, if you will permit, to express my real regret that I ever allowed myself to listen to the slanders of such a maligner. But he will never repeat them after your lesson this evening." He ended with a dry laugh, and we shook hands.

His companion was influenced by his manner and displayed a similar cordiality. I thanked him for the service he had rendered me, and with my swords under my arm left the ground.

I felt that I must be alone. Now that the special strain of the events which had led to the fight and in particular the absorbing desire for vengeance upon Grubel was relaxed, the old and deeper trouble reasserted itself. The pain was even keener than before, because Elfa now knew my jealously guarded secret.

I started to return to the town with brisk, rapid steps ; but as the distance between me and the hotel decreased, so my speed slackened, until, as I stood on the threshold of the streets, I halted, full of anxious perplexity. Then I turned and, avoiding the town, took to a bypath and kept to the outskirts.

My mind was like the swelling bosom of a land-locked lake over which a hurricane has passed, whipping and lashing its waters till they heave and spume and seethe and toss with fury. After the tempest of wind has passed the tumult of the waters will continue to rage, and the long snaky, coiling waves will dash their foam-crowned

Elfa

crests upon the shore, startling the new stillness with a thunderous echo of the storm.

The changes and stress of that day had been too great and constant for my deeply stirred passion to subside at once ; and ever and again some boisterous wave of feeling, hate, love, jealousy, or wrath, would rise and rage within me, and the surf of wild, vengeful thoughts would fill every cranny of my mind.

I was wellnigh afraid to trust myself to return to Elfa, fearing lest the old fierce impulses which had governed me that day as completely as if I had been a madman, should break out again and drive me to some regretted act with her or with the man she favoured.

The thirst for vengeance upon Grubel had overshadowed for the time all other thoughts ; and now that that had been but partly sated, jealousy of the young officer mingled with bursts of almost savage resentment against Fate and even against Elfa herself seized upon me in its place ; broken and darkened by long pauses of intense grief and withering dread, as I thought of what might be the results of Elfa's knowledge of my secret.

My wrath was greater than my grief, however, and burned with such heat that it sought and found for itself some special object on which to concentrate all its rank, malignant strength.

The purple shadows of the early summer night, lightened by the gleams of the crescent moon, had fallen before my half-unwilling and yet half-yearn-

Elfa

ing steps sounded on the stones of the nearly deserted streets. I walked slowly and heavily toward the hotel, fearful of what I might find there, yet most fearful of myself.

When I came to the point where the street opened into the market-place, I glanced about me, eagerly and keenly. Twice that day on reaching the place, I had seen there Elfa and her lover, and my eyes searched the moonlit empty square and settled on the spot under the shadow of the long church where the two had stood.

Either my heated brain played me some trick of fancy or just where I had seen them twice that day, I saw them now once more.

I caught my breath in anger at the sight and, halting abruptly, rubbed my eyes, and then stared long and eagerly in their direction; and even as I gazed they vanished. Anger passed in the great rush of relief and I leant against the railings of the big building behind me, scourging myself fiercely for the ill thoughts of Elfa which had prompted the vision.

The moonlight lay over the whole market-place, unbroken save for some few skeleton stalls here and there which had been set up in readiness for the morrow's market. By the church there was deep shadow, cast by a giant buttress of the west end; and it was on the fringe of that shadow my distorted imagination had pictured them.

I was moving away when the rapiers slipped from under my arm, and partly freed from their wrapping fell with a muffled clang upon the stones.

Elfa

I picked them up and was re-wrapping them when they slipped again from my nerveless fingers.

I had glanced across at the church and again saw Elfa and her companion. It was no cheat of fancy after all. They had but moved farther under the shadow of the buttress.

The moment my back was turned this scoundrel seemed to draw my wife to his side ; and at this thought the fumes of jealousy mounted, like strong wine, to my brain.

I could see them distinctly. Elfa's hands rested on the young gallant's shoulders, as they had often rested on mine, and even as I looked, he placed his arm about her and drew her to him until their lips met in a long caress.

That moment was like a pang of hell. I could not bear the sight and snatched up the swords to hasten away.

Then the devil gave me a shrewd prompt. The swords were just what I needed to call this insolent, reckless gallant to account.

With an oath I ran with all speed across the empty square and, heedless of my direction, I dashed full tilt against one of the booths, scattering the props to the ground, and falling with it and making a clash and clatter which rattled noisily in the still night air.

I scrambled to my feet, disentangling myself from the stays and ropes, and when I looked again toward the church the shadow of the buttress was empty.

Again I rubbed my eyes in amazed confusion ;

Elfa

and rubbed and stared and stared and rubbed again, hopelessly baffled whether again it was only a trick of my fancy.

The whole place was deserted, nor was there even the faint echo of a footstep anywhere to tell that any living soul had been there.

I groped about in the moonlight for the swords, one of which had fallen in a gulley and eluded my search for some moments ; and as soon as I had recovered them, I ran to the church.

Not a sign of them was there. I dashed along the streets which led off from that side of the market-place, searching anywhere and everywhere for traces of Elfa or her lover. But without result.

I turned back, baffled and full of perplexity, unable to decide whether they had really been present or whether my half-crazy wits had but cheated me.

The empty search caused both relief and disappointment. My blood was up and I would have rarely welcomed the chance to punish the scoundrel who had come between me and happiness, and stolen away from me the love which had been the one precious thing in my life.

I paced the shadows of the old church, listening moodily to the echoes of my footfalls which alone broke the solemn silence of the place. My brain was hot and seemed as if it would burst under the stress and strain of my emotions. I was wrathful, troubled, confused, impatient, jealous, and sorrowful—in a very maelstrom of passionate agitation.

It was long before I could force myself to return

Elfa

to the hotel and school myself to contemplate the meeting with Elfa.

When I entered it at length—it stood within a hundred yards of the market-place—the hall and rooms below were deserted, save for a sleepy waiter who asked me if I needed anything. I shook my head and passed on to the broad stairway, leaving the waiter yawning with hand to mouth and looking with weary curiosity at the two swords, now uncovered, which I carried under my arm.

I went noiselessly up the wide, thick-carpeted stairs and along the corridor to our rooms. I did not enter at once ; but stood outside, straining my ear to listen for any sounds within. I had left Elfa in such a condition that I knew not what might have chanced : and I half-expected to hear the voices of other people in the room.

But there was not a sound.

I turned the handle softly and entered. The room was dark, save where the moonlight streamed across one corner, making all else seem darker by contrast.

I crossed to the door of the inner room, which was ajar, and listened again. Not a sound. The stillness alarmed me. It was so unexpected, so unwonted, so disquieting, so fraught with possible ills.

I pushed the door open noiselessly, and crept across the floor to the bed and bent over it, holding my breath in my eagerness.

It was empty!

My heart grew pulseless with a new and terrible fear.

Elfa

I stole round the bed to the child's cot, listening with strained and almost painful intentness for the sound of the child's breathing.

Not a breath or sigh broke the now almost agonising silence. I felt the pillow and clothes with eager, feverish, trembling, hands.

It was empty, like the bed; and a groan of mingled anguish and wrath burst from my lips as I realised at last the full truth.

Elfa had left me and taken the child to hide with her; flying through fear of me and love for another.

I reeled under the blow and then raged like a man bereft of reason. At that moment I was in all truth insane.

Deep and terrible curses rolled from my lips, mingled with violent and bitter reproaches of my faithless wife, and fierce, insensate oaths of vengeance upon the man who had brought this shame and sorrow upon me.

All my gloomiest suspicions were now confirmed. The remembrance of my purpose to die for Elfa recurred only to mock me and add to my furious resentment against them both. They had been too impatient even for the few hours which would have sufficed for the accomplishment of my purpose. Had they been before me at that instant I would have taken both their lives without an itch of care or compunction; and I cursed the blundering folly by which I had let them escape me in the market-place.

I plagued myself no longer to decide whether

Elfa

the sight of them were cheat or reality, and told myself that they had also seen me and had fled from me in fear of my wrath.

I stood in the middle of the room in a very palsy of rage that choked my breathing, drove the warmth from my veins, and set my great muscles as with the icy stiffness of an iron frost ; and as I vowed to be revenged, I clenched my teeth and fists with a strain so fierce that my lips were pierced and the palms of my hands punctured.

Then, all suddenly, my strength ebbed. I shivered as if seized with an ague ; and only with a great effort was I able to stagger to a chair by the open window and sink into it, trembling and exhausted. The blood was pressing on my brain, causing a myriad sharp shooting spasms which darted from crown to nape and back from nape to crown in hot, burning, piercing stabs and throbs of agony.

After a time that seemed hours the pain lessened. I must have partially lost control of my senses ; for mingled with a wild, chaotic medley of old and recent events and thoughts came the infrequent night sounds of the street below. The stumbling step of some belated reveller ; the mumbled song of a passing roysterer ; the steady tramp of the watch ; the voices of two men who loitered a moment just underneath the window as one foretold a storm and the other replied urging him to hasten. Once a loud sharp cry in a woman's voice broke the heavy night air, and so complete was my confusion of the real and the

Elfa

unreal that I mistook it at first for Elfa's tone, and I remember that I laughed to think that her lover had so soon forsaken her.

Laughed ! Because Elfa was in such sore straits and distress !

From laughter I burst into tears, sobbing like a feeble woman. I, a hunter, a man whose strength was a proverb, who all my life had held weakness in contempt, was crying like a puling babe.

Of a surety I was mad; crazed by the tragedy which had come to crown the stress of that day of pain and wretchedness and reawakened wrath.

After that I grew calmer, and once again my thoughts began to fasten upon my trouble, indefinitely, and in an incoherent, chaotic, methodless jumble in which past and present, reality and imagination, were hopelessly blended. Yet through all, like a sinuous connected thread ran the idea that the end of all would be, not my death—that thought did not recur—but the death by my hand of the man who had won Elfa away from me.

I remember closing the window, for the effort seemed to tax the remnant of my strength, and I sank back wearied and exhausted, muttering to myself that I must nurse my strength carefully or I should have none for my revenge.

I sought to thrust away the plaguing muddled fancies of my disordered brain, and to concentrate all thought upon my new purpose.

And at last I fell asleep.

Chapter XXII

IT was night. The moon was shining with rare brilliance, paling the stars as they blinked and shimmered through the clear raw air. A shrewd keen wind was sweeping over the marketplace of Aschern, and blew cold in the dark shadowed nook of the gaunt old church in which I stood, waiting and watching and listening for the approach of Elfa and her lover.

I knew well enough where to wait and that the moment of assignation was at hand. I had found a cunning hiding-place under the arch of a broad heavy buttress at the corner of the church where a hideous gargoyle grinned down its approval of my errand. Here I could stand and watch them, hearing the words they spoke, almost brushed by their clothes as they passed and repassed, wholly ignorant of the madman who stood within less than arm's length of them.

I was mad: I knew it. I must be mad or I could never bear to endure such a life of cursed suspicion, spying, secrecy, and wretchedness. I must have ended it by killing them or myself.

None but a madman could have felt the fiendish delight with which I saw how the wild words of

Elfa

the shrewd old soothsayer, Judith, were coming true; and that my harsh looks, fierce words, and rough deeds were adding the weight of years to Elfa's looks and frame. I marked the colour of her face lose all the freshness of youth, the lines of care and suffering furrow her cheeks, the flesh grow wrinkled, dull, and pitted, the eyes sink deeper and deeper in their sockets, robbed of lustre and brightness, and the lithe and upright figure lose its grace and suppleness in the listless stoop of premature age and pain.

Wise Judith! Shrewd old prophetess!

No love of mere lover could last in the presence of such swift and blighting decay as hers.

" Each ill-considered, wrathful word
Shall sever, like the cut of sword,
Some thread of life."

I was waiting for the end. I knew what must come. Not death for me. No, no. I had been a fool ever to think of death for her or me—death there should be for the man who had come between us; aye, death as slow and lingering and painful as my scheming brain could conceive and strong hands carry out. But not for her. No, no! The end for her was when the hour would come in which this foppish villain would tire of her haggard looks and wasted, shrunken form, and leave her.

I was growing impatient for it; and every time when from my hiding-place by the church I saw them meet, I held my breath to listen for the

Elfa

first accents of the scorn that I knew must fall from him soon.

I had a strong reason for my haste. I was longing to wind my arms around his stalwart, graceful figure, to feel my fingers playing on his throat, to tease him into the jaws of death with lying, luring hopes of life, and to drag him into the presence of the woman he had wronged to be taunted and giped in the moment of his death agony.

I was full of these thoughts as I stood in my dark arch waiting and listening: and when the two came, I strained my ears to catch every word that they spoke.

They were not many: not so many as the caresses that would pass between them. And when I watched him twine his arms about her and saw her cling to him, as in the days of our happiness she had clung to me, I knew that the fiercest pit of the deepest hell could hold for me no torment, torture, nor terror compared with that agony.

"You are ill, sweetheart," he murmured, as he passed close by my hiding-place. "Why will you not leave him and come to me?"

"You forget; the future of my child binds me to stay even though my fear of ill-treatment grows with every hour."

"The cowardly bully," cried the officer, passionately. "Would to Heaven I were free to punish him as he deserves!"

"Wait; you strutting, thievish coxcomb," I said to myself. "Wait, and you shall have a bellyful of opportunity."

Elfa

"Nay," said Elfa softly, "you must do nothing. You have promised me. It would compromise us both. Remember."

"Remember? It is you, Elfa, who must remember, that you have promised to come to me, if ever your fears outgrow your patience."

"That will never be, can never be, while the child lives," she answered; and then they moved on again in silence, till Elfa saw she must go, for fear I should discover her absence: and with a long, passionate embrace they parted, Elfa hurrying toward the hotel.

"While the child lives! While the child lives!"

The words dinned themselves into my ears again and again as I lingered in my hiding-place. The evening breeze caught them up and moaned and murmured them among the arches and buttresses of the old church as though they would chant the solemn cadence of a requiem for a dying child. The hideous gargoyle overhead whispered them at me with sinister, cynical leer.

Fool that I had been not to remember that through the child I could strike at Elfa even more harshly than I had yet done.

"While the child lives."

What, if the child should die? What, if some time when Elfa held him in her arms she were suddenly frightened and let him fall and thus herself helped his death! There are many black crannies in a man's brain when madness goes groping for evil; and the devil soon had an abundance of

Elfa

fitting garnish for the crude idea that flashed into my mind at the sound of Elfa's words. I moved at length from my arch and paced the marketplace from side to side, with face as dark and threatening as my thoughts were black and wild.

"While the child lives."

The child should not live. I had never meant that it should. No offspring of my loins should there be to carry forward to another generation the cursed heritage of blood that had fallen on my life. It was but a question of time and opportunity. Elfa's words had settled the time: it should be at once: and I myself would find or make the opportunity.

As some plants will blossom in a night, so the plan ripened in my crazed brain. Once the child were dead, the two would come together; and so, more quickly, must follow the man's desertion: since constant fear and apprehension would aid a sated lust to tire him.

Full of this devilish plan, I went back to the hotel.

Outside our rooms I paused, my ear to the door, listening that I might choose the moment for my entrance which should most disconcert Elfa.

She was speaking to the child, who was restless and had called to her; and presently I heard her murmuring soothingly and softly to the boy whom she had lifted from the cot.

Then I burst open the door with violence and made my entrance with as much noise and tumult as possible.

Elfa

Elfa was standing in the middle of the chamber and stared in terror at me; and the child began to cry, hiding his face from me on her bosom.

This gesture angered me.

"Stop that child's mewling," I cried fiercely.

Elfa clasped her arms round him and tried to hush his sobs.

I waited an instant, till her back was turned to me, as she sought to still the boy; and then I placed my hand heavily on her shoulder and shook her, and cried in a voice of thunder:

"Where have you been to-night?"

I had judged the moment and the means well. In her terror at my tones and my violence, she turned her pale, drawn face hurriedly to mine and half loosed her hold of the child. I shook her again, more roughly, and the boy slipped from her arms and lay still and quiet on the floor. He fell on the back of the head, doubling his neck under him, and the vertebræ snapped like a rotten rod-joint.

Elfa cried out and fought like a wild thing to reach the boy where he lay; but I held her back and laughed at her efforts. Glaring into her face, I hissed out in tones that made her cower and tremble, despite her eagerness to get to the child:

"You have killed him. You meant to do it, you murderess. You have killed him; do you understand? No, you shall not go to him, shall not touch him. You are not fit to lay a finger on him. You know why. Because"—and I bent down and breathed the words into her ear—"you have killed him that there should be no

Elfa

longer any tie between you and me. Come; " and I dragged her to the inner room, thrust her in, and locked the door upon her, laughing at her frantic struggles and cries and groans of despair and anguish.

"While the child lives."

Ha ha; the child was dead and the mother was free—free to step into that hell of persecution that I had planned for her punishment.

I picked up the little dead body and examined it with no more concern or tenderness than I had shown a thousand times for any animal I had slain in the hunt.

I wondered how I had ever cared to fondle it or be fondled by it; and when I saw it was dead, I tossed it on to the bed, as I would have tossed aside a dead hare or bird that had fallen to my gun.

Then prudence awoke and started a train of reflection. Questions would be asked about the death of the child, and if Elfa were not there to make the tale seem straight and coloured with probability, there might be trouble.

So I opened the door and let her in, and threw myself into a chair and closed eyes and ears alike to the signs and sounds of her distracted, frenzied grief.

All I cared to think was that the child was dead, and the one chief obstacle between me and the end to which I looked was removed: and I was glad.

As for the child, it was better dead than alive, seeing what lay ahead for its parents.

Chapter XXIII

AT last the hour was at hand for which I had been waiting and working in all that time of angry vigil. Elfa had left me after the child's death and had fled with her lover, and I had followed them everywhere: like the shadow of night at the heels of the day; a thing of dark and lowering menace glooming their lives with the fear of ever impending disaster.

I had haunted them like a wraith of evil: appearing always in their path just at the instant when they hoped to have eluded me.

I saw the end as it approached. I watched the blight settle upon Elfa; fear told upon her health, writing almost a daily tale of suffering on her face and form. And with the change in her, I saw the change in him. At first it had been love that held him: I could see it, for I knew the signs as they had shown in me; but I marked how the love cooled gradually and how the light and pleasing coil of love gave place to the heavy chain of a sated passion which only the cold rivets of bastard honour and false and laggard shame prevented him from snapping.

Elfa

I laughed when I saw how it galled and chafed him; how he winced and fretted under the weight and longed to be free. I was glad with a devilish gladness: and yet it made me hate him more and more.

Elfa knew it, too: and now that the fair apple of desire had turned to grit and ashes, setting her teeth on edge, I believe there was sorrow in her heart and regret when her thoughts went back to the past.

It was at Aschern that the crisis came: always Aschern at that time and always the same spot—that western end of the long, brown, frowning, ugly church in the market-place.

They did not know that I was in the town; and little dreamed that, when, as it seemed, from old habit, they walked together in the customed spot, I was hidden close by to hear their words.

"You are grieving again; always grieving; always sad, always moping," said von Unger; and there was no accent of love in his voice.

"I am sorry: but I cannot help it," was Elfa's reply.

"One would think you were pining for the past, repenting the loss of such a loving husband, and longing to throw yourself into his tender arms again," sneered the man.

"Have I given you cause ever to say that of me?"

"I don't say you have," he replied testily, "but for God's sake do try and have less of these tears. One would think that I was the biggest brute to

Elfa

you under the sun—worse than a husband. All the time we have been together, you have been the same. All the sacrifices I have made for you seem to count for nothing: but you must be for ever thinking of the past. If you knew what an effect it has upon your looks, you'd be more careful. It's sickening that you can never take a cheerful view of anything. It's very trying to me, I know; and the more clearly you understand that, the better."

"Do you mean that you are tired of me?" cried Elfa, with passionate bitterness. "Having brought me to what I am, you wish to throw me aside."

"I didn't say that, or anything like it. But your temper is getting beyond all bearing. If you are not weeping, you are scolding; and, by Heaven, I can't put up with it—and I won't."

Elfa was silent for a minute and then laid her hand on his arm, with a gesture I knew well enough.

"Hugo, don't speak like that to me. You rouse such bitter, bitter thoughts and such sadness and sorrow. What is it you wish me to do? I will try to do it, if you will but tell me. Do you wish me to be cheerful, to laugh, and be pleased and light-hearted? I will laugh: listen," and she gave a forced, mirthless laugh that rang with inexpressible mournfulness.

"For Heaven's sake, don't laugh like that. Your sobs are infinitely pleasanter to listen to."

She sighed, heavily and wearily.

Elfa

"I see, I understand," she answered. "I can no longer please you. I have dreaded the coming of this moment; but I knew it must come. It is my punishment. You have ceased to care for me; have wearied of me. Your love has burnt itself out, and the ashes of regret are cold and bitter. Love, do I say?" she cried, flashing for a moment with scorn. "Not love, passion: Heaven help me, nothing but that! And I was weak enough to dream it could be something better and nobler. You are tired of me. Why don't you say it like a man: or have you not even courage enough to avow your cowardice?"

"If you've nothing better to do than to indulge in clap-trap heroics of a low order, we'd better go back to the hotel," he sneered. "Whatever my feeling for you may have been or may be now, it is not likely to be improved by your words. If I have changed, it is you who have changed me."

"That is not true; and you know it is not," replied, Elfa, in low clear tones. "You know that I have never given you cause to harbour even a thought against me. But that is enough. I have deserved all this, and more—but not at your hands. I threw away a love that was mine: and now my own is cast back in my teeth. Now, I myself can feel and know something of the sorrow I have caused." She buried her face in her hands and her figure swayed to and fro with the passion of her grief.

"Why don't you say at once that you are sorry you ever left that fond and gentle creature, that

Elfa

mixture of murderer and husband, and fled to me for protection?" answered the man, with a sneering laugh.

"Protection," echoed Elfa, angered by the sneer. "The protection of flying with you from town to town and district to district at the bare fear that he was pursuing us."

"Well, I have no mind to have my throat slit, even for your sake. I am not so used to the ways of murderers as you have been." His voice was cold and sneering and full of suppressed anger.

"No; you find it safer to insult a dying woman." She turned her face to him, and as the light fell full upon it, I seemed to see that her words were true and that the shadow of death dimmed every line of the white, drawn, haggard features.

"You dare to taunt me; by Heaven, but that is more than I will endure," he cried fiercely, stung by the sneer. "Listen, I had not meant to tell you yet: but you have goaded me beyond endurance. We must part. Do you hear? We must part. I came here to Aschern this time for this purpose. You can find your friends here and go to them—or perhaps to your loving husband. I will have my life no longer made a hell to me by your hysterical snivelling or overdrawn heroics. I have borne with them too long. Go your way; I care not whither, so long as it is far enough away from me. All I pray is that I may never see your face again. I would to God I had never seen it; for I hate the very sight of you;" and

Elfa

his brutal rage had mounted in him till he trembled under its force.

"You hate me?" answered Elfa, in a hard, set tone.

"Yes," he answered passionately. "I even loathe myself for having ever stooped to think I cared for you. Go!"—and his hand quivered and trembled as he stretched it out.

She seized his hand and pressed her lips to it before he could drag it roughly away.

"Now that I know that you hate me, I will go," she said, with the calmness of intense despair. And without a word further she turned and left him.

He walked away at the same moment without casting even a look to see whither she went.

"She is punished now," I thought, as I watched her: and I tried to feel as glad as I told myself I ought to be.

But I could not; and as I followed her, my heart was rent with a great conflict between consuming pity for her and mad joy that I had been so well avenged.

She hurried with bent head through the narrow moonlit streets out of the town, passing under an old round-turreted crumbling archway, by which we had driven into the town, and I followed, picking my way carefully among the shadows cast by the houses, walls and trees, and keeping the slender, drooping figure always in sight.

Some few hundred yards beyond the archway, she stopped and leaned against the low stone

Elfa

parapet of the bridge across the narrow river which flowed through the outskirts of the town. Pressing her hand to her head, she stood in deep meditation. Then from the bosom of her dress she drew out something on which the light of the moon played brightly, and gazed at it long and earnestly. In old times she had always carried there a miniature of our child: and it may have been that which now so strangely moved her.

Presently, she held it up before her and sank upon her knees, her frail form crouching low in prayer or abject desolation.

Then it flashed upon me that her purpose was to throw herself into the river; and I started forward and hastened toward her.

She heard my footsteps and springing to her feet climbed on to the parapet.

"Elfa, Elfa!" I called.

She glanced round open-mouthed with terror at the sound of my voice as I ran at headlong speed toward her. And, just as I was stretching out my hand to stay her, she uttered a shrill cry and fell rather than leaped into the river below.

Thus, even at the last, it was I who had frightened her to her death.

Remorse seized me and a hot yearning to save her from the dark, treacherous water; but, even as I laid my hand upon the parapet to spring over, a chill, icy numbness held my body as though with iron bands; and I could move neither hand nor foot.

Rigid as a statue I stood, rooted to the spot from

Elfa

which she had thrown herself, the will in me to rescue her mocked by the clogging paralysis of my muscles. Lacking even the strength to turn my head aside or to draw the lids over my eyes, I was forced to watch her struggling and fighting, sinking and rising again, as the water carried her away on its dull, sullen, cruel bosom to the death that lurked in the moonlit mists beyond.

It was thus that Fate mocked me.

It was part of my punishment. I had planned that a heavy penalty should fall upon Elfa. I had driven her into the arms of the man who had deserted her. And then, when I had rued and would have snatched her from the death to which I had hounded her, and when the longing to save was to the full as passionate as had ever been the desire to kill, I was turned to stone and condemned to see her die without strength even to die in trying to save her.

Chapter XXIV

HOW long I stood upon the bridge I know not ; nor how I came to retrace my steps to the market-place.

I found myself there, possessed by but one thought : to slay the man who had sent Elfa to her death, and then to kill myself.

I knew by instinct that it would be on the market-place that we should meet : and I hid myself there and waited.

After those moments of frenzied impotence in which I had watched Elfa borne to her death, I remember nothing until I was once more under the buttress arch of the church, standing silent and motionless, like a picket of death, waiting for the approach of my enemy.

He came at length, strutting with a jaunty air, his quick footsteps clattering noisily on the paving and across the rough stones of the market-place.

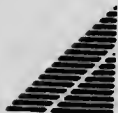
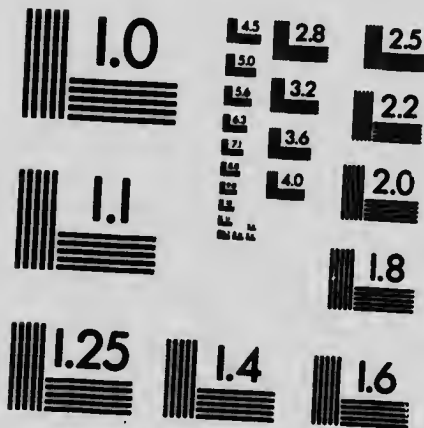
He almost touched me as he passed the corner of the old church ; and I saw him toss his head and draw his shoulders back, and caught the words he muttered to himself with a sigh of relief :

“ Free at last. Thank Heaven ! ”



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Elfa

The words brought a grim smile to my face as I peered out after him, and followed him just as I had followed Elfa, keeping well out of both sight and sound.

He took the northern road : through the copse where I had brought Grubel to account, and past the beer garden where the story of my life had been so lyingly told, and on beyond toward the spot where I had planned to seek my death.

He walked on all unconscious of my presence ; and as he had ceased to look about him when he had got free from the town, I lessened the distance between us.

I saw the two hills looming ahead through the moonlight, on either side of the white road ; and as he neared the place where the taller one, to the right of the road began to rise, I quickened my steps to a sharp, stealthy run, keeping on the turf by the side of the road, and closed up to within a score of yards of him.

Then came the moment to act. I rushed forward at topmost speed and, before he was well aware of my presence, my hand had gripped his shoulder and I swung him round and glared fiercely into his face.

"Now, you villain," I cried, "where is my wife?"

He was no coward ; though a braver man might have lost heart at my savage and sudden attack.

He wrestled a moment with me and, before I knew what he was minded to do, he had drawn a pistol and levelled it at my head.

Elfa

It was well and cleverly meant ; but he gained less than nothing by the move. I shifted my grip swiftly from his shoulder to his throat and forced him backwards, staggering and nearly falling, while with my left hand I seized the weapon and wrenched it from his grasp.

Nor did I rest there. I forced him to the ground, and, placing my knee on his chest, prevented his rising while I rapidly searched him for any other arms. He had no more : and then I picked up his pistol and pressed the cold barrel to his face, moving it from spot to spot with threats and taunts and angry curses.

But I did not mean to kill him like that.

I took from my neck my heavy kerchief and fastened it as a gag across his mouth ; with the belt of my hunting jerkin, I pinioned his arms behind his back with rough and brutal force, and then dragged him to his feet.

"Now, officer, march," I cried, with a savage laugh, as I held his pistol again to his head. "And march as I command you, or you may have to settle accounts with your own leaden friend."

He would not move a step ; but turned and faced me resolutely, struggling hard to free his bonds.

The next minute I was glad that he had set me at defiance ; for it left me free to use that violence with him to which it was a relief and pleasure to give full scope.

I thrust the weapon away into my pocket, seized him in my powerful grasp and half-dragged, half-

Elfa

lifted him from the road on to the first steps of the ascent up the hillside. I took a cruel delight in forcing him thus. Tall as he was and strong, he was but a stripling in my arms ; and I pushed and pulled and thrust and dragged him, now by the arm then by the clothes up the hill, while sometimes I hurled him to the ground and dragged him feet foremost, letting his head and face scrape and tear their way over the rough, stony way. And in this fashion we reached the point of the hillside from which the spur of rock ran out toward the road.

There I unpinioned his arms, loosened the gag from his mouth, and hauled him to his feet.

Hatless, his face was bruised and cut and bleeding, and his clothes soiled and torn by the rough passage up the hillside, he made but a sorry figure, as he faced me, dazed and stupid after the struggle.

I waited for him to gather his scattered wits. I was in no hurry, for I knew there was now no fear of interruption.

"Now, you villain, I ask you again—where is my wife?" I cried in a voice of thunder. "Do you hear?"—shaking him—"where is my wife?"

"I know nothing of your wife." The words came in a sullen tone, as if wrung from him despite his will.

"When did you see her last?"

"I don't know. I don't remember," in the same sullen tone.

"You prince of cowardly liars—do you hear—liars, liars, liars!" I cried in my rage, my voice

Elfa

growing louder and hoarser with each repetition of the word as I bent my face close to his and shouted it into his teeth. "You have murdered her: or what is worse, you have driven her to kill herself. You lured her from me with your lying lechery: and now you have deserted her and driven her to her death."

"It is a lie," he cried, speaking for the first time with any show of vehemence.

"Listen, you snake. I was close by you two to-night on the market-place in the town yonder, when you thrust her away to die with your cruel, callous words. To die, I say: ah, and with less remorse in your dastardly soul than I would have had in crushing out under my heel the life of some vermin of the woods. At the moment, my fingers twitched and trembled to fly to your throat and choke out your foul, adulterous, lying life. But I waited; ah, waited for this moment, that I might have you to myself, alone, in my power, and make you feel in the slow torture of a lingering death something of the pangs you inflicted on that poor guilty, feeble woman. By God, and I am glad I have waited, so that I can kill you at my leisure." I finished with a laugh that a fiend might have envied.

"She is not dead. It is not true. It cannot be true," he said, with the tone of one seeking to persuade himself.

"I saw her die. I followed her to the river and watched the river carry her away to the only rest and peace you had left for her—the rest and peace

Elfa

of death. While she lived, you were safe : now she is dead, your hour has struck. Within an hour you passed my hiding-place by the church, whispering that you were free at last. You are—almost: but your freedom, like hers, will be death."

Before the words had died away, he threw himself upon me with all the force of desperation, and sought to bear me to the ground. He might as well have hurled himself upon the rock behind. I caught him in my grasp and, holding him a moment, lifted him from the ground while he struggled and fought like a captured buzzard, and then I dashed him down with all my force upon the rock, where he lay huddled up in a heap at my feet.

"Kill me," he moaned feebly, "kill me. For God's sake, kill me !"

"No, no ; not yet. You have but sipped at the cup of my anger ; and, as there is a hell beneath us, you shall drain it to the dregs. But you must rest awhile, or your strength will wane too fast for my purpose." And then I sat down near him on a large boulder and watched him with a rare malignant pleasure.

"So you want to die at once, do you?" I taunted mockingly, after he had scrambled back to some sort of consciousness. "You are tired of your life and repent, I suppose, like a good Christian, and wish that you could undo the past. Ha ha. But you can no more do that than you can refuse to die just when and how and where

Elfa

I please. Now, what if I make you an offer : suppose I let you live, let you go free from here : what would you do to save your life? "

With a great effort he raised his head to look at me : and I felt a thrill of joy when I read in his face that my words had had the effect I purposed : had relit the flame of the wish to live that I had before so roughly extinguished. I meant but to cheat him with a new hope.

"You are young ; you have strength ; you might look for a long life ; you have many friends ; life should be sweet to you ; and you might redeem your black past by a better future. Say, what will you promise, if I give you your life? "

"I will promise anything you ask," he cried with husky eagerness, and he peered wistfully into my stern, dark face.

"Well, let us think of it. Could you bear to live with the thought of my vengeance always hanging over you, should you break a single jot or tittle of my command? Would you swear to follow every bidding that I gave you? "

"I would try. I could but die then, if I failed."

What a miserable worm it was, without even the spirit of the lowest brutes to die fighting ! And this was the thing that Elfa had set above me !

"But you are such a cowardly snake that you might even turn to bite the hand that saved you. I doubt that I can trust you. When I think of that, I fear you must die. Such slippery vermin as you who come creeping into our homes to poison

those around us, have an ugly skill in wriggling out of our grasp. No, you must die."

At this, the wretch groaned and fell back again on the ground.

I let him alone then for a space, revelling in his misery.

"What sort of pledge could you give me, that you would do my bidding and be my creature, if I let you live?" I asked, after a long pause.

"Are you a devil that you torment me with tantalising hopes of life? Kill me, or let me go," he answered.

"I suppose you mean by that that there is no pledge you can give me. Very well." I spoke carelessly, as if the decision were one of his making and a matter of no concern to me. And another long silence fell between us.

While I taunted him and lured him in this way with flashes of false hopes of life and longer spells of dark despair, the hours passed until the moon waned and the first signs of the coming dawn began to appear in the cold misty air, finding me, as he thought, still undecided.

I rose and stamped my feet once or twice to set the blood flowing.

"Get up," I cried harshly. "Let me see how you take to the new sort of life. Quick;" and I laughed as he pulled himself up by the points and juts of rock. "Now, you see that long span of rock; or if you don't see it, it is there"—pointing in the direction. "Climb out along it. The way is dangerous, and a false step may easily

Elfa

mean a broken neck, so that it's a good start for the new life. Go on, till I call to you to halt. If you slip, you die by your own hand: if you stop, you die by mine. Now, show me an earnest of your new obedience."

Many a man has found an easier path into the jaws of death than that: and few a more hazardous one out of them. How he kept his footing I cannot tell. Well as I knew the path and used as were my feet to rugged mountain ways, I needed all my efforts to save myself from falling. But there is no fight so fierce and desperate as that which a coward will make to save his life from any danger other than an open foe. He scrambled and clutched, tripped and stumbled, faltered and half fell a hundred times, clinging to every point and notch of the crags, feeling his way and tearing the flesh from his hands and the nails from his fingers in the desperate energy of the struggle. And in this fashion he gained the narrow flat ridge that overhung the road beneath.

"Halt, there," I cried; and in a moment stood by his side.

The darkness between the moonlight and the dawn was just beginning to lift as we stood on the brink of the rock, making the depth below look weird and awesome, with the course of the sinuous road showing faint and grey and dim beneath.

"You have made a rare struggle," I said, laying my hand on the shoulder of the tattered, bleeding, shivering wretch, "but I have decided against you

You must die. Peer down," I cried, pointing down into the gloom below us ; "learn the way down—for that is your road to death." I paused a moment. "I had meant to throw you over without a second's delay ; but I'll give you one chance—a last one, and a feeble one—for your life. Not flight," I said, with a scornful laugh, as he made as if to move away. "No man living could pass from this ledge of rock, except by the way we have come. Death hems you on all sides, and your one hope—if hope you like to think it—is to force me to let you pass back. You shall have a last chance to die fighting like a man ; and not shrinking and cowering like a sheep."

But he had no stomach for a contest ; and he threw himself down on the ledge of rock and begged for his life.

"Get up and fight," I cried savagely, for the whining, puling cowardice of the man angered me. "Or I'll spurn you over the brink with my foot."

He made his attack like the snake he was ; and even as he writhed on his knees in the act of begging me to spare his life, he twined his arms about my legs with sudden swiftness and sought to pull me down.

At that last act my fury rose to a frenzy.

I set my feet hard on the rocky ledge, and he could not move me by so much as an inch ; and with a deep, fierce oath and a loud shout I bent down and laid my iron hands on his shrinking, shivering body.

I tore his grasp from my legs and raised him

Elfa

struggling and wrestling and shrieking in his paroxysms of terror. I lifted him high in the air and held him so for a moment over the black abyss yawning at my feet.

"You treacherous viper," I hissed between my clenched teeth. "False, lying, and vile to the last, you shall die like a foul thing of ill-omen." And with that I hurled him away from me, and stooped and listened to the thud of his body as it fell, crushed and mangled and lifeless, hundreds of feet below.

My task was finished.

Elfa and the babe were dead: and the death shriek of the man who had wrought the havoc in our lives and turned them to bitterness was yet ringing in my ears.

There was nothing left for me but to die.

Just one second I paused, while my truant thoughts flew back to the time of my happiness with Elfa; scene after scene passing before me; mocking and saddening me. Then, with my lost love's name on my lips, I sprang from the rock.

I was falling through space as though the abyss were bottomless. Strange lights seemed to flash across my eyes; voices, soft and sweet, sounded in my ears; I turned in my fall and saw Elfa and the little lad, looking with sorrowful yearning at me from the rocky ledge above. Gradually, the voices took their tones as each had often called me in long-ago, dead, happy past.

"Ernst! Ernst!"

"Father! Father!"

Elfa

A great burst of despair came to me at the thought that they were yet alive, and that I had rushed from them to my death.

"Ernst, Ernst," came Elfa's musical voice again.

I strove to stay my fall, choking myself in my frantic efforts. In vain! Turning, I saw them both once again, and at that moment I reached the ground with a thunderous crash—and awoke.

Chapter XXV

"ERNST, Ernst! "

It was Elfa herself calling to me, as she bent over me, resting one hand on my arm, and in the other a lighted candle held close to my face.

"Ernst, Ernst! " came the cry again, when I did not answer. "You have been starting so restlessly in your sleep that though I did not wish to disturb you, I grew frightened and was obliged to waken you."

For the moment I was dazed in bewilderment; at a loss to understand what had happened and could do nothing but stare at her and at the boy who, clad in his white night-robe, had crept to the other side of me and was pulling my hand and calling me.

"Is it you, Elfa? " I asked at length. "Where have you been? Where am I? What has happened? Where is Captain von Unger? "

"Captain von Unger? " she repeated, with a smile; "what has Captain von Unger to do with us? Have you been dreaming of him? He came here to ask if you had returned—just before we came home."

Elfa

"Where have you been and the little lad?" and with that, though I was getting my wits again in order, I put out my hands and touched both her and the boy, as if to satisfy myself that they were not part of the dream.

"I will tell you in a moment. But are you not well, Ernst? You do not look yourself. You are haggard and pale and you have been starting and calling out in your sleep, and speaking in anger as if you were quarrelling."

"Yes. I have had a dream. Only a bad dream. But I am well. But how came you here? You were not here when I returned. I wondered where you were. What time is it?"

"The church in the market-place chimed midnight some little time back. There goes the half-hour—do you hear?"

"How long have you been here?" was my next question.

"We came in about an hour ago; and as you were asleep, I did not wish to disturb you. So I put little laddie here to bed and sat and waited for you to wake. But you frightened him with your starts and cries and groans and then I too began to be afraid. I feared you were ill, dear, so I woke you. You are not angry?" she asked, as she ran her arm round my neck and kissed me; and gazed into my face with loving solicitude. "You gave me a bad fright; but that is nothing, since I know you are not ill. Now, then, little baby boy," she called to the child, "come along to bed. Kiss father first;" and she set him on

Elfa

my knee and watched him and smiled as he clambered up and took my great head in his warm soft chubby arms and kissed me and rubbed his face against mine. Then she gathered him in her arms, and petted and fondled him and laid him in his cot, with a sweet command to go to sleep at once.

After that she turned to me.

"Come into our room, Ernst; I have such strange things to tell you."

I rose and followed, walking as though it were all still a part of the dream.

Elfa waited till I passed her and, glancing back to whisper a mother's crooning message to the boy, closed the door between the rooms and came to my side.

"The first thing to be done, Mountain," she said, using a term I had not heard from her for a long time: a name she had laughingly given me when first we had met: "is for you to make a good supper." And she laughed merrily. "You don't deserve it, but I've got you almost everything that you like. Shall I tell you why?" she chattered, as she moved quickly about the small table on which were set out a number of dishes of game and meat and sweets and fruit and wines. "Because—well, I've two reasons. Both are selfish: and neither of them has any connection with your welfare. The first is that I am quite famished myself; and the second, that I have such confessions to make to you—and I have to scold you too—so that you see I must have you in the best possible humour. There's nothing like supper for

Elfa

that, is there, Mountain ? " I was still lost in perplexity and made no reply, and she came and stood before me, laying both her hands on my shoulders, a wistful look in her eyes as she held up her face for me to kiss her.

" So you see this is just bribery and nothing more," she cried when I had kissed her. " Come along, or else we shall be talking the whole night, for I won't say a word till I've had my supper and seen you eat yours."

But in spite of this determination not to speak, she scarcely ceased to chatter all through the meal ; leading the talk to the old life on the Grossberg, by comparing the supper we were then having with those which she used to prepare for us in the days of our hut life. From that point she ranged over many incidents of the time ; the pleasures we had enjoyed together ; the long walks, the tale telling, the adventures, the ways of my hound Karl, the encounter with the bear and the wolves, and a hundred other matters ; only finishing when we rose from the table.

Then she made me sit in the easiest chair and came and perched herself on my knee and nestled closely and lovingly to me.

" Now, which will you have first—the confessions or the scolding, Mountain ? " she asked, laughingly.

" The scolding," I answered, falling in with her humour, " for it may be that after the confessions your share may be the scolding."

" Very well. Now, I am serious. You frightened

Elfa

me to-day, Ernst, as you have never done since we met on the dear old Grossberg. You were angry with me without cause, and you said things which you once promised, by your love for me, should never pass your lips. If you do that to me again"—here her voice sank almost to a whisper and she trembled—"it will break my heart, husband. My scolding is not the scolding of anger, dear: I could never be angry with you as—as you were with me to-day; it is the scolding of grief." She looked into my face through the tears that had gathered in her eyes, and my heart smote me.

"I am very sorry, Elfa, deeply sorry. But at the time I was beside myself with passion."

"With me, Ernst? What had I done? Why did you tell me to 'search my own conscience' for the reason of your wrath? Those words have been ringing in my ears ever since. Do you think, or did you think, I had done anything to wrong you, husband? My dear, I have not. I could not. I have not a thought or a wish or a dream but for your happiness. You are all in all to my heart, you and our baby lad; and I love him because he is your son. Ah, Ernst, my darling husband, you must not think that I could willingly give you reason for such anger. I love you more than ever, dearest: much more even than when we stood together before the priest at Massen. And the more I grow to love you, so does your harshness cut and sear and wound my heart more deeply. I am not like some others, who can hear

Elfa

hard words and forget them. With me they linger and sting and throb like pain. I will not ask you what cause you thought you had: for that might seem to you as if I doubted myself. But I will ask you, aye, and pray to you, dearest, to promise never again to speak like that to me. Will you promise me? That is all my scolding, dear."

She ceased and, smiling to me through her tears, she craned her neck up to me and kissed me passionately. Then she threw her arms round my neck as though her sorrow had laid hold of her anew, and sobbed bitterly and piteously, with hysterical wiliness.

I held her close to my heart, and let her grief run on unchecked: for the signs of her suppressed emotion had not escaped me, and I judged that her tears would ease and comfort her.

After the stress and tumult of the day's experience and the stern realism of the dream, there was an unspeakable sweetness in the thought that these tears were inspired by her unaltered love for me. The sadness and horror of my dream thoughts had held me in such bondage that the knowledge of her safety, the sweet assurance of her love, and the charm of her presence soothed me now in the sudden change of feelings with thousandfold power. Her tears refreshed me even as a gentle shower of warm sun-mellowed rain is welcomed at eventide and seems to soften and settle all nature, after a fierce rainless thunder tempest has spent its rage in ravaging, convulsing, and shocking the landscape.

No longer did I, no longer could I, harbour a

Elfa

doubting thought of her love and constancy; and all my eagerness was to soothe her and humble myself for my insensate wrath.

As I pressed her, trembling and shivering, to my heart, I was moved to a passion of remorse for the wrong I had done her, and although I dared not say a word of what had caused my anger with her, I murmured promises to such effect as she asked me. In this way I weaned her from her grief and brought back the colour to her pallid cheeks and the light of happiness to her eyes, and she smiled once again with radiant glee.

It was the only "scolding" that ever she gave me: and so sadly was it given and so keenly did it grieve the giver, that it has never slipped from my memory.

She did not get command of herself all at once; but sat some time on my knee, resting her head against my breast and toying with my hand, without speaking. I did not press her. In the revulsion of my feelings, my trust in her had come back in all its former strength. The conviction of her great love for me had forced itself through all my being: and I swore to myself that whatever she might do or say, never again would I harbour even a passing doubt of her.

But she had yet something to tell me, and presently she began again to speak.

"Am I not a cruel scold, Ernst?" she asked, with a catch of sadness yet in her voice, as she bent her head down to kiss my hand, into which she had locked her white, slender, supple fingers.

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.

Elfa

for all this strange confirmation of my former fears, but answered readily:

"I should think him a very lucky fellow to find so clever an ally in what I know must be a right good project."

"That is good. That is how I like you to speak. I love you to trust me so completely as that implies. Oh, I am happy now; so happy: and after such a doleful day. For all is going to happen just as I would have it."

She paused here as if collecting her thoughts; and when she spoke again she prefaced the words with a low silvery laugh, which she was wont to give when she was very pleased.

"Poor Captain von Unger! He has been so terribly in love, Ernst, and has had so many, many doubts and troubles, that when we were at Festen and he heard that I knew Aschern, he seemed to think I must be able to help him, and he could not keep himself from asking me in such a droll way whether I knew—I will tell you whom directly—who lives here at Aschern. And when I said I did, he questioned me so closely and so anxiously, and hung so eagerly on my replies, that I could not help but guess his secret. I had seen the symptoms in another man whose looks and words and acts I had learned to scan and study long ago on a certain great mountain. I suppose you don't know who that could have been, Ernst?"

"I think I could guess, little heart," I murmured.

"Well, I don't know whether every woman feels

Elfa

as pleased as I did, when his secret came tumbling out, with pauses and gaps and stops: for though he was right glad to have some one to tell it to, he was so awkward and man-like in the telling. Of course, I promised him all the help I could give; for I was so happy with my big husband that I thought I should like to try and make those two happy. And then I wanted to have you brought into the conspiracy: but he would not, and protested that, as men in love are shame-faced with men, he could not look you in the face if you knew. And I yielded, knowing it could be but for a few days. I did not like that part of it; yet seeing that the man was good and true and noble and that I loved the girl he loved; and perhaps because I rather liked to have the direction of such a matter, I gave way."

"You loved the girl yourself, Elfa? Why, who——?"

"Ah, that was the reason which weighed with me more than all. Do you remember I once told you of a cousin whom I had loved in my childhood as we grew up together, and how we were at length parted: my cousin, Esther Mähling. It is she whom Captain von Unger loves. They had had a lover's quarrel; and he, poor fellow, was so unhappy that when he asked me to help him, I could not refuse. I wished first to find out whether Esther loved him; and I thought if I were to see her gain—and I longed to see her and let her know what happiness had come to me—I could surprise the secret out of her. But you are looking very grave and thoughtful at all this, Ernst."

Elfa

And well I might: for now I saw how nearly I had made a desperate wreck of both our lives.

"I wish that you had told me before, Elfa," I said, my features relaxing, not without some effort, indeed, into a smile. "But go on, I am interested now, indeed."

"Then I am very sorry I did not. Well, when I came here, I think the having a secret—it was only a simple one after all, Ernst—pleased me. I had to watch your going out and coming in, so that I might find time to seek for my cousin. I found her, but not until to-day; and Captain von Unger, who met me by chance this morning on the market-place, had told me of the house just as you came to us. You went out again soon and I hurried to the house and saw Esther. I had not much time; for we had a thousand greetings to exchange and ten thousand old memories to recall, yet I managed to get from her the little story of her love. And oh, Ernst, you should have seen her when I said I knew her lover's name." And Elfa laughed musically like a child.

"How did she show her love, Elfa?" I asked.

"Why, like a woman. She spoke indifferently of him; said she had heard of a Captain von Unger—for in telling me the story, she had not mentioned his name—in fact, that she had met him: a tall, self-conceited, rather foolish person, was he not? She had heard nothing to his good and much to his discredit. That he was mean, bad-tempered, cold-hearted, and hateful, and so on. I said nothing, but just looked steadily at her. Oh, yes, she had heard that he was intending

Elfa

to marry some one whose name she gave me; but how any one could take an interest in anything that he did or left undone, she could not think. She knew he was a flirt, and so far as she was concerned she would never think of speaking to him again; the bare thought made her indignant; and with that she put her head on my shoulder and sobbed out that her heart was breaking for love of him. And then—well, in less than an hour Captain von Unger was with her again and all the foolish misunderstanding was at an end. Am I not a clever little match-maker?"

"Yes, indeed. And I am glad you have helped them to be happy," I answered; but she little thought how much it had all but cost us, through my insane misreading of her acts.

"I left them as happy as only lovers can be after a storm—married lovers as well, husband," she interposed, nestling to my heart. "And scarcely had I cleared away the little summer cloud from them, than it seemed as if a storm had broken over me and mine. I took little laddie for a run and when I came back, you were here, Ernst, and that occurred for which I have scolded—and forgiven you." Here she kissed me and made me kiss her.

"After you had gone away and I had awoke with our little one crying over me and had sent away the people of the hotel whom I had found standing round with troubled looks of sympathy, I was scared and frightened and did not know

Elfa

what to do. And while I was thus puzzling, Cousin Esther came with Captain von Unger. And as I had helped them in their trouble, I now told them mine and begged Captain von Unger to find out where you had gone and what you meant to do. Then, dearest, he told me everything. He had seen Herr von Gunsthal and heard from him the dreadful scene that had happened between you and that villain, Max Grubel, after his wild, boasting, lying talk in the beer garden. And oh, my darling, such a fear settled upon me and darkened me, as I had never felt in all my life. A double fear; lest by some treachery the man should kill you; or lest you in your passion should slay him. I longed to fly after you and try and stop your meeting with him: but I dared not, after what had passed between us. Then an agony of fear seized me, lest you should be brought home dead; and I knelt and prayed for you as I never prayed for myself—that you might be spared alike from death and from shedding blood.”

She trembled so violently as she said this, that I held her more tightly in my arms than before: but I could not speak, for the labouring emotion that oppressed me.

“Thanks to the good God; my prayers have been heard. Seeing the distress that I was in, Cousin Esther urged me to go with her and wait until the result was known; and as Captain von Unger promised to go out and get the earliest tidings and bring them to me, I consented. He went, and meeting with Herr von Gunsthal brought

Elfa

him that he himself might tell me the news. Ah, Ernst, that is another noble man. I could have loved him first for the news he brought, that you were safe; and next, for the way in which he spoke of you."

"What did he tell you of me?" I asked, somewhat hoarsely, in my anxiety to learn how much she knew of my past.

"Together, they told me everything that had been said by Max Grubel; and how he had retracted it; but they told it in such a way as showed me how highly both thought of you. Yet I knew very much of it—all that was true, indeed—long ago." She said this in a faltering voice as if confessing to a fault.

"You knew this, Elfa?" I cried in my astonishment.

"Yes, dearest. The good priest at Massen told me all the story of your life, that day before our marriage. But he charged me not to let you know that he had told me: and I promised that I would not, unless the knowledge came to me in some other way. He thought, and I thought, too, that you did not wish me to know and would choose your own time to tell me. You are not angry that I did not tell you of my knowledge?"

"No, Elfa, no," I whispered, laying my hand on her head and smoothing her golden hair. "I am glad you know it. I should have told you, but I feared that if you learned how wild and violent a life I had lived, you might fear instead of loving me."

"Then I wish I could have let you know. But we

Elfa

will have no more secrets: they are like the burr in the silk skein, as we say here, and tangle everything they touch. But now, I must hurry to the end. I have not much more to tell. I waited with Cousin Esther, while Captain von Unger came here several times to ask if you had returned; and as the time passed and there was no news of you, a new fear began to spring up—that some mischance had befallen you. But at last the good news arrived, that you were here, and then the little lad and I came at once. And the rest you know, dear. That is all my confession," she added, after pausing a while. "Please, have I absolution?"

"Yes, little wife, given freely with all my heart—though I don't see much to call for it. But there is one question I should like to ask you. What made you so restless in urging me to move from town to town so often, after we had left Rosenthal?"

"I was afraid that you were sometimes wearying for a life more like the active one you had led: and—and troubled by a fear that you might grow weary of me for having caused the change."

"Ah, that I have a mind not to forgive, little sinner. That was the worst fault of all," I answered, gaily enough in manner, yet more amazed than ever that I had so completely misread the child even when showing her love and care for me and my happiness.

I thanked God with all reverence that the cloud on my life, created by myself through my wanton blindness and mistrust, was thus cleared away for ever; and I strained my darling wife to my heart in all the ecstasy of perfect love.

Chapter XXVI

IT was not until years had passed that I fully realised all the good that Elfa wrought in my life.

We made our home at Aschern, and as a chance offered of obtaining just such an estate as we wished I purchased it, and we settled down to a country life of the kind that Elfa planned. It was a quiet, happy home life, with few distractions save those of the chase.

Other children came to bless us: a little Elfa, fair and sweet, like her mother; a tiny thing, all pink and white, with fleecy, flaxen hair and large blue eyes and a laughing face, pitted with roguish dimples: a wee waif of humanity, so unlike myself and so like my darling wife, that I loved her even beyond my boys. From the first, unlike the others, she would cling to me as much as to the mother, and would lie peacefully and calmly in my arms, quiet and still as an unruffled pool in a forest depth, and stare up into my face with earnest, restful love and infinite content; until she held my great heart in her infant crumpling clutch as firmly as in a vice.

Elfa

I was fond of my boys, too: three sturdy lads they were: and proud of the promise of strength they gave and of the fearless, honest, truthful ways in which Elfa led them to find delight.

And we found friends there: staunch, true and kind: such as never in my life before had I possessed.

Von Unger and his bride, Elfa's cousin, and von Gunsthal and his wife, were the chief; and it was through them and their friendship for Elfa, that the rest came. Both these men seemed to feel as if the world were somehow in my debt for much that I had suffered of old; and they set themselves to see the debt paid; putting about the story of my life in a form that led the people round to regard me with such esteem as I had never known.

This esteem was leavened with a sense of gratitude, I think, for having helped to rid the town of the man Grubel, who, as I afterward learnt, had everywhere been held in detestation. After the duel he fled, and we found that he had been living on Elfa's patrimony, which the rascally knave had for years been stealing after having forged the necessary papers. I would have had him punished, but Elfa, who was all forgiveness, was not willing. She was content to let the thief escape and fly where he would.

The change in the life around me was not greater than that in myself; indeed, it was a part of it and helped to make it.

That others should seek my company instead of

Elfa

shunning me ; should give me their esteem, in place of their suspicion ; should pay me the tribute of a deference to my judgment and proffer me in honest truth and sincerity the good right hand of friendship wrought as complete a change in me as was ever wrought of old when the Christ drove out the devil from a man and let in the light of charity and righteousness.

It was a revelation ; showing, as a mirror reflects the true or distorted face of him who gazes in it, that it had been my own distempered fancy that formerly had but seen itself in the eyes of my fellows. I grew to look for goodwill in place of ill : and what I looked for, I found.

It was all to Elfa that I owed it, and owed the peace and happiness that flourished abundantly on every side. Not happiness of the kind that I had known at first on the Grossberg : like to the monotone peace of the desert : but the happiness whose rhythm runs with the harmony of cheering looks and pleasant friends and the silver chimes of the voices of love.

And through it all the lesson of my life ran sweetly and helpfully : like the tracery of sap veins in a broad leaf, blending with its comeliness and adding to its growth : the lesson that Heaven itself had set me when sending a creature of such fragile fibre as Elfa to be my helpmeet, and thus compelling me to seek my happiness in the rigid suppression of all thoughts and words and ways of harshness.

Life became like an easy road through a fair

Elfa

country, where one is lured from one pleasant view to another by gentle paths.

The chase it was that drew us three men closely together; von Gunsthal, von Unger, and myself. They were clever sportsmen, and as keen as ever shouldered gun. Many a hundred splendid tramps we had across mountain dale and forest; knit together in the bond of good fellowship, which binds all true hunters. My life on the Grossberg had given me a knowledge of the craft far beyond theirs, and they acknowledged it ungrudgingly, giving way to my judgment. This better skill of mine, too, drew from them tributes of admiration which they were glad enough to render: just as in other matters I was well pleased to yield to them. Thus we passed from an earlier friendship to the delightful intimacy of close and constant companions.

When the labours of the day's sport were ended and we marched homeward, moved in common by the generous flow of mutual confidence, discussing all the incidents of the day and comparing them with those of former hunts, or passing to some other matters which could claim and hold the interest of all alike, the talk was ever that of tried and genial friendship. And often in the evenings we would all foregather in one of our homes; our wives and we together forming a happy circle, and tell again the never-tiring story of the chase, each ready with a generous tribute to the others' prowess, and all sure of a ready, interested, sympathising audience in our womenfolk.

Elfa

And when we parted, it was always with a keen desire for the morrow's meeting.

Added to all, and sweetest of all to me, were Elfa's loving confidences. Save for the worrying doubts I had once held, there was not a thought we did not now share in common. The great little events of the household; the children's health and ailing and growth; the myriad pleasant cares of the daily life; the infinite variety of doubtfully debated projects—with all their accompaniment of hopes and fears, joys and sorrows: every purpose and incident was penetrated and illumined by the steady, mellow, warming influence of my wife's increasing and all selfless affection.

As the rough and rugged lines of some tall mountain whose lofty peaks in the time of storm, the lightnings have threatened to overthrow while the earthquake has shaken its very base, will loom out softened and subdued in the gold-streaked purple mists of a glorious autumn sunset, so it was with me.

The peace of the afternoon of my life was sweet and calm and soothing. The more so, perhaps, for the storms in which the morning and midday had been passed, since the sunlight which bathed and warmed and brightened it was that of home and love.

THE END.

