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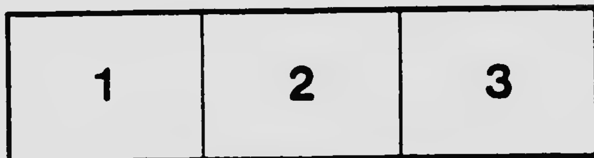

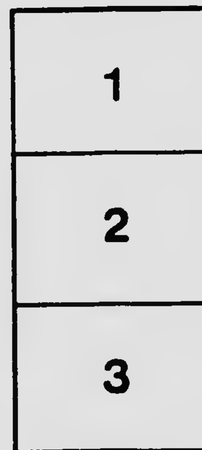

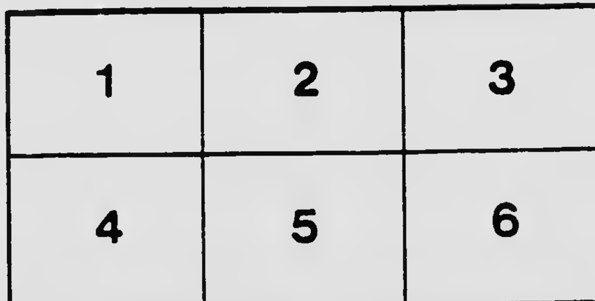

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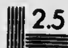

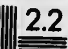
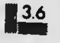
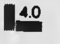
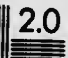

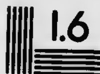

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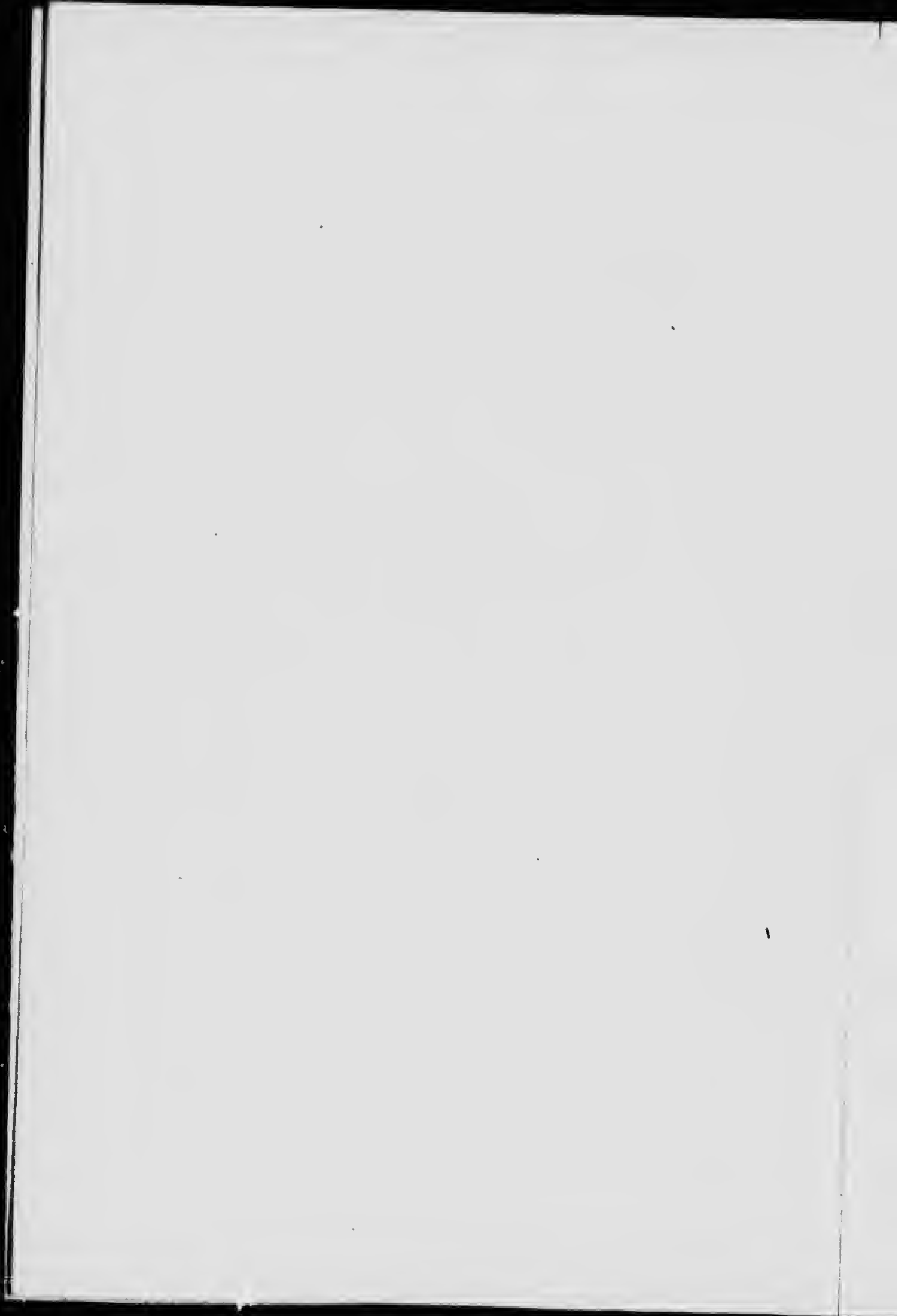
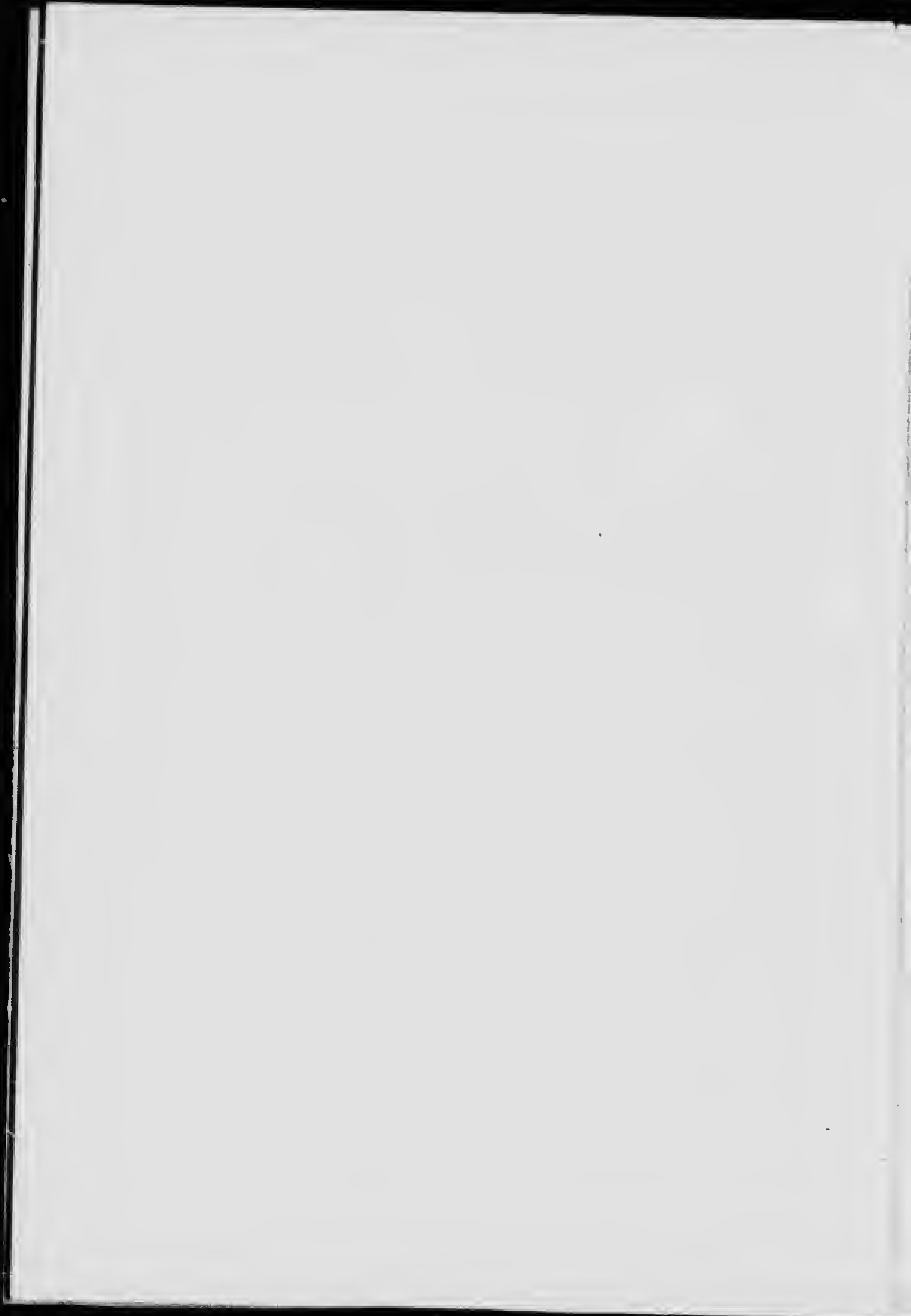


THE
DEPARTMENT STORE

A NOVEL OF TO-DAY



THE DEPARTMENT STORE

A NOVEL OF TO-DAY

BY

MARGARETE BÖHME

TRANSLATED FROM THE GERMAN
By ETHEL COLBURN MAYNE

THOMAS LANGTON
TORONTO
1912

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THE DEPARTMENT STORE

CHAPTER I

At the moment that Rita Nickelsen turned her head aside to die, little Karen began to whimper. The sound was strangely arresting—that small sound of a baby's whimper in this room of death. There was something almost conscious in it, as if the three-weeks-old creature had instinctively felt the loss which it was about to suffer.

Mieze Meier took the little thing from the cradle and carried it out into the studio. It went on crying. She rocked it in her arms, pressed it close to her bosom, and hushed it with gentle words: "Be still, my darling. Don't cry so, sweet. Baby has her Aunt Mieze still. Aunt Mieze loves Baby very, very much." And as if her soft low voice had hypnotised the infant, its crying became quieter and gradually ceased. In a little while it was asleep. Then Thor Nickelsen came into the room.

He looked pale and stricken, yet composed, as one who has long been prepared for a destined blow, and, now that it has fallen, can view the ending of the crisis with a certain relief.

"My poor little Rita!" he said. "She would have been only twenty-two in May. She died of homesickness as much as anything else. I ought not to have taken her away from Rome. In so far, I am responsible for her early death."

"It is well with her," answered Mieze.

The artist sighed a little; then put out his hand to Mieze and clasped hers firmly. "I don't know how I am ever to thank you, Fräulein Mieze, for all that you have done for my poor wife and the little thing—and for me and everyone of us. . . But I hope that the time when I can repay it all is not so far off now. . ."

He stopped, with the instinctive feeling that the moment for a proposal of marriage was not precisely well chosen.

Mieze thought the same; and indeed it was not necessary to speak of it. They had long known that they would be one another's some day, although not until now had they in any way expressed that knowledge.

It could not be attributed to insensibility in Thor Nickelsen that his demeanour betokened a vague, abstract melancholy, rather than a personal sorrow. Rita had been ailing for years, and, moreover, since the birth of her first child had suffered from a grave female complaint; the doctor had warned her husband, from the earliest stages of her second pregnancy, that the confinement would probably end in her death.

In truth, that death was a release for both husband and wife. Their marriage had been unhappy from the first, though it had been for love, and though they had kept house together for two years before in perfect harmony. On Rita's account Thor had at that time almost broken with his best friend, the sculptor Lynegaard, in whose studio he had come to know her. She had been one of the most sought-after models in Rome, and Lynegaard had had a passing fancy for her. Nevertheless, he had kept up his friendship with the girl, and had even consented to be godfather to this last baby.

When the first child was on the way, Thor Nickelsen

had married his lovely young mistress; and from that day unhappiness began all along the line. The official bond seemed to arouse the Philistine in Nickelsen—the Philistine that had always slumbered beneath a surface Bohemianism. It was all at once as though he used a glass wherein every trait in Rita which he had hitherto admired was diminished, while her faults and limitations were magnified to the dimensions of a caricature. Her lack of housewifely virtues, her ignorance, seemed to him insupportable now that they led their daily life together. Thus, when she began to ail, and her charming looks to go, the last vestige of his passion for her went with them; and only pity, and a sense of decency which forbade him to abandon her to her fate, had kept him from leaving her altogether.

In these last months, the relations between them had, so far as appearance went, somewhat improved—at any rate while Mieze Meier lived near them. Mieze was at that time engaged for a "soubrette-turn" at the Winter-Gardens, and had a furnished room on the same floor as theirs. Acquaintance had been made on the stairs; and after that Mieze used to come in every day to set things straight. At first, the Bohemian *ménage* in the small, unkempt studio quarters had called forth her most serious head-shakes and a very critical spirit of observation. But then her warm heart triumphed over her satiric bent. She ached to think of the pair, so radically unsuited to each other, hardly knowing which she pitied the more—the little ailing, unpractical, inefficient wife, or the husband, so evidently and poignantly wretched in the slovenly atmosphere which had long since robbed him of all artistic impulse.

Mieze and he had many interests in common; moreover, there was a genuine affinity between them. The

longer they knew each other, the more closely did they draw together, yet with no injury to Rita's claims. But assuredly they both knew, and each knew that the other knew, that their Platonic relationship would sooner or later develop into one which could claim no moral right to exist in the circumstances. Rita herself had at first regarded the intimacy with some disquietude, but had never plucked up courage to protest, or to break off their intercourse with Mieze. Moreover, she was not insensible to the comfort with which Mieze surrounded them. It was very pleasant to shift the household burden on to another's shoulders, very pleasant to know that the master would always be in a bearable humour—pleasant, also, to have her melancholy pinings dispersed by the pretty, kindly, cheerful girl who nursed and petted her so delightfully. Possibly, too, she was aware of her hopeless state of health, and regarded it all, in the simplicity of her pious little soul, as a dispensation of Heaven and the Blessed Virgin. Very certainly Mieze would not be the worst of successors. During the painful confinement, she had nursed her devotedly, and looked after the infant with exquisite tenderness. Rita's last conscious action was a grateful yet pleading look into Mieze's face, and an expressive squeeze of her hand.

From the moment Mieze closed the dead girl's eyes to that in which Thor Nickelsen alluded to his gratitude and his hopes for the future, all thought of the consequences of this death had been crowded out of Mieze's mind. She had truly cared for little Rita—despite everything. But hers was not a sentimental nature. Things were as they were, and life belonged to the living.

"It is well with her," she said again; "we must all go the same way at last, and God knows what horrors we may have to live through first. And now you must

try to sleep a little. I'll take the baby across to my room for the night."

On the day after Rita was buried, they spoke of the future—calmly, dispassionately, as two reasonable people who had long known that such a conversation must take place at some time; Thor Nickelsen then first alluded to his past life. There was not much to tell. He was a native of Denmark, but had been brought up in Germany. His inheritance had barely been sufficient for his artistic training, and a student's tour or two. Later, Rita had brought him luck; his portraits of her had attracted attention and commissions, and had been sold for considerable sums. But his marriage had robbed him of all joy in his art, and sheer, bitter need had too often housed with them. Now he meant to travel for a year at least, and gradually find himself again. After his return, they would marry.

Mieze was a native of Berlin. As the eldest of nine children, she had had an unhappy girlhood under the iron rule of an implacable stepmother. Immediately after her confirmation she had gone out to service with strangers. In her seventeenth year, a lucky star led her to a childless old pair, actors both, to whom her gay, sweet nature soon made her indispensable. The old man kept a variety theatre, and the old woman—once a renowned "star"—delighted in teaching the pretty, quick, eager maiden a whole repertory of songs and stage tricks, so that Mieze was ere long fit to appear upon the boards. The old people loved her as their own child; and when in a couple of years they died almost simultaneously, she became inheritor of their small savings. She remained on the variety stage, although it did not altogether suit her somewhat comfort-loving and fundamentally serious nature. She had

invented some "quick-change" tricks, and as she looked extremely handsome on the stage and possessed some dozens of gorgeous costumes, she easily got engagements at the more important music-halls. But she never could regard her present calling as anything more than a means to an end; and for really practical reasons. Her repertory was limited, and music-hall managers are ever on the lookout for new and sensational turns. Mieze knew quite well that artists of her kind regarded their appearance on the great stages as a kind of solemn holiday, and mostly pursued their careers in the fair booths of one of the smaller towns. *That* she wished to avoid. Her ideal was a quiet, respectable existence as proprietress of a confectionery, a public-house, or even a shop. For that she strove, for that she saved. She did not wish to marry, or only on certain conditions. She had seen too many unhappy marriages.

And now she was at the very goal of all her strivings. On New Year's Day she had opened with her friend, Lisa Drinkmann (who at that time was manageress of a great drapery shop in the Hausvogleiplatz), an *atelier* for ladies' tailoring—a genuinely first-class affair. She—Mieze—was contributing the money, and Lisa the knowledge and experience. This plan had been brought to consummation at almost the same time that Mieze made the acquaintance of her fellow-lodgers. With that event, the new, the unreckoned-with, entered into Mieze's life in the shape of her sudden and ever-growing love for Thor Nickelsen. That was unchangeable. They were of one piece, as it were; they simply belonged to one another. Whether things went well or ill, they would have to stick together.

They talked calmly and sensibly of their future plans. Mieze wished to keep on with her business even

after their marriage, and Nickelsen had nothing to say against it. Little Karen was meanwhile to be entrusted to Lisa Drinkmann's sister, Frau Ribbeck, who had suffered from nervous depression since the death of her own three little girls. Later on, of course, Mieze would take her into her personal care.

So it was all settled—the road was clear, the future arranged for.

Castles in the air are fragile things. The little future home that seemed so safe was shattered before Thor Nickelsen and Mieze had set foot in it. Fourteen months after Nickelsen's departure, there came the news from Scotland that he had died in a sudden, grievous illness.

Professor Lynegaard, Karen's godfather, undertook the guardianship of the child; and as she was thriving admirably with her foster-parents, he agreed that she should remain with them. He paid expenses; but had scant time to look after the little girl in any other way.

CHAPTER II

The house in which Karen, as the adopted daughter of the shoemaker Ribbeck and his wife Tina (formerly Drinkmann), spent her childhood, stood in a street which branched off from the Alexander-platz towards the centre of the city. It was old, and, despite its three storeys, looked almost hazardously narrow-breasted, squeezed in as it was between towering erections on either side.

This house was in its way a curiosity in our hurrying, changing times, for its various tenants had been there for so many years that they almost looked upon it as their own home. The proprietor, Herr Jakob Kiesewetter, who had lately died at the age of ninety-two, had held conservative views. He lived himself on the third floor, and on every quarter-day, as he stood in the window and looked round at the neighbourhood, he had said to himself with infinite secret pleasure, and a satisfaction which fell little short of the sanctioned "purest joy," that in *his* house the most recent change of tenants had taken place twenty years ago—at the time when, after the death of old Privy-Councillor Bock, that gentleman's son-in-law, Major Knusper, had taken on his apartments. And so they had at any rate remained in the same family.

The Ribbecks had been on the ground floor for more than fifty years. In the middle of the fortieth year, old Peter Ribbeck had there opened his little shoe shop. He "went slow" at first, and cautiously, with only one assistant, to whom after some years there were added a second, and a few apprentices. Peter Ribbeck was

hard-working and efficient; his wife—a fellow-craftsman's daughter—was economical, housewifely, and, like her husband, untiringly industrious. They prospered—not with lightning speed, but slowly and surely. The conditions of the time were favourable to hand-made goods—it was almost an El Dorado. At the end of ten years, Master Ribbeck was working with fourteen journeymen, for by that time the products of his black art had won a certain fame. Peter Ribbeck was indeed the fashionable shoemaker of Berlin in those days.

For about ten years more, the business kept up its reputation; then came a gradual decline. Circumstances altered; hand-made goods could no longer compete with machine-made; the shop was old-fashioned, customers were moving, and buying elsewhere; and when Peter Ribbeck's only son took over the business in 1877, after the quickly succeeding deaths of his parents, he found that the savings had dwindled to a mere pittance, and that the workshop could barely support its inhabitants—and *that* only if the business were reduced to the proportions of a quite small handicraftsman's affair.

Tobias Ribbeck had had a good education at a town-school and confirmation class. For years he had travelled over Europe as a roving journeyman, and as he was keenly observant and had much assimilative power, he had brought home no small quantity of knowledge and experience. He was a plain, unassuming man, and took up his work with no great illusions. He had never looked for a gold-mine in it, but he had hoped that it would serve to keep him and his young wife in decent comfort; and when it became clear that for all his efficiency and strenuous industry, it would barely suffice for mere daily bread, he gradually grew morose and bitter—all the more because he saw that he must de-

generate in the grind of such an existence, and that no change for the better was on the cards. Hand-made goods, once a golden talisman, were now little better than old iron; hand-made goods were at their last gasp—and particularly hand-made footgear. The factories turned out more attractive and better-fitting articles than the cleverest shoemaker could; and they worked cheaply—so cheaply that the most industrious and expeditious craftsman could not compete with them. The customers for "bespoke" grew fewer and fewer—only a few still went, from force of habit, or because they had no confidence in the solidity and comfort of the machine-made wares, to order boots and shoes at the craftsmen's shops. By far the majority of them now bought in the big emporiums, and came to the shoemakers only when they wanted repairs.

And so the business of Tobias Ribbeck decreased from year to year. Many runs of ill-luck, many hard blows from fate, were added to the rest, and made things worse and worse. Of five children, only the youngest boy now survived. Three little girls had died in one week from diphtheria. The mother was broken by this blow; she lay in nervous fever for many weeks, and, when she recovered, went about the house like a living corpse. She would probably have gone melancholy-mad if Master Tobias had not conceived the happy idea of finding a foster-child for her.

He had seen aright. To care for the little motherless creature was the best medicine for her sick soul. Her motherly instincts were awakened, her interest in somebody who needed her revived her interest in life; all that maternal tenderness which the three little girls had seemed to take down into their graves with them, was now lavished on the adopted child; and in this way each unconsciously gave the other of her best—

she to the little orphan, a mother's love, and Karen to her, a compensation for her lost babies.

While the child was growing up, Master Tobias was fighting desperately to keep his head above water. The absolute necessity for a drastic alteration in the conduct of the business (which meant transforming it into a smaller edition of the "Boot-and-Shoe Department" in one of the big shops) became more evident every day. Tobias resisted it; the craftsman's blood in his veins rebelled against the modern system which discredited handiwork, and made the huckster lord of all. Most of his fellow-craftsmen had long since yielded to the inevitable—had thrown lasts and hammers to the winds, and opened shops wherein they sold the products of the factories. It was an easy and a profitable method; one could keep one's hands clean, and exchange the now somewhat degrading title of "shoemaker" for the more high-flown and popular "merchant."

Tobias fought bravely against it all, and said to himself that things must have come to a pretty pass if an industrious, capable, intelligent craftsman could not get a living for himself and his family. . . But the day came when he had to lay down his arms. There were only two courses open to him: either to shut up shop altogether, or improve his custom by dealing in the machine-made goods. For the sake of wife and children, he chose the latter. But even so the shop did not do very dazzlingly.

The house stood some feet back from the pavement, hemmed in right and left by arrogant, many-storeyed buildings. It cowered between the two wings of the Müllenmeister Emporium like a small shy huddled man behind the stuck-out elbows of two giants; it could scarcely, indeed, be seen, and people often passed the house day after day without noticing Ribbeck's shop at all.

And besides, there was a positive rash of shoe shops everywhere. Many foreign factories established their own branches in Berlin; American footgear was flooding the market, and, worst of all, the emporiums were beginning to compete with the smaller shops. There was the Müllenmeister establishment next door, for instance, which had had a "Boot-and-Shoe Department" for some years now, and was doing remarkably well with it.

Tobias had known the proprietor intimately from his childhood up, and they still got on well together. Ribbeck recognised the many charming personal qualities of his friend, and genuinely admired his eminent organising capacity and his very remarkable intelligence as a business man—but when he gazed from the street at the great red-brick buildings, and watched the never-ceasing daily crowds that flowed in and out of their portals, while his own shop door-bell scarcely sounded once in a morning, he could not stem the tide of bitter anger in his soul.

This emotion was caused by no petty personal rancour; it was rather directed against an impersonal Something—and chiefly against the brutal sovereignty of capital, which, like some great, silent, inexorable machine, was draining the life from all branches of industry, and using it for the exclusive advantage of its possessor.

Forty years before, old Israel Manassa had had a little draper's shop on the ground floor of the corner house. Peter Ribbeck and he had been good friends; and the two businesses had kept pace with one another at first. But while Peter Ribbeck, in his good days, had put all his cash profits in his savings box, Israel Manassa had used his to buy the house in which he was a tenant, and had enlarged his business by adding a branch for haberdashery and linen goods. Moreover, Manassa had a son, his adored Joshua.

This boy, unlike Peter Ribbeck's one healthy, intelligent youngster, had been backward not only in body, but apparently in mind as well. In the third year of his course at the town school, the headmaster had advised Manassa to build no hopes upon the intellectual development of his obviously ungifted offspring.

Manassa was in despair. His Joshua, his pride, his treasure, his sole heir. . . "obviously ungifted". . . It was enough to make a man hang himself. Tearfully he told his friend Peter Ribbeck of his trouble. Peter shook his head, and did what he could to console.

"Why, Manassa, man, the French have a good saying; I think it runs, *Qui vivra verra.* Your learned headmasters of the high-schools may have supped up knowledge by the tablespoonful, but they're often, for all their book-learning, poor judges of men, and stupider in practical matters than one of my apprentices. As far as I make out your Joshua, he'll go far. . . Take care he doesn't beat the whole crew of schoolmasters, from here to the Potsdamer-platz."

And Peter Ribbeck, with his simple, sound discernment, turned out to be a true prophet.

Joshua left school at sixteen, spent two years at his father's business, and went abroad, after having been declared unfit for military service. First he visited London, then Paris. In both cities he studied his work at the best-known establishments. He was employed for two years at the Louvre; and thanks partly to interest, but more to his efficiency and aptitude, he succeeded, in that relatively short time, in learning all the details of the complex undertaking. Stirred by its magnitude, he weighed the possibility of attempting a similar enterprise in Berlin. From the little timid, simple boy, to whom the most elementary rules of Latin grammar had remained a sealed book, there emerged,

in the foreign country, a far-seeing, cautious, clever business man, whose ideas were considerably in advance of his time.

When he returned, his father handed over the business to him and retired into private life. As a preliminary act of power, the new master gave notice to the various lodgers in the house, and used all the space for the business. On the ground floor he set up a fifty-pfennig [1] bazaar next door to the drapery department; the linen goods and haberdashery were on the first floor, and in the second, he opened a new department for ready-made clothes for both sexes. On the third floor he established (besides the warerooms) an umbrella factory or rather an umbrella-mounting workshop. The material, and a particular kind of handle—of silvered Britannia metal, which looked exactly like good oxidised silver—were sent ready from the factory; the rest was made up from the parts of old umbrellas, which Joshua bought in enormous quantities from the big second-hand dealers. Fit for use, such an "elegant, solid, half-silk umbrella with uncommon crook-handle" cost one mark [1] in the bazaar.

Old Israel did, it is true, shake his head over the new methods of making money promulgated by his ingenious son.

"Joshua, my boy, you're making a mistake," he said; "men can only do what they can, and no man can exist without getting a profit. Do you want to make a present of house and home along with your umbrellas?"

Joshua laughed. "Not I, Dad. But we must always pretend that we're making a present of *something*. . ." And then he showed the old man that, beyond yea or

[1] A pfennig is one hundredth of a mark. A mark is the unit of German currency and is worth about twenty-four cents.

nay, he was making, not a mistake, but about eight and a third pfennigs on each umbrella.

The "elegant, solid" umbrellas, at a mark each, made a monster advertisement for the firm. From Berlin and its suburbs—nay, from the very farthest outposts of the capital—people flocked to secure a "Manassa-umbrella." In the early days the crowd was sometimes so great that the shop had to be shut; and as the umbrellas looked really good and were solidly made, it was no one day's marvel. The firm of Joshua Manassa became renowned in the twinkling of an eye; and of the thousand customers who came from Heaven knows where, few left the shop without adding another purchase to the umbrella. It was an opportunity for inspecting the many cheap novelties which Manassa displayed in his bazaar, and which were to be had in no other house in Berlin; and people convinced themselves of his tasteful selection and the genuineness of his wares. The unassuming, pleasant manner of the proprietor, who was always present in person, joined to the general politeness and absence of all importunity, had a magnetic and decisive effect. Almost every customer left the shop with the persuasion of having been admirably served, and the intention of revisiting the attractive place as soon as possible.

When all the umbrellas had been "cleared," Joshua opened a coffee-tasting room for his customers. A great import firm in Hamburg let him have the coffee almost gratis, for the tasting room was connected with a retail depôt of the firm. Thus Manassa's risk was not very enormous when he gave customers a cup of coffee and a dainty little cake for fifteen pfennigs. But in Berlin, where nothing of the sort had ever been offered before, this "present" made another sensation among his clientèle. As hitherto for the umbrellas, so now they flocked for the cheap coffee. The ladies of the

neighbourhood arranged to "meet at Manassa's," and got through their shopping at the same place. . . Joshua knew very well what he was about when he took up anything. Big ideas, wondrous plans for the future, were fermenting in his brain.

After some years, he married the only daughter of the piano manufacturer, Müllenmeister. Six months later, he underwent Christian baptism, and obtained official permission to bear his wife's maiden name. The too obviously Semitic "Manassa" impeded his projects. The odium of overcharging and imposture which attaches to the Jewish bazaars in the estimation of the public, was not to be suffered to hinder the development of his firm.

Immediately after his baptism the house was styled "Joshua Manassa: Proprietor, J. Müllenmeister, late Manassa"; finally, the "Manassa" was dropped altogether. In this way the public was taught to accustom itself to the new firm; and in twenty years, scarcely anyone remembered that Müllenmeister's had once been Manassa's. It was generally looked upon as a "Christian" business. And it grew and grew--grew into a monster, and went on growing, ceaselessly, pauselessly. . . Long since had Manassa Müllenmeister acquired two neighbouring sites on the Alexander-platz; then he bought the two on each side of the Kiesewetter house—itself unobtainable through the obstinacy of its owner. These last two houses were connected with the other Müllenmeister sites by a building at the back. The mighty erection was like a bee hive with its countless cells, every separate one of which contained its special branch of industry under the control of a selected leader.

Like every prosperous undertaking, the Müllenmeister emporium had, in the first days of its rapid development, to contend with animosities, rancours, and sus-

picions of every kind; but as customers were, beyond question, promptly, honestly, and excellently served, and as nobody could point to any sort of underhand practices on the part of the fortunate proprietor, these attacks hung fire, without any action whatever on Müllenmeister's side.

The majority of the Berlin folk were irresolute enough in judging the new enterprise. It was *too* new for them; the rapid increase of these great bazaars, which were opening now all over the city, puzzled and disconcerted them; they knew not what might come of it. . . Would this new kind of speculation, this union of so many special branches of industry under one roof and one proprietor, prove advantageous or injurious to the public? Was it a blessing or a curse?

The progressives, and those not directly attacked, said: A blessing. "Advantage to the consumer. . . accustoming the trades to firm, fixed prices. . . accustoming the public to ready-money payments. . . sound development of the retail trade from the petty wasteful methods of the small capitalist to judicious concentration."

But the small tradesman and craftsman said: A curse. "Ruin of the middle classes; downfall of the crafts; usurious profit of the capitalist at the expense of the great mass of the people."

The latter view was Tobias Ribbeck's, though he was too fair-minded utterly to condemn the emergence of the "big shop." Just as the great Müllenmeister buildings overshadowed the little Kiesewetter house, did modern methods overshadow old opinions and customs. Joshua, the little "obviously ungifted" Jewish boy of former days, was the owner of a huge emporium, which made its millions yearly; he had received several decorations, and was the imperative authority in the domain of the great retail business world—was indeed in his

way a sovereign, reigning unrestrictedly over his subjects in Central, North, and East Berlin. Meanwhile, Tobias Ribbeck squatted in the same shop where his father had squatted fifty years before; his hair had grown grey in the toilsome struggle for a bare livelihood, and on his threshhold squatted, too, mere naked destitution.

Once Joshua had offered him a post as manager of the boot-and-shoe department; but Master Ribbeck had so curtly declined that the old friendship between them had nearly died the death.

"I am I!" said Tobias, vehemently, when his wife made him some gentle reproach for his refusal. "I am the Master-Shoemaker, Tobias Ribbeck. Let anyone who wants to, go and be Manassa's clerk. *I* will remain my own master."

And there it rested.

CHAPTER III

Karen was nearly fourteen when a new and heavy anxiety began to hang over the monotonous workaday life of the Ribbecks.

Müllenmeister was in negotiation with old Kiesewetter's heirs about the sale of the house, and it was not to be supposed that distant relatives would hold the same conservative opinions as that eccentric old gentleman. Müllenmeister needed the house; it stood in his way, hindering the enlargement of his premises in that direction, and dividing them in half. . . There was as little doubt that he would move heaven and earth to get the house, as, on the other hand, that the heirs would use their advantage, and obtain an exorbitant price. Ribbeck's lease would run out in a year; clearly there would be no question of a renewal.

Among old Kiesewetter's admirable principles had been that of not raising his rents against his tenants. Tobias paid the same relatively absurd sum that his father had paid sixty years before him. To that good fortune—his low rent—he owed it that, despite the miserable falling-off in the business, he could still keep his head above water. Landlords in the neighboring streets demanded unthinkable rents for their shops; and in this region, where the Müllenmeister predominance "squeezed" prices, there were, moreover, so many shoe shops that they overlapped one another like the flakes of an onion. Thus, the very existence of the little Ribbeck was bound up with the old house.

"When all the cords are broken, I'll let the shop go to the devil, and set up, in true modern fashion, a

'soling and heeling establishment' in a cellar,'' said the master in an access of bitterness; but in reality, he still nourished at the bottom of his soul a faint hope of rehabilitation. As long as the boy needed him, he must keep his end up.

For Tom was dazzlingly gifted. His teachers had always deplored that it was impossible to send him to one of the great art schools. He would have liked to go in for the higher architectural career; but as that could not be, he strove to obtain his ambitious goal by way of practical building. His three years of apprenticeship with a master mason passed quickly. Then he went, as a designer on probation, to one of the great architectural offices. His master was extremely pleased with him, and prophesied an exceptional future.

"People will talk of your son one of these days, Ribbeck," he said; "you wait and see if an efficient master mason, given his chance, can't put a hundred of your academic architects in his pocket."

At such speeches, Ribbeck smiled incredulously and bitterly. He had long lost all faith in a victory for the crafts. But he was glad that Tom adapted himself so easily, tranquilly, and confidently to the unalterable. He derived from his father in that. Not to strive for what one cannot attain, to yield to the inevitable, while maintaining a consciousness of one's value: these had been Tobias Ribbeck's guiding principles through life.

In this atmosphere of diligent toil and quiet self-confidence, of troubles and cares, of steady hope and tranquil renunciation, had the orphan artist-child blossomed into a slim, pretty maiden. In her babyhood, Karen had been a delicate plant, but with her fifth year her health began to mend, and after an attack of scarlet-fever in her sixth, she had not been for an hour seriously ill. From her mother came her slender body and her

long blue-black hair, from her father, the dark blue eyes and delicate "Northern" complexion.

As Karen's fourteenth birthday fell on a week-day, it was celebrated on the following Sunday. Friends and near neighbours came to coffee in the afternoon: Lisa Drinkmann, Frau Ribbeck's sister, and her partner, Mieze Meier; a cousin of Ribbeck's, the fringe-maker Ignaz Schiller and his wife and children, an eighteen-yeared son and fifteen-yeared daughter; and a brother-in-law of Schiller's, the recently widowed military master tailor, Hugo Selmar.

Mieze Meier had altered little in the fourteen years. She was somewhat stouter, and there were tiny wrinkles about her temples and mouth; but when she laughed—and she still laughed often—these disappeared, and she looked as young and pretty as ever. In her exuberant, lively, warm-hearted charm, she was the direct opposite to the grim, strong-featured, formal Lisa. It was difficult to understand what had drawn these fundamentally different women together, and how they could live in the same house without continual friction. Mieze, indeed, had had at first to keep a tight hand over herself to avoid knocking up against the corners and angles of Lisa's old-maidish acerbity, but gradually she grew accustomed, and there had been no division between them in all these years except harmless little differences of opinion. Both women were closely and affectionately intimate with the Ribbeck household. Mieze felt peculiarly at home with the simple, kindly folk. Little Karen, whom since Nickelsen's death she regarded as her special property, had been the link with Tina Ribbeck, and in the course of time they became like fond sisters.

It was always cosy at the Ribbecks.

A tiny fire in the stove suggested a feeling of pleasant warmth. On the round table gleamed the smooth

damask, the gold-rimmed tea-service, and the silver which belonged to the flowering-time of the House of Ribbeck. The laughter and chatter of the young people dispersed any inaugurative stiffness. A great joke was Trudchen Schiller's peculiar knack of always finding the best cake in the plate with her dainty little white fingers.

That was Trude's talent—ever and everywhere to pick out the best. Papa Schiller, who was desperately proud of his pretty children, quizzed his daughter, and gave instances of her efficiency in the matter. Even as a tiny child, she had always managed to snap up the daintiest titbits. . . "Didn't you, Trude-mouse?" And Trude laughed and enjoyed her vanilla sandwich infectiously—she had fished it out of the heap of puffs and sugared cakes.

She gave no promise of classic beauty; but every separate trait, from the faintly tinted mouth with its snow-white row of teeth, the clear rose-hued skin, and the thick golden-red hair that lay in heavy clusters round her somewhat narrow white forehead, to the dainty little feet and the graceful figure, was of such soft sweetness, such velvet bloom, that despite her irregular features it was impossible to call her anything but a ravishing little being.

"Well, I hope you'll show your cleverness later on in other things, and always pick the plums out of the dough of life," said Mieze. "What do you wish for, Trude, when you're grown up?"

"Riches and happiness," said Trude, laconically.

"Riches and happiness are inseparable, almost identical, for the younger generation," observed Ribbeck. "It seems to me we were greater idealists in my young days. For girls, happiness always meant a good husband and a happy marriage; and young men, when they spoke of it, were thinking of the great things they were

going to do one day. The detestable worship of money had not then infected all ages and classes."

"Gently, gently, my friend." And Mieze sighed. "Happiness without money is like a good set of teeth, of which one is hollow. Once *that* brute begins to make a fuss, you forget the thirty-one sound teeth, and feel only the bad one."

"Yes, without money a man is a cipher," said Tina, and shrugged as if she were cold under her shawl.

"Money *is* happiness," cried Hugo Selmar. "For money you can get everything that means joy: a fine house, splendid carpets, pictures,—everything! And if you have all that, what more do you want? Am I not right?"

"Everyone has his own idea of bliss," laughed Mieze. They all knew Selmar's passion for beautiful things. His four-roomed abode in the Bülow-strasse was his hobby. Whenever he needed any little thing for his house, he would wander for weeks from one shop to another, peering and selecting, and these walks were quite as great a treat to him as a visit to a theatre or restaurant was to another. His flourishing business brought him in a good income, and his one care, at this time, was the thought that his things might be neglected by the servants. For that reason alone he dallied with the idea of marrying again. Already he had his eye on Mieze Meier; she pleased him well, but he was not quite certain if she possessed the needful qualities for a really intelligent supervision of his treasures.

The young people had left the table, and gone into the shop. Silence reigned awhile in the little living-room. The cigar smoke rose slowly to the ceiling, and thickened the overcast light of a November day into a grey twilight. All at once there fell sadness, depression, upon the circle. The word "money" had set almost everybody out of tune. With the exception of

Selmar, not one but had his well-filled wallet of trouble on his back, which now, in the warm twilight, he opened and spread out for the rest. Ignaz Schiller began. In ordinary life he had a strong tendency to boasting, was fond of depreciating the factories, and always declared, when he ran short of money, that it was merely a case of "temporary inconvenience." His business, which he had inherited from his parents, had, like others, had its time of glory; but the shop had long been given up, the "manufactory" was a workshop of eight or ten hands, and the whole undertaking, which for years had been limited to the fabrication of particular articles, principally buttons and trimmings, was really little more than a better "home industry." To-day Schiller had laid aside his slight swagger. With laborious sarcasm, he now depicted the many "slaughter-houses" he had visited a few days earlier, in search of three-hundred marks which he had needed to cover a bill of exchange. He had run from Pontius to Pilate, till at last his urgent inexorable need had driven him to get the money from a professional lender at seven per cent., and thirty marks commission.

A short, heavy pause ensued.

"I wouldn't have done that," said Ribbeck. "I'd have called a meeting of creditors sooner. He needs a long spoon that sups with the devil."

"Go bankrupt? What are you talking about, man?" cried the enraged Schiller. "Thank God, we're a long way off that. All our hands are full up with work. Why, only Wednesday, there came an enormous order from Müllenmeister. I shall have to engage more hands, else we shan't be up to time."

"Couldn't Müllenmeister have advanced you the three hundred?"

"He never does that sort of thing. The goods are to be paid for on the nail, at a discount of only five per

cent. That's big business—no private house could do it."

"But *what* does he pay you? Is he 'big' in that, too?"

"Indeed he's not!" cried Frau Schiller. "If my father-in-law that's gone had known the starvation prices we have to work for nowadays—" She stopped in the middle of her sentence; her husband made her a sign.

"Circumstances alter cases, and none of us can prevent them, Lisbeth. . ."

"Some of us can," said Ribbeck. "I remember well how you used to talk when Müllenmeister began to sell buttons and trimmings in his 'lace department,' cheaper than *you* could deliver them wholesale to the private shops. Müllenmeister, with his deadly competition, has slaughtered trade in the small establishments. It is not 'circumstances,' but the accursed squeezing of prices by the big houses that is lying like an iron weight on the home industries. If I'd been in your place, I wouldn't have harnessed myself to Müllenmeister's apple-cart, and let him dictate prices to me."

"Dear Tobias, I have made my calculations. We do not work for nothing. All the manufacturers have had to make certain concessions. Remember the enormous orders, and the ready-money payments. Look at all we used to lose upon the small ledger accounts!"

"Yes; ready money talks," broke in Mieze. "I can tell my little tale about credit. We have customers who are three thousand marks deep in our books. And the grander the ladies are, the more leisurely about paying! If one gives them the least little note of warning, they are highly offended, and as often as not one loses their custom. That *we* have to settle our own accounts, and that the workmen must be paid in ready money every Saturday night, never seems to occur to them. A little

jobbing dressmaker with a middle-class clientèle, who 'takes ladies' own materials,' and presents her receipted bill on delivery, is far better off than we are. Luckily there are some thoughtful and regular ones among our ladies. Four weeks ago, when the Paris traveller's account fell due, if a customer had not helped me out with two thousand marks, I, too, should have had to wend my way to the Jews."

"Müllenmeister won't let anyone owe him a red cent," said Ribbeck, "and I think it's a sound principle. Why can't we small business people imitate the warehouses in that? If we were unanimous about it . . . if ready-money payment was universally exacted—"

"The public wouldn't stand it," murmured Schiller.

"They stand it from the big houses."

"Because the big houses have the upper hand of them. They can sell cheap, because of their enormous turn-over and the capital behind them; they have a hundred and one methods of attracting customers, business flows in of itself—it all hangs together. Since Felix has been at Müllenmeister's, I have gained some insight into the big ways of doing business. I tell you *no* private house can compete with them—not if it turned itself upside down to do it."

"Then we may all shut up shop to-morrow. But things are not so bad as that yet awhile. If we small men would only stick together in the fight against the big enemy! And the most important tactics are, not to die of sheer admiration for the other side's 'strength' and 'bigness.' If I'd been you, I shouldn't have let Felix go over to Müllenmeister. What's the career of a young man in those houses? First, learner; then, counter hand; then; salesman; later, when all is done, head of a department."

"And with three or four hundred marks' salary a

month. As a buyer, he may make over ten thousand; and why shouldn't a young, clever, hard-working man attain to a leading position in the house, as Rosen, the manager, has at Müllenmeister's?"

"Granted—but one thing he'll never attain, and that's real independence. Possibly the younger generation has different notions—we live in an age of uniforms—but in our young days there was no higher or finer ideal for a youth than one day to be his own master."

Schiller shrugged. "Don't talk to me of the independence of the small tradesman!"

"That's true," cried Mieze. "I used to think I should be a marvel of independence as the proprietress of a business. Oh, ye gods! When one has to fawn and flatter any goose that happens to be a fine lady, ordering herself a new frock!"

"Yes; times have changed, and a certainty is something to be thankful for," said Tina, drawing her chair a little nearer to the stove. She was always cold. The suffering of the past consumed her, as well as the anxieties of the present. On those days, when, in the narrow room where now the little party was gathered round the coffee[illegible], there had stood close together three babies' coffins, [illegible]nething in her had been broken and had never been mended again. With her sunken cheeks, dark-rimmed eyes, and sallow complexion, she looked like a consumptive in the last stages of the disease. But she had looked like that for years, and as no one had ever seen her any different, her aspect passed unobserved.

Another silence fell. Lisa had seated herself near the window with her needlework, and Selmar stood near and observed her. The longer he considered the tall spinster with her whitening hair and stern features, the more lively was his conviction that his beloved "things" would be better cared for by those bony, prim, deliber-

ate hands than by the manicured fingers of the rapid, impetuous, elegant Mieze. . .

In the silence, there sounded the shrill summons of the house door-bell.

Ribbeck went himself to open the door. The dark entrance was lit by an oil lamp on the wall. Its reddish light fell in a glimmering streak upon the delicate-featured face, with pointed, greyish beard, of an elderly man, behind whom two graceful girls emerged, with flowers and daintily tied parcels in their hands.

"Why, Müllenmeister, in your own dazzling person! How comes this glory into my house?" blurted out Ribbeck, as he loosened the door-chain.

"How, indeed? And no less than three of us are invading you this blessed Sabbath," said the great man, coming in. "This is my daughter Mimi, and that is my niece, Ella von Reeren. We bring messages and greetings from Professor Lynegaard. He wanted the girls to make friends with his ward, your little foster-daughter. And as *I* want to talk with you about something, I took it on myself to bring the young people."

"Ah, indeed!" murmured Ribbeck. . . At this moment Tina came out and took the girls into the living-room and Müllenmeister and Tobias went into the so-called counting-house behind the shop, a narrow, windowless room, wherein, besides the foot measures on the walls and a standing-desk, there was nothing but a table and two chairs.

Ribbeck lit the lamp. His hands were trembling, for he guessed what brought the other there.

"Your little foster-daughter has been with you a long time now," began Müllenmeister, drawing off his gloves.

Ribbeck turned hastily. "Well?" he said.

"Professor Lynegaard became engaged to my sister-in-law, Frau von Reeren, a few days ago, and I understand that he wishes his ward to join his future house-

hold. By-the-bye, it's a secret as yet. The engagement won't be announced for a day or two."

After five years of widowhood, Müllenmeister had, two years ago, married for the second time—on this occasion, a very fashionable girl.

Master Tobias did not answer quickly. He was not prepared for this last blow from destiny—for Karen's departure would be nothing less than a blow. She was the sunshine of the house, that irradiated everyone in it. How would Tina survive the separation from her darling?

Müllenmeister interpreted Ribbeck's visible emotion quite differently.

"Yes, yes, Tobias—and now for another piece of news, my real reason for coming. Yesterday the arrangements for the sale cf the house were completed between the heirs and myself."

"I expected that," said Ribbeck.

"I take over the house forthwith. If I succeed in coming to an agreement with the tenants, as I hope will be the case, we should begin demolition in January, so as to get the roof on the new building as soon as possible. Your lease runs to next autumn. We should, of course, compensate you in every way, if you were so obliging as to go by the first of January or even sooner."

"I shall not be able to be so obliging, Joshua. Nor would it be easy to compensate me for turning me and my business, from one day to another, into the street."

"You could include the injury to the business in your claim, and moreover you can make it a condition that we find you another site by the agreed time. All that's quite simple, when there's good-will on both sides."

"Yes. All roads lead to Rome—for Müllenmeisters."

Joshua leaned his head back a little. The old, familiar surroundings made him soft-hearted, even sentimental. He was susceptible to such influences. All

sorts of pleasant memories of childhood awoke—sweet, happy images. . . He had been like Ribbeck's own son. He thought of the evenings in the living-room, when the stove purred and the kettle sang. He had never since tasted anything so good as the roast potatoes and "sops-in-the-pan" that Mother Ribbeck used to give him. Here, in this narrow little room, had he and Tobias made plans for the future. . . Ah, they were happy times!

Nothing was altered here. Time, that streamed by ceaselessly outside, tearing down the bulwarks of the past, battering at the old ways of thinking, caressing the new, seemed to have left no trace of its passage here. All was the same.

"All like the old days. . ." Unconsciously he had thought aloud, and Ribbeck perceived an unintended double meaning in his words.

"Aye; we haven't moved on with you. Everything is as it was when we were young."

"Yes, because you're always running your angular, protesting old skull against the wall," said Müllenmeister. "You *will* not understand that the times don't wait for men—men must go on with them. And not only go on, but swim—ever upwards, upwards, with the current. He who cannot will be stranded. All reactionaries are like corpses floating on the stream of time."

"Fancies!" said Ribbeck, shrugging.

"No; facts. Nothing is so foolish as to take one's stand on an opinion that circumstances have made untenable. Because you have learnt a craft and inherited a business from your father, you regard it as a point of honour to stick to your last, and keep your shop open. Well, that may be all very fine as a pious opinion, but it isn't wise, and it isn't profitable. You stand in your own light, and your family's, Tobias. You and your like are forever talking about the golden days of handwork. You shake your head, but it must have occurred

to you by this time that the golden days of hand-work are gone by. They were probably at their goldenest in the time of Hans Sachs! But a good deal of water has run under the bridge since then. To-day there is not a single craft, or private business, or 'special line,' that holds forth any prospect of unlimited development; and yet our day is the day of precisely that—unlimited possibilities of development. Only a business which has an open field on every side, enabling it to spread and embrace fresh issues, has any chance of maintaining itself in the future."

"For unlimited possibilities, unlimited means are necessary," said Ribbeck. "Anyone who is without *them*, may go and bury himself. You have spoken the truth."

"And do you think that 'unlimited means' fell into my mouth like a ripe plum?" asked Müllenmeister, laying his tall hat, which till now he had held in his hand, upon the desk beside him. "I can assure you I had my headaches and my sleepless nights before I got so far. Golden apples don't rain down out of the air, my boy. When we were planning the big new wing, I often didn't know whether I was standing on my head or my heels, or possibly floating in the air. That was a touch-and-go affair!"

"But it came off."

"Yes, because the X—— Bank backed me up with two millions credit."

"The banks give nothing without adequate security."

"The bank's security consisted in my personality, in my known successes, and their confidence in the future plans which I detailed to them. They were not mistaken, either. They could not have done anything better with their capital. To-day I enjoy unlimited credit, which, for that matter, I hardly ever use."

Ribbeck nodded. He was thinking of his cousin Schiller, who for three hundred marks had had to tramp the

boots off his feet, though he was good for much more than that small sum. How did it happen that a man like Müllenmeister could bring everything off, that the banks flung their millions at his feet, that whatever he touched was a success, and a huge success—while a poor devil of an honest small tradesman could barely get along, and frequently had to do *that* sideways, as it were? . . .

"When we have our new big wing up, I'm thinking of enlarging considerably our boot-and-shoe department," began Müllenmeister, after a little pause; "and I wanted to suggest to you once more that you should undertake the management. We need an efficient, reliable man for that responsible position, and I think you would be satisfied with what we could offer you. . . No; let me finish at any rate. . . You are always boasting of your independence, which, in your view, you would lose with us. But it isn't so at all. You'd be, in reality, quite as independent with us as in your own business. You would direct, and give all orders for purchases; you could hector to your heart's content in your own department; the only difference to you would be that on the first of every month you would pocket your three hundred marks for your services alone, to say nothing of your commissions, and that you could sleep sound at night with no worry about rent, or accounts with the factories, or anything else."

"Hm! It's not quite like that. Supposing I was not up to your work? Supposing we fell out? You know, Tobias Ribbeck has his own ways of thinking. . . What then? I should be kicked out."

Joshua shook his head. "Don't talk so perversely, Tobias. We've known one another now for fifty years, and have been good friends all the time, haven't we?"

"No," said Ribbeck. "Six-and-forty years ago, Joshua Manassa and I were good friends. But Herr

Joshua Müllenmeister and the shoemaker Ribbeck have nothing in common. Within a reckonable space of time, your sons will take over your business. Who is to guarantee that they won't clear out all the 'dead stock,' beginning with the staff? And in that case?"

Joshua stiffened a little. "Be assured that Joshua Müllenmeister is as decent a chap as your old schoolfellow Manassa. If you can suppose that I would now cause you to give up your business, and then leave you, or let you be left, in the lurch—well, if *those* are the kind of suspicions you have of me, we need say no more."

"I didn't mean it quite like that, Joshua. But I am not fit for such a post, really I'm not. I dare say it's troublesome of me, stupid, short-sighted, a kind of unreasonable obstinacy—but I *cannot.* I can't see myself standing about in a black coat as a kind of glorified clerk. I don't want to have a master over me in my old age. And above all, I don't want to pile my arms to *you,* Joshua Müllenmeister. God knows, it's not envy; I don't grudge you your millions, but. . . A man is human. And I freely confess that I *have* a declared and utter hatred for the circumstances that have made you great. These big emporiums are a sort of vampires, it's a system of plunder; you fall upon us small tradesmen and garrote us, until we turn blue and strangle."

Müllenmeister shook his head again. "If only one could rid people of that fixed idea that the emporiums can really harm them in any way! *You,* with your intelligence, your knowledge, ought to have had a wider sphere long ago. I absolutely deplore the years you've frittered away here. I mean well to you, Tobias."

"To speak frankly, *I* think that if you had really meant so well by me you would not have been quite so ready to compete with me, hand-over-hand. And in such a way—so that you slay me hopelessly! It's not the sort of thing I expect, or ever knew before, from an

old friend. As if your house hadn't a thousand and one things to sell, but you must add a boot-and-shoe department to all the rest! Was *that* necessary?"

"Yes, it was necessary; it stood for the completion of our business. A big shop without footgear to sell is like a body without toes or fingers. Really, Tobias, you would do well to consider my offer."

Ribbeck shook his head. "A man is as he is. I cannot change. You overrate me. I am the born cobbler. Even the business side of *that* is beyond me. Do you know that this very minute, while we're talking together, I am wondering if I shan't join old Siebenschläfer on the bench, and set to again with my hammer and waxed end? Who knows if I shan't come to that!"

Müllenmeister was silent for a while. "Well, at any rate, think it over. I won't hope (for it would grieve me for you) that you may still rue your refusal of my offer—and for the sake of a mere prejudice! I simply can't understand how anyone can be so hidebound as to choose a miserable, anxious existence instead of a pleasant, safe one, for the sake of a hobby called 'principle.' A man has duties to his belongings, after all."

Ribbeck looked at his soiled, work-worn hands. "Yes, Joshua, that's all true; but everyone has his own point of view. We handicraftsmen and small shop people do, as I said just now, regard the emporiums as our foes, working for our undoing. And as we fight with such unequal weapons, it is clear enough that we, being the weaklings, must go under in our war to the knife with the great capitalists. Well! we can't keep pace with you, but neither will we let you take us in tow. As long as I can stir a hand, I'll be my own master. You think that foolish; but I can do no other. It is, if you will, my tragedy."

"Yes, it is. . . Well, the place shall be kept open for you till January. Once more, think it over." He rose.

"My son will come for the girls about half-past seven. Au revoir, Tobias."

Ribbeck went to the door with his whilom friend. Before returning to the living-room, he stepped for a moment into that behind the shop. The interview had strongly affected him. In the little room, the air was damp and heavy, but a very slight, fresh scent of eau-de-cologne recalled Müllenmeister's presence—the merest whiff, as if something alien had passed through, and left a faint trace behind it. . .

And that was the spirit of the age, to the rustle of whose wings he had just listened. Once more it had held out its hands to him, had tried to draw him towards it, and along with it. Was it right that he should fight against it? Were there not higher duties than to be true to one's own convictions, to trust to one's own thick head? Duties to others, to one's own belongings? . . . But, again, seeing that a monstrous, sinister machine is, with inexorable, iron persistence, crushing the existence out of thousands and thousands, ought one, for dear life's sake, to become a wheel or blade or screw in the womb of the portent, and so play a part in the work of destruction, which the masters on the bridge describe so proudly as "progress," and which claims, instead of hate and rage, the recognition, nay, the applause of the many-tongued? Was it mad, Quixotic to throw oneself in front, and be crushed with the rest? Or was there a middle way—to compound with it, to try, by artful impairment, to paralyse the construction of the destroying force, by letting off steam here, forcing the pace there, and so change the torn furrows of the quieter life into fruitful pasturage, one day to bear golden, waving ears of new, abounding food? . . .

Master Tobias Ribbeck put his head on his hands, and, in his reflections, forgot all time.

CHAPTER IV

THE young people found the first half-hour a little stiff. Karen was not overjoyed at the irruption of the dainty girls with their flowers and sweets and greetings from "Uncle Lynegaard." Some instinct warned her that this unannounced visit meant more than met the eye—was only the forerunner of another disagreeable surprise. The mere fact that Uncle Lynegaard was in Berlin, and had not, as always before, found time to come himself with his birthday greetings, was enough to put her out of humour. She was very fond and proud of her guardian, who in her imagination stood for the never-known, dead father. Everything that Aunt Mieze told her about *him* fitted Lynegaard. He, too, had been tall and fair, blue-eyed, a Dane and an artist. The tender kindness that Lynegaard manifested for his little ward had completed the conquest of her heart. From the most distant countries he would send her characteristic gifts; his Christmas offerings were sometimes a little too magnificent and numerous; and on his visits he would talk of how, when Karen was a big girl, he would set up a house of his own, and she must come and look after it for him. She had taken it all in deadly earnest "When I'm keeping house for Uncle Lynegaard," had long been the refrain to her dreams of the future.

"You are all I have, aren't you, little girlie?" So he used to say; and now a small stab of jealousy pierced Karen's heart. How came Uncle Lynegaard to have anything to do with these stranger-girls?

The youthful denizens of Central Berlin and the budding fine ladies of the Kurfürstendamm had not much

in common. Conversation refused to flow; and the visitors frankly stood side by side. Their governesses' careful training caused them to wear a polite and serious expression, but they were inwardly almost bursting with laughter, and a thousand naughty little imps of derision gleamed in their eyes. Felix Schiller, who, in his best lounge suit, with a pink in his buttonhole, had already been playing the man of the world, at last approached them and began a conversation, in the course of which he insinuated that his father, the manufacturer Schiller, merely "kept up" with the distantly related Ribbecks out of a sort of old-fashioned piety. They very rarely met, and only on particular occasions. . . Then he offered cigarettes, which Ella von Reeren accepted, while Mimi Müllenmeister thanked him and refused. It made a good opening for further conversation. Felix was devouring the graceful, slender Ella with his eyes. He did not think he had ever seen such a pretty, smart girl; his eighteen-yeared heart was on fire. He had an absorbing passion for anything delicate, distinguished, elegant. Nor did Ella seem at all disinclined for a gay flirtation with the pleasant, nice-looking boy—so between them, at any rate, the ice was soon broken.

Karen, Trude, and Tom Ribbeck made a separate little group at the other end of the shop, and only when Mieze entered after a while, bringing with her a breezy whirl of good-humour and high spirits, did the heaviness of the atmosphere there begin at all to clear up.

But where Mieze was, nobody could be dull. She knew such delightful games; she could arrange living-pictures, charades—all so new and amusing that even the girls from the Kurfürstendamm threw off their bored reserve, and began to enjoy themselves hugely. Ella even condescended to say a few patronising words to Karen.

"You will come and see me soon, won't you, Karen?"

Karen shrugged. "I have very little time on week-

days, and on Sundays we are always either with Aunt Mieze and Aunt Lisa, or else at home."

"But if your Uncle Lynegaard says you *are* to come to us on Sundays?"

"I don't let anyone say I *am* to," answered the child, defiantly.

"But, Karen! He's your guardian." A sly smile crept into Ella's shrewd grey eyes. "Supposing he said you were to come to us altogether—you'd have to, you know."

"Uncle Inge would never ask me to do such a thing," said Karen, and her uneasiness made her tone a little hostile. . .

Soon after seven, the party was reinforced by a military contingent in the shape of Non-commissioned Officer Johannes Schiller, and Hermann Müllenmeister, who was doing his year of service in the same cavalry corps.[1] They were in the same company, too; Johannes Schiller was Hermann's immediate superior. They got on well together, and had now met at the hall door.

Joshua Müllenmeister had little of the Semitic in his appearance, and his two other children, the elder son and Mimi, took after their mother, who had been a Christian. But in Hermann the paternal descent was very strongly marked. His nose stuck out from his long, pale face like a gargoyle. In his short-sighted, ambiguous eyes there was a restless, cunning glitter, and under the thin dark moustache the mouth betrayed a curious mixture of brutality and false sweetness. His quiet manner and soft, insinuating voice removed, however, a good deal of the unpleasant impression of his outward appearance.

Frau Tina brought mulled wine, and bread and butter, and amid eating and drinking the last traces of restraint and dulness disappeared. Tobias was godfather to

[1] Einjähriger.

Johannes, who was even more at home with the Ribbecks than with his own people.

"You must play something—yes, you must; to-day we insist on some of your best dance music, Uncle Ribbeck," pleaded he. And without hesitation Tobias got out his fiddle-case from under the sofa, and began to tune up. Thirty years ago, he had bought the fiddle a bargain from his master's wife in Verona; *she* had kept it back as an indemnity for rent from the effects of an old musician. The valuable violin had induced Tobias to take lessons, and he had attained a certain degree of facility. In former days it had been his dearest distraction, but now he seldom touched it. The discords of his anxieties were not to be exorcised even by the sweet tones of the old Veronese violin.

But to-day it was to come into its own as a renewer of joy; for youth will and must be merry. . . His hand, which formerly had wielded the bow with dexterity, had now become stiff and clumsy. An experimentary staccato first sounded—it was like the stammering whine of a child; but gradually the notes shaped into a melody, and from that swept into a swift, infectious waltz.

Johannes Schiller hummed the intoxicating tune, and the girls tapped time with their feet. Mieze swung round with her hands on her hips. . . Suddenly everyone was in motion. Johannes invited Mimi Müllenmeister, who was sitting next him; his brother rushed at Ella von Reeren; Hermann Müllenmeister took Trudchen Schiller, Tom caught hold of Karen, old Schiller and Mieze paired off, and Selmar and Lisa brought up the rear.

The gas hummed in the wall-brackets, the boots that were strung in rows from the ceiling dangled and clattered, the fiddle laughed, wept, allured, scolded. The couples whirled; the little shop had all in a minute become a crowded ballroom, filled with music, laughter,

and life. It was not a boot shop any more. . . The walls widened, the space seemed infinite—it was like a huge fairy-tale-like banquet hall, flooded with light, wherein, hidden behind palms and orchids, there played a whole orchestra. To the rocking rhythm of the music, thoughts and fancies rose like soap-bubbles and burst ere one could grasp them. The budding fine ladies forgot to laugh at the cobbler's den, and to lament their "wasted Sunday."

"It's delightful with you; we're having a splendid time, Frau Ribbeck," Ella called to Tina, as she flew by. And how well the "little man" could dance! He was a charming-looking boy, and so smart. . . and how his bold blue eyes worshipped her! Oh, why wasn't he in society—if he had been, this Sunday might have been inscribed in letters of gold.

She stopped dancing. Felix ventured on a slight squeeze of her hand. . . "This Sunday will be the most unforgettable day of my life," he whispered sentimentally. Ella blushed. "And of mine, too," she answered softly. Then Felix kissed her hand.

"I'll trust my star, gracious lady, to make this something more than our first and *last* meeting."

Hermann Müllenmeister next fell out of the ranks, and walked about a little behind the counter with his pretty partner. His study of the night life of Berlin had given him a slight affection of the heart, and he dared not dance too long. He had already acquired something of the drawling military manner.

"You dance like a fairy, Fräulein. You must have got through a long course of lessons."

Trude laughed her clear ringing laugh. "Lessons—oh, dear!" and she explained that when the barrel-organ man played in their court, the girls all gathered round and danced, even the tiny ones. That was how she had learnt all her dancing, and she couldn't imagine what

else there *was* to learn. It was fun, and one's feet did it by themselves.

Hermann nodded, listening amusedly to her childish chatter. The little thing pleased him. With his experienced vision, he beheld the essential woman in the gay, temperamental creature. Perhaps it might be worth while to keep up his comradeship with Schiller after the period of service (which ended at Easter), for the sake of this ravishing "kid." Hermann was very skilful at turning every relation in life to his little personal account. He was polite and pleasant to everybody, no matter what their social position or their connection with himself; and very certainly this trait was not, as with his father, a result of instinctive genuine kindliness, but a carefully calculated method. One never knew when people might be useful to one.

Between him and little Trude there was in this respect a certain affinity; both liked to separate the cream from the milk, but with the distinction that Trude's instinct for the sunny side of life sprang from an unconscious epicurean tendency, while in Hermann all was based upon cleverly daring calculations. "Such hair! such splendid golden hair!" he said admiringly, and gently stroked the bright curly head. But Trude hit him coquettishly on the finger with the curly end of her plait. "Hands off! That's private property."

"But I delight in touching that red gold"... and then she blushed.

"Fräulein Trude—that's your name, isn't it? A charming name—enchanting, like everything about you... Listen! Would you like to come to the circus with your brother and me?"

"I Oh, my goodness! Of course I would."

"And then to a confectioner's? Do you like puffs?"

"*Do* I!"

"See how we sympathise! So do I. If your parents

will let you, shall we make a day of it on Wednesday or Thursday?"

"Father will be sure to let me," cried happy Trude, and she rushed at old Schiller and stopped his dancing. Schiller looked across at Hermann, smiled, and nodded. The intimacy of young Müllenmeister with his son flattered his vanity, and if this pleasant young man was so good as to invite Trudchen to go with him and her brother to the circus, he was not going to be a spoil-sport, especially as the child had almost no amusements of that kind. . .

About ten o'clock, Mieze made a move. Next morning meant early rising and work. This week was going to be a heavy one in the workroom; before it was over, a beautiful trousseau of twelve frocks, each more complicated than the other, must be finished.

"That must mean a nice little sum of money," remarked Tina. But Mieze sighed. Yes. . . when they got it. Unfortunately, as she had told them, that usually meant a long time. Ladies often did not think of paying until the frocks had long since been cast off, or gone to the old-clothes woman.

They all left together. Hermann Müllenmeister took a cab for himself and the girls, Mieze and Lisa used the electric tramway, the Schillers walked.

Ribbeck turned out the lamps in the shop. Afterwards he sat for a long time with old Siebenschläfer in the living-room, smoking a pipe. Siebenschläfer would soon be celebrating his golden jubilee in the service of the Ribbecks. In the great days of the business, he had filled his place as head worker no more conscientiously than he now, at seventy-one, superintended the repairs-room. His poor old head was palsied, and in his sunken mouth there showed only one big, yellow incisor, instead of the firm white row of twenty-five years back, that used to munch so manfully at Mother Ribbeck's black-

bread dripping-toast; but his soiled, bony old hands worked as untiringly as ever. Siebenschläfer rarely emerged from his workroom. When he had nothing to do, he sat—for he often could not sleep until late in the night—in a corner, smoking and wool-gathering. As a native of Preetz, he always thought in his beloved, homely Low-German. His conversation was limited to pantomime, and an ever-recurrent Low-German expression: *"Dat hett en groten Verscheel."* ("That sounds very well.")

Master Tobias paced up and down the room, telling his faithful comrade of the impending changes, of the sale of the house and his own resolve to take to the last again and begin at the beginning.

"It will come off, Siebenschläfer; it must come off."

And Siebenschläfer nodded: *"Dat hett en groten Verscheel."*

Tobias continued. "Isn't the whole of life a continual up-and-down? If the signs are not deceptive, there ought to be a great revival of hand-work.. People can't fail to see it, if once they reflect upon the rubbishy stuff they get in the shops—the brown-paper welts, the pasted-on heels, and the poor quality of the uppers. For years it seemed as if everything was tending to a universal superficiality and mediocrity. What is the use of distinguished boots, when there are no distinguished men? But gradually the recognition of the value of personality, of one's "own thing," seems to be struggling to the front again. And when men are individualists, they want individual clothing, not machine-made stuff, produced *en masse,* all on the same last, with no consideration for the future wearer. Men should wear the shoes that fit them, and then their shoes won't hurt them—that's simple enough. Am I not right, Siebenschläfer?"

"Yes, indeed. *Dat hett en groten Verscheel,"*

sounded from the sofa corner. Then fell a silence. Tobias still paced up and down; he could not have rested yet awhile. The thought that the abhorrent "warehouse" would shortly set foot upon the very plot of ground which, after so many years, he had thought he was justified in regarding as his own home. . . this stabbed his brain as with red-hot pricks. Over the ground where his cradle had stood, and the coffins of parents and his children, the ground whereon the destinies of them all had been worked out for decades, there would now sweep the tide of modern business management. Something in him revolted against this prospect; it caused him almost a physical sensation of pain. "We must clear out; they're sweeping us off the face of the earth on which we once could make out a steady, stubborn existence. They have torn down our pleasant places. . ." A vague memory of some such words passed through his mind; and a great, sad, burning hatred rose up in him.

Joshua Manassa had once been his friend, and no one could deny that he was a good fellow. Yet Tobias Ribbeck hated him at that moment, as the incarnation of a hostile force, a destroying principle.

"Jews will be Jews," he thought. "A christening can't do away with that. Müllenmeister or Manassa—Israel is trumps! Step by step, Jerusalem is conquering the world. . ."

His pipe was long gone out, but he did not notice, any more than he noticed how the hour hand of the clock was creeping on. Dawn was glimmering at the window when at last he sought his bed.

CHAPTER V

I beg most cordially to announce to you my betrothal with Frau Erica von Reeren, **née** ***Domwart.***

PROFESSOR INGWER LYNEGAARD.

ERICA VON REEREN
INGWER LYNEGAARD
Betrothed.

Lynegaardehuus. ***Berlin, W.***
3. III. ***Berlin.***

More than a hundred copies of this, on heavy English hand-made paper, fluttered through West Berlin and the neighbouring districts, and found, with fewer exceptions than usual, a genuine welcome. The universal opinion was that the two who thus stood pledged to one another were admirably matched; at least, all thought that Professor Lynegaard could not have chosen better.

In one house alone did the great cartel, and the letter written by the Professor's own hand, in which he told his goddaughter and ward of his coming marriage with "a dear lady, who will try to take the place of his little Karen's dead mother," call forth grief and pain on one side, and an almost distracted outbreak of despair on the other. The Ribbecks had scarcely supposed it possible that they should ever be called upon to relinquish the child whom they regarded as their own. Müllenmeister's hint, which now was confirmed, had come upon them as an unexpected and, therefore, almost annihilating blow. Tina especially could not bring

herself to contemplate a separation from her darling. Karen went about as if she had been stunned; she neither ate nor drank, and wept for hours to herself. The impending marriage of her guardian seemed to her a betrayal of her personal rights, though many of its inevitable consequences as yet escaped her; she resented his part in it, and hated the strange lady who had driven her from the first place in his heart.

One forenoon, Lynegaard telephoned that he would call for Karen in the afternoon, and take her to see his future bride.

Karen flamed forth. She would *not* be introduced to the lady. She would hide, run away, throw herself into the river, if they tried to take her there. . . This stubborn temper had already shown in her when she was a tiny child. In general, she was a gentle, easily led little creature, but when once she got a thing in her head neither punishment nor reasoning availed. Nothing would move her to obedience but the firm, kind gravity of her foster-father; and on this occasion also, a few decisive words from him had more effect than all Tina's coaxing and scolding.

"You will go, Karen," said Ribbeck; and without further speech the child went to her room, and dressed herself for the visit. . .

Frau Erica von Reeren lived at the Halensee end of the Kurfürstendamm. She sat with her daughter Ella in the bay window of her luxurious boudoir, awaiting her betrothed, who to-day was to bring his ward, her future charge.

"I can only repeat what I've already told you, Mamma. You will be astounded!" said Ella, tapping out a waltz measure on the carpet with her faultlessly shod little foot. "I've never seen such a horrid, spoilt, awkward girl. And she talks like a servant. You'll simply have to lock her up for the first three months, unless you

want to be laughed at all over the place. . ." Here the young lady made an artful pause. "If Papa Lynegaard insists on his idea of thrusting this 'Karnickel' into our house. . . well, if I were you, I should think twice about marrying him."

Frau von Reeren shook her head indignantly. "You talk like a mere child, Ella! How often am I to explain to you that I am not marrying again to please myself? This step is a sacrifice—yes, a veritable sacrifice that I am making chiefly for your sake."

Ella smiled a twisted smile, but answered nothing, and without looking up, went on drawing the coloured threads through her "Gobelin" embroidery-work. Erica lifted herself a little from her easy posture in a high-backed antique chair, and turned her face towards the window. A fine, grey drizzle was pattering against the broad, bright panes, and wrapping the view of the street in a thick mist of vapour. But the life and movement outside was not claiming the lady's attention; her vision was directed inward, and what she saw was plainly not of an agreeable nature, for the delicate lips shut close and bitterly, and the famous dark brown eyes had not quite their usual expressive radiance.

Erica von Reeren was not undeserving of her renown as the most beautiful woman in Berlin society. Her tall, slender form had something almost queenly in its bearing. Snow-white, silk-soft hair was piled in great, picturesque waves around the small delicate face, whose flower-like freshness had not been impaired by its owner's eight-and-thirty years. About this glorious white hair, which contrasted so effectively with her youthful appearance, there circulated the most romantic tales. It had turned "in a single night" from grief at the death of her husband, people said; and Frau Erica made no denial when they hinted as much to her. A gesture, a sorrowful sigh, would gently plead for si-

lence on the subject of a wound that time had not even yet healed. In reality, premature greyness was hereditary in her family. When, at the end of her twentieth year, the silver threads so multiplied that the pincers could not cope with them, the beautiful woman had had a long conference with her trusty hairdresser, the French head of a great firm in the Tauentzien-strasse. This took place shortly after the death of Lieutenant-Colonel von Reeren—hence the legend. Then, after Erica had been invisible for several days, she suddenly reappeared with white hair. She had every reason to be satisfied with her barber's happy notion. The chalk-white hair became her exquisitely, and had a distinguished, interesting, lovely effect, like snow upon peach-blossoms. The fact that for half-a-day in every month, directly after the treatment of her red-haired Parisian, she was obliged to keep her room and be seen by no one, was but a slight inconvenience, fully atoned for by the effect.

Erica and her sister Henny were the two only children of their father. Their mother had died early, and the father enjoyed his widowhood in the broadest interpretation of the term. He was a libertine to whom the pleasure and development of the beloved Number One was life's highest law. The children had grown up in luxury and extravagance, and had never been taught the true value of money. Money flowed into the house, and out of it; the inmates bathed and splashed about in it, and flung it in bucketfuls out of the window. Erica was married young to a wealthy officer; Henny escaped shortly before the crisis—six months before the father's death—to the Fortunate Isle of marriage with Joshua Müllenmeister. For after the doctor's death it became clear that of the large sums that had circulated in the pampered household, nothing, literally nothing, remained. The sale of the gorgeous effects was just

enough to pay the bills, and put up a costly monument to the renowned physician.

Erica was early widowed. Her husband left her a not inconsiderable fortune; but she had never understood figures—indeed, she could barely add up a bill. The way of life in her paternal home was to her the normal way for "decent people." When, for once, she ordered a dress that cost only two hundred marks, she had the uplifted feeling of having been immensely economical. She could not conceive how "decent people" could have any bath but a perfumed one, how anyone could live "respectably" on any *more* modest scale than she did in her seven-roomed abode, nor how a "proper" summer holiday could be spent elsewhere than at St. Moritz, Ostend, Baden-Baden, or one of the other half-dozen fashionable cures.

Every now and then, the Deutsche Bank, with which she did business, would most respectfully intimate to the "gracious lady" that her deposit account was at the moment exhausted; "did she wish them to sell stock, and if so, which?" And she would instantly telephone, "Yes, yes. . . Let them sell whatever was most advantageous at the moment." And there the matter ended.

At the interminable rows of figures in the yearly settling of accounts, she scarcely glanced ere signing her receipt. Thank goodness one could depend on the Deutsche Bank; one needn't take the trouble of verifying their figures. It would have cost her a serious mental effort to attempt any such thing; and if women only knew how thinking ruined their looks! Especially grubbing at dull subjects like that. Involuntarily they wrinkled their brows, and distorted their facial muscles. No woman who wanted to keep young and lovely ever dreamt of doing accounts. And why *should* she? If she had *had* to, perhaps. . .

But one day, soon after the New Year, it happened that Erica's somewhat more arithmetical sister Henny got hold of a bank-book, and—half from idleness, half from curiosity—stuck her nose in it. Immediately her face took on a most anxious and disconcerted expression.

"Have you mortgaged some of your property?" she asked.

Erica glanced up from the novel she was reading. "No—how do you mean? My money is in the Deutsche Bank. . . You know that Egon left me only stocks."

"How much?"

Erica reflected. "About two hundred thousand marks."

"But according to this statement you have barely eighty thousand!" cried Henny.

Erica shook her head. "No, no. . . It will be all right."

But Henny, who knew her sister, was not reassured. The Bank was asked for an elucidation, and then it appeared that in the course of six years, Erica had run through, besides the interest, a hundred and thirty-six thousand marks of her capital. If she continued at the same rate, she would hold out for a couple of years longer, and then would come an end.

Erica was distraught. Eighty thousand marks! Scarcely three thousand marks a year![1] Why, that was sheer, naked destitution! Translated into facts, it meant an attic in the Northern district, and a sewing-machine. . . "Stitch, stitch, stitch," like the person in Thomas Hood—and water and dry bread and rags and hunger.

In vain did her brother-in-law Müllenmeister employ all his eloquence to point out to the outraged lady that between her present way of life and an attic room there

[1] $750.

lay many stages of a not unbearable sort of existence, and that with a Lieutenant-colonel's pension and an income of three thousand marks, it was hardly necessary to starve, or sew for a livelihood—especially when one had Joshua Müllenmeister for a brother-in-law. Erica had grasped just one thing: in future she would have to economise *more* than hitherto, and a "decent person" simply couldn't, and that was all there was to say about it. Henny saw how the thought of the future oppressed her sister, and perceived that her husband's well-meant consolation and admonitions were mere waste of breath. Erica simply *could* not live economically; it was useless to waste words about it. Henny—though three years younger, with a temperament of her own, and far from bad-looking—had always been overlooked beside her lovely sister; but she had never resented it, for in the first place she tenderly loved Erica, and in the second she felt herself to be infinitely superior to her elder. She had gifts which Erica wholly lacked. She could think logically, she could reflect; she had many interests, and a quite admirable power of discernment. But Erica was exclusively the priestess of her own beauty; before it she spent twelve hours of the day in adoration—she loved her own beauty more than aught else, more than her child, more than herself, more than her life. All that nature had given her of intelligence and sagacity—and the mighty mother had been somewhat parsimonious in these matters—was used in the service of this beauty. Her morning and evening prayer was to keep the marvellous gift as long as possible. Consideration of the means to this end, and of the most suitable setting for the treasure, occupied the greater part of her cogitative faculty; there was only a very negligible quantity left over for anything else. Henny knew this, and did all other thinking for her lovely sister.

"I know only one way out of the dilemma, Erica," she said one day. "You must marry again."

Erica started. "Marry again?" she said in dismay. "Do you really mean it? Is there no other way of salvation?"

Marry again, after experiencing as a widow the bliss and comfort of real freedom! But Henny had no other counsel to give, and gradually the beauty perceived that her sister's suggestion was not so bad. From that time, she kept watch for a suitable *parti*.

In the first years of her widowhood, she had refused various offers, and now people said that she had taken a vow, by her husband's coffin, never to marry for a second time. A few trusty adorers, who would be safe to try again if given a little encouragement, were considered—that is, enquiries were made as to their worldly estates; but they were found unworthy, and ruled out.

About this time Erica decided, for the sake of distraction, and escape from her anxious broodings, to go to the West Indies with some friends on one of the great steamers. It was on this journey that she met Professor Lynegaard.

He was forty-three, and no woman had as yet played a really serious part in his life. His intimate friends would rally him, and say that he had only twice been genuinely in love: first, as a twelve-year-old boy with his parents' dairymaid, and *then* less because of her general rustic beauty than because she had a fascinating brown mole on her left cheek. The second time was with the sweet, small Rita, who had preferred his friend Nickelsen. This had been a good deal more serious. His artist vision had been so penetrated by her sunny loveliness and freshness that his heart had warmed to her. Often, when he recalled those days, he thought how much better Rita would have done to give herself to him. *He* would have kept her in the sun, *he* would

not have planted her in the heavy, duty-bearing soil of a poor married woman's existence. Of course it had killed her!

That was a long time ago now, yet when he looked at little Karen, remembrance often moved him deeply. He said to himself that she might have been *his* daughter, and in his heart she was; from the first, he had always meant to have her with him some day. In her earliest childhood she had been admirably brought up in the honest shoemaker's house, by his gentle, not too ignorant wife; but as she grew up, he often asked himself anxiously what was to be done with her. If she was to be trained in any degree for a better social position, he must not leave her much longer in the small tradesmen's circles. He himself had no fixed abode in Berlin, and even if he did set up a bachelor establishment, the child would be exposed to the far more dubious influence of servants. He hesitated equally to take her from the good simple folk she loved, and put her in a boarding-school. And as yet no other way of escape had occurred to him.

Then he met Erica von Reeren. The week of close companionship on the steamer made for quick intimacy. Lynegaard was Erica's neighbour at meals, and even if her loveliness and grace had not awakened his boundless admiration, her manner in conversation would have won his sympathy. She spoke little; but in her soulful eyes there lay so much understanding, so much that was plainly inexpressible in words, that only a very sceptical observer could have escaped the silent conviction that the soul of this tranquil and beautiful woman was a mine of precious "inwardness." It only awaited the right hand to bring its marvellous treasures to the surface.

Lynegaard at any rate could have sworn it. Until now he had summarily denied to all women any powers

of discernment in artistic matters, but *this* one was in his view an exception in every way—nay, more! a phenomenon. Certainly she was very guarded in her utterances; for the most part she confined herself to listening and an occasional interpolated remark—but *how* she listened, and how aptly she interpolated! Anyone could see that there was a great deal in her; she was profound, very profound.

When the trip drew to an end, Lynegaard was convinced that this was the woman he wanted as a companion for life. If it was to be any, it must be this.

Long before he reached this stage, Erica knew what was going to happen. But wisely she guarded against a premature declaration. She must be certain first that she would not be buying a pig in a poke.

The enquiries were most satisfactory. Lynegaard was the only son of wealthy parents, had himself a considerable estate in North Schleswig, and got high prices for his work. Moreover, his name ensured his wife a prominent position in society for the rest of her days.

Erica breathed again. The West Indian tour had turned out splendidly. Besides a whole bazaarful of carpets, bronzes, exotic trifles, and, as the crowning glory, a live, beauteous, almond-eyed Hindu, to decorate her house, she was bringing back, all ready in her trunk, the great *parti* that she had longed for. . . Four weeks later, the betrothal was announced.

But for Erica there was one bitter drop in the cup of joy. Lynegaard, with a decision which admitted of no appeal, had declared from the first that his ward, the orphaned daughter of his friend Nickelsen, must find a permanent home with them. Erica sighed in secret. This duty was not very alluring. But to avoid quarrelling, it was best for the present at any rate to put a good face on the matter. Indeed, his anxiety about Karen's future had partly dictated Lynegaard's

hasty resolve to marry; otherwise, he might at the eleventh hour have changed his mind. He was past the age of "great passions" and he prized the great gift of freedom above aught else.

Outside, a coupé came driving quickly along the quay, and stopped before the house. Erica rose. Her features smoothed themselves, her lips and eyes smiled, as she returned the greeting of her lover, now getting out of the cab with his ward.

Karen was almost choked by the beating of her heart, when the bronze-skinned, fantastically dressed Indian took her hat and cloak from her in the entrance hall. Her hand lay ice-cold and heavy in Lynegaard's, as he led her through the wide drawing-room to the mistress of the house. Every feature in her little white face was quivering, and despite her bravest efforts, she could not articulate a single word as Erica welcomed "her future foster-daughter" with ingratiating sweetness.

"Do you think you will be able to love me a little, Karen?" she asked, putting all her fascination into the few gentle words.

"Karen!" said Lynegaard, warningly.

The child started. "I can't love strangers all at once," she said, mechanically.

Erica laughed. "Oh, oh—so we are conscientious, and we have a character of our own! Never mind, Karen; we'll soon understand one another, little one."

"I hope Karen will never give her new aunt any cause for displeasure," said Lynegaard, vexed at the girl's unmannerliness.

It was high time that Karen got into the hands of a lady! But apart from that, surely any girl of fourteen ought to have had tact enough to answer a kind, affectionately meant question with some sort of politeness. For the first time, Professor Lynegaard was displeased with his little goddaughter. Karen, though

she did not look up, felt his dissatisfaction, and grew still more confused. She had not meant to say anything ill-bred; what had escaped her was the involuntary reflection of her feeling. And in her shyness she was incapable of an apology.

Ella's suggestion that she should show Karen her dolls, ended the somewhat difficult situation. Visibly relieved, Karen followed her to her room, where Ella displayed her various treasures to the far from deeply interested visitor.

"If you are good, perhaps I might give you one or two of my dolls later on," said Ella. "But I must tell you, Karen, not to be so rude to Mamma again. It might bring on one of her nervous attacks, and you wouldn't enjoy *that*. Surely you must be grateful to us for taking you?"

"Grateful to you—I? . . . Never!" cried Karen.

Ella smiled reflectively, rejoicing with secret malice over the things that were to come. . . It *would* be a pretty kettle of fish. . . Mamma, who hated every emotion like the plague!

"I want to go home—please, let me go home!" begged Karen.

"We must have tea first, Karen."

In the meantime, other guests had gathered in the drawing-room—Henny Müllenmeister with Mimi and her elder stepson, Friedrich, who, after studying law for a few terms, had, six months ago, entered his father's business as a volunteer worker.

Karen was still struggling with her tears while Erica presented her to the newcomers.

Friedrich looked closely at the pale, quivering little countenance. "I seem to know your goddaughter's face perfectly, Herr Professor!" he said; then thought a moment. "Ah, that's it. When I was quite a little boy, I used to collect pictures out of the papers. One

of them, a charming, dark-haired girl's head, I've had for years—it must be lying about somewhere. It might be a portrait of Fräulein Karen."

The Professor nodded smilingly. "I admire your penetration no less than your memory. It can be no other than the 'Spring' by Karen's father, which was awarded the prize at Munich two decades ago. It was a portrait of her mother as a young girl. The picture created a sensation, and was frequently reproduced for years afterwards."

The Indian servant rolled back the folding-doors of the dining-room in which the tea-table was laid. Erica took her place at the head, Lynegaard sat next her, the others anyhow. Karen happened to be between young Müllenmeister and Ella. Her dark mood was gradually dispersing, for her neighbour was talking away her embarrassment. Odd that this absolutely strange young man, whom she had never seen until to-day, should seem to her more friendly than all the rest, her guardian included! Perhaps it was because he had her mother's picture so deeply imprinted on his memory that after many years he could perceive a likeness in her child; or perhaps because the winning sweetness of his nature instinctively awakened her confidence and a pleasant feeling of being protected.

The conversation soon became general. Lynegaard reverted to the woodcut that Friedrich had mentioned, and from that they came to speaking of the improvements in the three-colour-process printing, the results of which were now to be had for moderate prices.

This led Friedrich to introduce his darling idea of getting his father to add, at some time in the future, an art department in the "great manner" to his warehouse. With the exception of Müllenmeister, no one in the business took him very seriously. Amongst themselves the office staff had given him a nickname: "The

Fancy Chief"—because in their view none of his theories and ideas would stand the test of practice. He would have liked to make a study of the history of art; but had unresistingly yielded to the wishes of his father, who designed both his sons for the business. In his free time, however, he still pursued his favourite study, and consorted most with young artists and writers.

"To bring art to the people. . . Could anything be more splendid? To make accessible to everyone, even the poorest, the great treasures of all nations! . . Do you think we shall ever attain to selling, for one mark, the works of our contemporaries—yes, especially those—as well as the old masters, in perfected three-colour prints?"

"Frightful thought!" said Lynegaard drily. "As horrible as the, alas! achieved misdemeanour of copying sculptures in plaster, and selling them dirt-cheap in the bazaars. Hats off to your emporiums for ribbons and reels, and fancy articles of every kind, but they must leave art alone. Art is no ware for all the world and his wife. Your universalisation is an outrage. And, besides, all enjoyment of art demands a certain amount of culture."

Friedrich Müllenmeister flushed. "Forgive me if I say that I think your view is wholly mistaken, Herr Professor. But that is a strange thing about artists: they all desire popularity, yet so soon as one tries to make their work universally accessible, they fight vehemently against one and proclaim their exclusiveness. Just as well might you object to the works of Schiller and Goethe and the classics in general being procurable for a few pence by 'the world and his wife.' "

Lynegaard crumbled a macaroon between his fingers. "Have you never felt it an abhorrent prostitution of the finest operatic music to be dragged about the streets on the barrel organs?"

"If the rendering does not distort the melodies—no! Everyone cannot afford to go to the Opera. Moreover, by the untrained and unaccustomed ears of the public, melodies are best appreciated on primitive instruments."

"And, therefore, I again declare Art is not for the masses."

"And I—how often I've pondered on the contemptuous and superior manner in which the word 'masses' is employed. It is, so to speak, the badge of inferiority. 'To rescue the masses,' 'to sink back into the masses'—those are phrases of depreciation that one hears every day. What *are* the masses but the people, from which our greatest minds have sprung? [illegible] a few geniuses have had geniuses for parents. I consider it as art's highest task to penetrate the masses with its sacred earnestness, to work in them like living leaven, paralysing gross instincts, freeing noble impulses—forming, clarifying, liberating the whole. The common man has neither time nor inclination to visit the Museums. Very well! If he doesn't go to Franz Hals, let Franz Hals come to him—come in the form of a tasteful, well-executed three-colour print; and then the frightful oleograph libels on Royalty and other horrors with which the lower classes disfigure their walls will disappear, and make room for real works of art. The people are gradually getting accustomed to good pictures; already the worst of the oleographs have ceased to please them—and this is the way to teach them taste, and enjoyment of truly beautiful things."

"Bravo! You are the future educator of the people, the bestower of art's treasures on the mob! Who knows? Perhaps you are the Chosen of the new Israel, the long-awaited Messiah of art, who brings his people deliverance from the universal banality and ignorance of our day. You have the fancy for it, at all events—that's clear!"

A slight flush crept over the pale, delicate face of the young man, when he saw the general smile that was directed at him. A vehement reply was on his lips, but he choked it back somehow. He had long been accustomed to find that his views called forth only ironic opposition and mocking smiles. They were looked upon as the fantastic dreams of an utterly unripe youngster, to be dismissed with a jest. He was not able to express with any real persuasive power the things that he really felt, and so he was for the most part misunderstood even by those who genuinely wished him well. How often had he vowed to himself that he would never again enunciate an independent opinion! But always some of the many plans for reform and creation in his future sphere of activity that surged in his brain, would break out into speech, and bring upon him —especially from Hermann's set—deliberate derision and idiotic jocosities.

"He who laughs last laughs best, Herr Professor," he said now, good-humouredly.

The talk drifted to other subjects; he turned to his little neighbour, who had been attentively following the conversation, and asked her if she inherited any of her father's talent.

Karen said: "No; unless delight in beautiful pictures was a small inheritance." The intelligence of her answer surprised him. "Had she then seen many fine pictures?" he asked.

Oh, yes—a great many. Every Sunday she went with Aunt Mieze or Tom to a gallery. "And I think what you were saying just now is very beautiful and right, Herr Müllenmeister," said Karen softly. "When I am big and have a little money of my own, I shall buy myself some lovely pictures, and then it would be nice if they were not quite so expensive!"

Friedrich nodded smilingly. Oddly enough, the in-

genious admiration of the little maiden had obliterated the uncomfortable impression of a moment ago, and restored his hopeful mood. Karen, too, was gradually forgetting her shyness, and when, in half-an-hour, they all rose from the table, that oppressive, strangling terror had almost left her.

CHAPTER VI

Joshua Müllenmeister possessed phenomenal energy. Even before the great shop opened at precisely eight o'clock in the morning, he would be already seated at his desk in the office; and long after tranquillity and darkness reigned in the mighty building, his electric standard lamp would illuminate papers which his untiring pen was covering with words and figures. Apparently he knew not fatigue. None of his employees could compare his hours of work and his actual achievement in them with those of the master.

In his hand lay all the threads of the complex organisation. No "young lady" was dismissed, no customer's complaint dealt with, no careless menial called to order, no smallest alteration made in the conduct of affairs, without appeal to his authority. He knew every one of his five hundred employees personally; like the spirit of God upon the face of the water, did his direct influence hover over the whole concern.

Yet for some time, his energy *had* been slackening a little, when nobody was watching him. Since the death of his first wife, he had not been the same Joshua Müllenmeister as of yore.

It had been a heavy blow. From the wall above his writing-table, the soft, sweet eyes of the dead woman looked down upon him from a life-size portrait. He could not have worked if he had not known them always there. The picture, by a good artist, was a speaking likeness. Just so had she moved beside him all those long years, day by day—in the plain, high-necked dress, her only ornament the cameo brooch at her throat,

her fair hair smoothly parted, and on her irregular yet infinitely expressive features, already the stamp of that disease under which she languished for many years, and of which she died at last.

The clergyman, in his funeral oration, had described Frau Wilhelmina Müllenmeister as the pattern of a good wife and mother. But to her husband she had been much more than that: she had been the faithful comrade and helpmate, who fought, struggled, toiled beside him, and who had had her honestly won share in the great work which he had achieved. Perhaps it was the sense of their endless union which had led him to marry again quite soon after her death; though how he had come to give his simple Wilhelmina such a successor as the highly fashionable Henny Domwart he could not himself have said. Only too soon had he perceived his mistake. But that was his own affair, and he settled it with himself alone. In Wilhelmina's lifetime, they had had a seven-roomed flat in the Alexander-platz, close to the business. Their manner of living had been plain and comfortable, not straitened in any way, but with no sort of luxury. Naturally he could not bring Henny to this austere abode. For that pampered maiden, the pretty villa in Halensee, which he bought just before his marriage, was the fitting frame; and even envy granted her taste and cleverness and charming grace as a hostess. Other things, too, went well. The children had soon grown used to the change, and got on admirably with their stepmother.

But even his spirited pair of horses could not do the distance to the warehouse in less than three-quarters of an hour, and that meant as good as two hours wasted in getting there and back. Hence Joshua usually had his modest lunch at a neighbouring hotel. In the evenings he could not expect Henny to sit at home awaiting him, for he often was not back till ten or eleven o'clock,

or even later. She was young and fond of amusement; he did not wish her to give up anything on his account, and was glad that she was sensible enough not to insist on his escorting her when she accepted invitations or went to theatres or concerts. But as she was often still asleep in the morning, when *he* was setting off, it came to pass sometimes that he scarcely saw his wife's face for three or four days running.

His sons were, at any rate outwardly, promising enough; but the extreme tendencies displayed by both caused him some anxiety. Two more different characters could hardly be imagined. On the one side, Hermann, the incarnation of concrete fact, the personified calculating machine, whose driving force was the hope of profit, whose views were dictated by an openly declared mercenariness, a greedy acquisitiveness; on the other, Friedrich, whose head, despite his twenty-three years, was full of so much that was distractingly vague and unripe, who, in his passion for the good and the beautiful, lost himself in a sort of fool's paradise of unrealisable ideals, who mixed up the perception of his own advantages with ideas of public welfare and universal happiness in a way that compelled a smile from the experienced man of affairs. When he depicted the Emporium of the Future, as his fancy painted it, he lost his head completely; he reckoned on the most unlimited possibilities, the most unheard-of aggrandisements—in short, his was an unreasoned, nebulous dream, with no basis in reality. Nevertheless, Joshua never cut him short, as Hermann did, with impatient objections and derisive comments. Once the young firebrand had sown his intellectual wild oats and had had his nose rubbed in real, every-day life, there might well emerge from the chaos of illusions and fantasies a useful worker in a realisable future sphere of "big business."

Friedrich was, in short, his father's darling; but

Joshua wished that each of his sons could have endowed the other with fifty per cent. of his surplus energy. He himself had a good share of their respective qualities. Where business interests were concerned, he had never allowed sentiment to sway him; but on the other hand, he never lost sight of the purely human standpoint with regard to his fellow-workers.

His employees were well paid. Long before the Sunday rest had been made a legal obligation, *he* had shut his business premises on Sundays and holidays. Every servant of the firm, who had worked in it for a year and a half, had a right to at least a fortnight's summer holiday, on full pay. Only for gross misbehaviour—such as drunkenness—was a summary dismissal the penalty. In all other cases of misdemeanour, a kind of disciplinary investigation was instituted, which was meant to avoid a possible dismissal. And for some time he had been considering the question of "old-age insurance" for his people—after the pattern of the *Caisses de Prévoyances* in the Paris warehouses. In the conferences over this notion, the difference in his sons made itself very apparent.

Hermann was beside himself at the idea of the "self-taxation" that his father thus proposed to institute. With a hundred arguments he sought to convince him that this whole "welfare-of-the-people rubbish" was simply beating the air, that all it did was to make them more discontented. Friedrich represented the opposite extreme. According to him, Joshua's idea was not nearly generous enough. If he was going to do anything, he should do it properly and ensure that those who had spent half their span of existence in the service of the house, should, in their old age, enjoy not only the bread, but the butter, of life as their reward.

One thing Joshua long had seen: the brothers would never conceivably be able to work together in one busi-

ness. Already he had arranged, in this respect, for the future. At the end of the eighties he had seized an opportunity of acquiring quite quietly six large sites, side by side, in the busiest part of the Friedrich-strasse. As the value of these sites had increased by twenty per cent. in the interval, and was still rising, the speculation had been in every way a good one. The longest leases of the present tenants ran till 1902. At that date, he meant that on this spot, right in the middle of the most frequented part of Berlin, passed, day in, day out, by a constant stream of the best money-spending classes of inhabitants and visitors, should arise a new emporium —a palace, such as Friedrich dreamed of, with well-lit courts, winter gardens, and tea-rooms, with broad staircases of marble, bronze, and precious stones; a "luxury house" of the first rank, a masterpiece of architecture, a wonderful sight in its externality alone. And Friedrich should rule in this new building, while Hermann undertook the old place on the Alexanderplatz. But before that, each must be thoroughly trained in every branch of the business. At Easter, after his year of military service was over, Hermann was returning to the office; in the autumn, Friedrich was to go for a long time to America, to learn transatlantic methods at Marshall Field's in Chicago and at a New York big "store." Business life on the other side of the Atlantic was, in its stern reality, the best school, thought Joshua, for the young dreamer—there he would learn the difference between abstract and concrete values. . . The emporium in Germany had survived the dangers of its infancy. No longer did public opinion class it with the gimcrack bazaars and the swindling concerns; it had won the respect and confidence of customers. The present "big business" seemed to promise almost unlimited possibilities of development. On the other hand, circumstances de-

manded the highest qualifications of efficiency and energy from the proprietors of such monster establishments. Warehouses now crowded on one another, but the difficulties and hostilities against which each had to fight arose far less from such competition than from the hosts of small shopkeepers and "special industries." The ill-will of this circle had condensed into a middle-class policy; a check on prices was under consideration, by which it was hoped to loosen the deadly grip of the big shops. . . Take it altogether, it was a strenuous time, a period of feverish pressing forward, and, at the same moment, of fighting—in defence of what had been so laboriously won.

The chief's private office was at the end of a long row of compartments, all of which looked out into the yard of the building on the Alexander-platz. Every hour of his day was filled; his activities were regulated to the minute; it was a continual going and coming.

At this moment, the advertisement manager, Herr Koch, was displaying his latest triumph: charming little ships of papier mâché, with sails and streamers of gay waxed paper, which were to be given gratis to children during Christmas week, and were filled with advertising leaflets and booklets. . . They were so well-made, and withal so pretty, that the children could play with them for quite a long time, and then stick them up as ornaments. Joshua declared himself well satisfied, and then Herr Koch laid before him the newspaper insertion for next day.

"GREAT SALE OF JEWELLERY!

"Unparalleled sensation! Guaranteed genuine stones at ridiculous prices! Rings with brilliants and coloured gems from twenty marks. Magnificent settings". . . etc.

Joshua glanced through the manuscript, and erased the "guaranteed genuine stones."

"We do not need to remind the public that we are not cheats," he said, smiling.

Herr Koch bowed, and made as if to withdraw.

"Just a moment," said Joshua. "The shoemaker, Ribbeck, has agreed to clear out of his house in the beginning of January, on condition that we find him, by that date, suitable premises in the neighbourhood. He means to start business again, and wants a small place—a mere workshop with two living-rooms. Perhaps you could manage also to devise a little advertisement for him? For personal reasons, I wish to serve Ribbeck."

"I shall attend to it, Herr Müllenmeister,"—and Herr Koch vanished.

Punctually at half-past four came the two submanagers to a conference in the chief's office.

Eduard Feldbergen, a tall man, inclining to corpulence, was a cousin of the late Frau Müllenmeister, and had been for nineteen years in his present post. He was just fifty, a bachelor, and people told all sorts of stories about his private life. He lived in an eight-roomed flat in the Schönhauser Allee, and collected antiques, especially Madonnas—Madonnas in all mediums and styles, oil, water-colour, chalk, wood, marble, wax, and metal. The profane declared that this love for the Madonna in art was decadent perversity; but in truth it was the most innocent of hobbies, and pleasantly diverted the few free hours left him by the business. For years he had been egging on Joshua to open an antique department, and of late had had Friedrich on his side. It really seemed as if the chief were at last seriously thinking of it. Feldbergen and Friedrich, indeed, were in sympathy about most matters; there was a very genuine friendship between them,

while Hermann was more attracted by the second manager, Herr Rosen.

Rosen was the only son of a rich pawnbroker in the Friedrich-strasse. and was just thirty-one years old. Eight years ago he had come to Müllenmeister's as a salesman, and in a surprisingly short time had climbed all the degrees of the ladder to the topmost perch of head buyer. A year ago, he had been appointed Managing Head of Departments.

Joshua was too good a business man to confound personal qualities with professional talents, though many of Rosen's ideas went against his grain; but the man had that "lucky hand" and that farseeing outlook which in every calling ensure rapid promotion to their possessor. He was not beloved by the staff. They nicknamed him "the Almighty," and there was a rumour among them that he aspired to the hand of Mimi Müllenmeister, in the hope of becoming ultimately a partner in the firm. He was fully aware of his value and influence, and in many little ways let the staff feel the full weight of his authority; but with the chief he invariably used a suave, modest, ingratiating manner.

The jewel sale was his idea. Joshua had not cared for it at first; but Herr Rosen had had a host of arguments at hand. In the last purchases for the furniture and carpet departments, the province of the house had been somewhat overstepped, for its clientèle was composed chiefly of the working and lower middle classes. Now cheap jewellery would, so Rosen calculated, attract the wives of the better *bourgeoisie;* and in this way there would be an opportunity of displaying the higher-class goods to a more discerning public. There was nothing to be urged against this reasoning; for on similar calculations had all the successes of the firm been based.

Rosen had returned that morning from a business trip

to Aix-la-Chapelle, of the result of which he now informed the two other men. At Aix, there was a fairly large cloth factory with an old established reputation, now being offered for sale in consequence of the proprietor's death. In latter years it had terribly lost ground, owing to the antiquated methods of this owner; and now the heirs—private people, who wanted the hard cash—were trying to dispose of it as quickly as might be to a suitable purchaser.

Herr Rosen had thoroughly inspected the factory. The machines were in the best of order, the stuff—a speciality was made of blue and black tailoring materials—was of first-class quality; under intelligent management the place would be bound to pay its way.

Joshua nodded. He knew the firm. If the establishment was to be had at a really low price, it would probably be worth while to undertake the production of the material themselves, for Müllenmeister's had a large cloth department. The late owner had never been able to master modern business methods; whenever he had attempted a new departure, the devil seemed to be in it, and he invariably came to grief. . . At the moment things were going from bad to worse. Some of the looms were actually at a standstill, and the majority of the workers had been dismissed. The valuers had taken the inventory with culpable carelessness. "Either the stuff is rotten, or the fellows are stark mad," Joshua murmured, looking through the list. Herr Rosen declared that the stuff was flawless. And twenty bales of red cloth were quoted at the incredible figure of a hundred marks! Rosen explained that some years ago red cloth came into fashion in Paris; and a leading tailors' journal had prophesied for Germany also a "red" season. The factory had accordingly set a quantity of looms with red. But once again the bold step turned out to be a false one. With singular unanimity,

German women seemed to turn against such a bright colour for outdoor clothes, the demand was slack, and as the merchant's principles would not allow him to supply goods "naked"—that is, without making a profit—a number of bales had remained in stock, with which now "the mice were playing," for which now only a few shillings were asked. Then Herr Rosen bent a little forward, and, despite the sound-proof doors, lowered his voice to a whisper. "He had an idea. . . this red cloth had inspired him with a splendid notion". . . And he spoke on, on.

Herr Feldbergen pushed back his spectacles, and cleared his throat, in sheer respect and admiration. He did not particularly like Rosen, nevertheless. . . Joshua, head on hand, listened attentively. A slight flush rose slowly on his cheek; in this moment, he felt almost an impulse of tenderness towards the young co-operator whom chance had brought to his house. Nay, more: he felt that this man, with his almost light-hearted efficiency, was his superior in many respects—that the cool reflectiveness with which he himself operated might well have lost him many a huge profit. Compared with Rosen, he sometimes felt almost out-of-date. This, for instance, was no fantastic dream for the future, but a safe, well-calculated combination, to which there was nothing to oppose. By means of the cheap red cloth, they were to gain the military tailors to their side. . . By this and that means, in such and such a fashion, they were to obtain for their firm an army contract. . . Why, it would come off—it *must* come off!

The clock struck seven. The time set for the conference was already overstepped. "This evening at nine o'clock, gentlemen."

At that moment in rustled Henny Müllenmeister, followed by Friedrich.

"Good evening, Jos! Good evening, gentlemen!" she cried gaily. "Tell me about the brilliants, Herr Rosen! All Berlin is talking of our sale. Councillor Zau's wife is said to have bought a marvellous collar with eighty brilliants, for five hundred marks. Are they actually real stones?" . . . She stopped suddenly at the singularly stern, reproving look of her husband. "Good gracious! one must have one's joke," she muttered, somewhat confusedly.

"They are guaranteed genuine stones," said Rosen. "Perhaps Madame would like to see for herself? There really are some very fine things."

"That would be very nice of you, if you'll come with us?" And turning to her husband, she talked a minute or two. She and Friedrich had arranged to meet Hermann at half-past seven in the shop, and poke about a little. . .

"That's right," said Joshua, absently. "But now—be good, my dear child."

"Yes, yes, we're going directly. Come, Friedel. Adieu, Herr Feldbergen—adieu, Jos!" She kissed her husband fleetingly on the brow, and turned with a laugh to the door. Friedrich exchanged a quick, close handshake with his father. Herr Rosen followed them.

It was Saturday, and seven o'clock in the evening—the time at which business in Müllenmeister's was at its height. Moreover, the Christmas rush was beginning. There was an odd air of haste about the crowds that streamed in at the various doorways—it was as if each had been seized by a feverish desire to offer a part of the newly received weekly wage upon the altar of the warehouse, as if, indeed, it were a duty to do so, the neglect of which would have most painful consequences. And a keen observer would have noticed how curiously the faces changed as the women entered—for they were mostly poorly dressed women who came. The weary,

careworn countenances became interested and eager, the dull eyes shone with secret longing, with delight in the mere spectacle; it was as if there were something in the air that was like an injection of morphia in its transfiguring, gladdening power. . .

The salesrooms always awakened two contradictory feelings in Friedrich. He loved the business and hated it, with equal intensity. In the present conditions, he beheld only a wild chaos of building materials for that august temple of the future, that marvel of the architect's skill, that revelation of the modern spirit, that shrine of all great art, that crystallisation of every social and political effort—his dreamed-of emporium. . . In the meantime, the atmosphere of Müllenmeister's was not highly congenial to an æsthetically sensitive nature. The heat of the many hundred gas-jets and electric lights, and the exhalations of the endless stream of humanity, filled the low, unventilated spaces with a thick, suffocating odour. In the air there was an indefinable sound—a humming, buzzing, singing, pounding, like the gasping of an overheated machine. At some places, notably the pay-desks, the crowd choked the passage, so that neither advance nor retreat was possible. The electric globes cast queer reflections on the exhausted youthful faces of the shop-girls, who looked, in the harsh, greenish light, fantastically dragged and old. For such a Saturday evening strained the staff to the utmost.

The ground floor was the El Dorado for bargains. On long tables the staple commodities were heaped: cheap glass and china, linen goods, bundles of remnants, embroideries, gloves.

Friedrich felt, as ever, unhappy at the sight of these countless pennyworths. Everywhere reigned the principle of cheapness as opposed to good value; and it was that principle which chiefly attracted people to the big

shops. "Some day," thought he, "it must all be changed."

Herr Rosen tried to make a way for Henny through the press, but it was not easy. Before a table of house clocks at elevenpence each, the crowding became almost dangerous. Close by stood another table of cheap sweetmeats—inferior chocolate, gingerbread, and biscuits. Friedrich's attention was caught by a woman who was hungrily eyeing a packet of gingerbread cakes. She evidently belonged to the working classes, and wore a shabby round cloak which failed to conceal the fact that she was close to her confinement. She took up the packet, smelt it, looked about her, laid it down again as if in a struggle with herself, then cried, suddenly resolute, to one of the shop-girls: "Fräulein, what price are the cakes?" But no one answered; all hands were busy with the cheap clocks. Then she went a few steps backward with the packet in her hand, apparently to look for an attendant, then turned, as it were, to a pay-desk. . . Suddenly her hand, holding the cakes, disappeared beneath her cloak, and she fled to the door.

Friedrich sighed. It was evidently her first theft, but probably it would not be her last.

At length they reached their goal. A wide space under the stairs had been made into a separate room by means of a curtain. Before it hung a transparency:

JEWEL SALE

Here there was a similar throng. The women stood, close pressed, before the display. Electric reflectors drew coloured rays from the jewellery that lay on black velvet cushions. At the moment, there was no possibility of reaching the counters. The cheaper pieces

were selling like hot cakes; and the gazers seemed to be in a state of excitement verging on ecstasy.

A fat lady in furs was almost gasping. "If I only had credit till the end of January! I should so like to have those emerald buttons," she said to her neighbour. "But at Christmas time—!"

"Yes, isn't it too bad?" answered the other. "I *have* dipped into my Christmas money, and bought the brooch; but there's another lovely thing I'd like to have. If only they'd give us credit for a couple of months—we're safe enough!" A deep sigh stirred her fur-covered bosom.

"That alone was wanting!" murmured Friedrich.

"What would you? A sound system of credit is not by any means a bad thing," whispered Rosen, winking. "We should increase our trade by twenty per cent. if we started it—" But at this moment there came an opportunity of making a path through the throng of women, and getting near the brilliants.

Friedrich did not push forward. He was in the secret of the jewel-clearance. The only humbug was the designation "bargains," though even this had a certain justification. Strictly speaking, it was no "opportunity," but an ordinary sale of inferior goods at corresponding, though certainly extraordinary small, prices. From time to time the Amsterdam jewel cutters would put on the market large consignments of so-called "surplus goods"—stones spoilt in polishing or in themselves inferior; and there, tastefully set in certain manufactories, were the materials for the *"occasions."* In reality, any jeweller who did not disdain to traffic in comparatively worthless stones could offer his customers the same opportunity.

Henny came back quickly. Her practised eye had at the first glance detected the inferiority of the stones. She said nothing, but a smile of mocking depreciation

played about the corners of her mouth. Once outside the curtain, she could not repress a derisive remark: "For shame, Herr Rosen! with your jewellery for clerks' and post-office secretaries' wives." Rosen laughed, taking leave of them both at the staircase.

Henny, on ascending, went towards the refreshment-room, where she had arranged to meet Hermann. She never lingered long in the salesrooms, for at the bottom of her heart she detested her husband's proletarian public, and made her own purchases in an establishment in the Leipziger-strasse.

Friedrich strolled onwards through the various departments. On the first floor, where stood the departments for ready-made clothes, underlinen, carpets, furs, and boots and shoes, the traffic was not so keen as downstairs; it was possible to find elbow room in the narrow gangways. But on the second floor a dense throng prevailed, for in the fancy and toy departments the Christmas display had begun, and special novelties and attractions were here causing quite dangerous crowds. Thus, in the "fancy," a new line was exciting general admiration and almost bringing about a sensation by its cheapness; it was an imitation of Japanese lacquer with mother-of-pearl inlays. The things were charming, and even connoisseurs might for a moment have been deceived as to their value—or rather, valuelessness.

Friedrich unwillingly stopped. A slight feeling of horror, increasing to almost an oppression of the heart, came over him at the sight of the bowls, little boxes, tablets, and hanging-cupboards. He had been present when they were delivered. There had been a turbulent scene, for the producer had not been pleased with the discount which Rosen had made, ostensibly on account of faulty workmanship. Rosen had thereupon declined to take the stuff. Again Friedrich seemed to see the

little narrow-chested, asthmatic man, pleading, with twisting hands, for the carrying out of the agreement; then, almost in tears, explaining that these were the products of a home industry, that even the agreed prices scarcely brought the producers, after their most untiring industry, more than one mark's earnings a day. Gradually his lament had developed into an excited raging, cursing, and reviling, and in the end he was summarily ejected. Friedrich had had literally to lay hands on himself to keep from interfering and taking the man's part; but silence was compulsory, for he knew his father's regulation of never permitting his subordinately placed sons to meddle with the arrangements of the responsible officials. The worst came later, when Rosen secretly bought the rejected wares dirt-cheap from a middleman, and so was enabled to sell them for still less than the originally calculated price. . . That his father probably knew nothing of the infamy of such a thing as this, was a fact which hardly consoled Friedrich. A dull flush swept over his cheek and brow. As if in a dream he proceeded, conscious of a strange difficulty in breathing. Perhaps it was only the heat, the thickening, evil atmosphere. . . but he felt as if he were choking. Driven onward by the throng, he suddenly found himself again in the toy department. The crush here was unbelievable. Few sales were made; but mothers were leading their children about to show them the splendours that the Christ-child had displayed for them; dolls were brought for repairs, and people were admiring and choosing their future purchases.

Almost fainting, Friedrich groped his way to a window, tore it open, and let the blessed, cool air play upon his face. How often had he heard the phrase: *No sentiment in business!* But it could not charm away the apparition of the sallow, anguished face of the "German-Japanese merchant," which almost seemed to

make a shadow in the glaring intensity of the light. And suddenly the face vanished, and an endless line of stooping, hollow-eyed, famished men, working by dim petroleum lamps at the arduous work, became visible. . . then endless rows of pale women sitting at sewing-machines, of embroideresses with bloodshot eyes and pricked fingers, of hundreds and hundreds of unhappy beings toiling, day in, day out, from morning till night, and with their united strength filling the coffers of the house of Müllenmeister, working in the sweat of their brows that the banking-account of one individual might reach to the immeasurable. . . A strangely importunate hallucination—away with it!

A loud, scolding voice at his elbow made him start. A customer was complaining of the bad attendance. She had been waiting nearly an hour. Last week she had bought a pair of doll's stockings, and now, as she had a perfect right to do, she wanted to change the stockings, and the young lady would not serve her, and in future she would buy any dolls' stockings she wanted at Wertheim's or Tietz's, where things were better managed. . .

"Fräulein Matrei," called the superintendent in a sharp, imperative tone; "why are you not serving the lady?"

Behind the thickly strewn counter stood a tall, slender, unusually lovely girl with black waving hair, dark eyes, and that peculiar pearl-like pallor which is almost the monopoly of those *mondaines* who spend incalculable time and trouble upon their complexions.

"I have been serving until now," she said with a slight defiance in manner and tone. The superintendent made a note in her book.

Friedrich scrutinised the girl with interest. She pleased him in every respect; he did not remember ever having seen her before. Plainly she was not in perfect

health; there were wide bluish circles round her eyes, and from time to time she caught at her back with a sudden, involuntary movement of the hand, as if she felt a sharp pain there. . . She turned her head, and met the earnest eyes of the young man—smiled coquettishly, and blushed.

CHAPTER VII

At the entrance to the "refreshment room"—a designation which at this hour, with its frightful atmosphere, sounded like a bitter mockery—Friedrich encountered his stepmother and Hermann, with the latter's friend, Eduard Van Hoolten, only son of the chief shareholder and director of the X—— Bank, Dr. Van Hoolten.

This youth, at twenty-five, looked like a worn-out man of forty. At nineteen, he had "done with" everything that the majority of boys of his age regard as most desirable. The possessor of two solid millions of marks, bequeathed him by his mother, he speculated on the Bourse with reckless audacity. "Tape-prices" were his only reading, their rise and fall the one thing that could spur his jaded nerves to activity, or inspire his prematurely fatigued spirit with interest. He intended to take his doctor's degree, so as to enter the Bank as legal adviser. In the punctilious elegance of his array, which with a sort of modest coquetry expounded the fashion of the day before yesterday, with his reddish, brushed-up moustache, and his correct, measured manner, he was like a young American. He wore a single eye-glass, and had a trick of drawing up the left corner of his mouth in speaking, which gave his face a comically distorted expression.

At one time, Eduard Van Hoolten had given promise of great things, by his remarkable talents and his ardent enthusiasm, for knowledge and the fine arts. Before he was eighteen he had passed his matriculation. But then—he himself scarcely knew how—he had got into a set of young libertines, in whose company he went

through all the excesses, all the perverse monstrosities, of night life in Berlin. . . The reactions of this life soon made themselves apparent; in the perpetual absinthe fumes of the uproarious nights his former ideals perished, his early interests were stunted, and decayed. At twenty, he was a wreck, a young-old man, a hoary youth.

Certain common interests had drawn him and Hermann Müllenmeister together. As yet Hermann had considerably more power of enjoyment and freshness of feeling than "Eddie" Van Hoolten, though, on the other hand, he could not, in more than one respect, hold a candle to what young Van Hoolten had been in his better days. . .

In the meantime, traffic in the shop had increased, for it was the last quarter of an hour before closing. Like a swift seething wave of dark human bodies, the stream poured between the counters; the strange, indefinable, immanent noise in the air now sounded like the distant, menacing growl of hungry beasts of prey. . . At last the four managed to reach the exit, and the street. During the long progress, almost step by step, Henny had kept her handkerchief pressed against her mouth, that she might not inhale the execrable atmosphere; once outside, she drew a long breath of relief.

A droshky took the party to the Bunten Theatre, where in the interval they encountered a newly married couple whom they all knew. The young folk were only just back from their honeymoon, and the husband was getting great amusement out of showing his twenty-yeared bride some of the most prominent features of the night life of Berlin. She was highly excited over her initiation, and ready to prolong her study indefinitely. . . They agreed to sup together at the Casino, and spent a couple of amusing hours there. Van Hoolten

maintained that he was celebrating a memorable occasion, and ordered champagne—obstinately refusing, though, to say *what* the memorable occasion was. This gave rise to much more or less risky chaff and jocularity. Hermann received a box on the ear from Henny, in punishment for a somewhat unequivocal witticism, but that did not prevent him from displaying a further range of capacity in the same sort. Altogether, the tone grew highly festive; even Friedrich had drunk a little more than was good for him.

Suddenly Henny expressed a desire to know something of the *"real"* Berlin-by-night—the sort of thing one knew only from whispered *on-dits* or from books; the type of place at which the whole and the "half" world of libertinism encountered one another, and of which ladies knew only what the indiscretions of their masculine acquaintance might chance to betray. . . The gentlemen accepted the challenge. Why not? There were plenty of places to which one could safely take ladies. What about breaking up at once, and going to one of them?

The ladies, in their excited condition, thought the suggestion delightful. When the men had paid their bills, the six drove in two cabs to a well-known dancing-saloon in the Friedrichstadt.

Rather timidly, and very seriously, the two young married women, followed by the men, ascended the wide, carpeted staircase; but once seated above, with more champagne before them, they began to feel so safe in the escort of their cavaliers that their too festive mood returned. At the end of five minutes, such remarkable, almost noisy gaiety, reigned at their table that many of the men who kept passing up and down it began to bestow such searching attentions on the ladies as aroused their ostensible annoyance, and their secret, indomitable gratification.

Under the influence of the champagne, Henny frankly declared that she had expected more of such a place, and was very much disappointed. The bride confessed the same: for ten marks' entrance one expected a little sensation—what *did* go on here, after all? Clearly, nothing whatever. It was just as much "prunes and prisms" as at any private ball on the Kurfürstendamm. Elegant women, well-dressed men, Hungarian string-band, flirtation, conversation; perhaps here and there a rather excessive display of Parisian *chic*—but such departures from good taste occurred, after all, in the best regulated families. No, it really was not worth the money.

Friedrich stood somewhat aloof. The short drive in the open cab had sobered him again. He, too, was paying his first visit to a place of this class, and the spectacle in the hall beneath awakened all the minor cadences to which his inner life was naturally strung. He was puzzled by the two women of his party. What did they want here, what amusement could they have anticipated from such a visit? Did they understand where they now found themselves? On what "sensations" had they reckoned? Did not all here proclaim themselves, by their mere presence, to be one of the silken mob below, for whom this realm was made? Was there any essential distinction between the painted beauties there and the laughing, rowdy ladies here? There sat his stepmother, listening, with flushed cheeks and eager attention, to the witty obscenities that young Van Hoolten was whispering in her ear. Her bright, brown eyes were flashing coquettishly into his dull grey ones; with unpardonable familiarity, he had put his arm round the back of her chair, so that he almost seemed to be embracing her. And the little bride was humming to the band the refrain of an indecent music-hall ditty!

He stared on absently, straight in front of him, at the hall below. The music stopped. . . Suddenly his glance took a definite direction, then remained fixed. In the midst of the gay throng of women, one form had attracted his attention: a tall, slender girl in a pale-blue batiste gown, and a great black-feathered hat. She was moving, quite alone, across the saloon to the door. Was it a certain timidity in her movements, or the contrast of her almost poverty-stricken attire with the glittering gorgeousness around her? For she gave the impression of not belonging to the company below, certainly, at any rate, not as an *habituée* of the fashionable resort. Her beautiful, dead-white face was curiously familiar to him; and, just then, she stood still and caught at her back with a sudden clutch—as if in an instant of unbearable pain. . .

"Friedel! Good Heavens, look at the boy!" cried Henny. "What on earth is he about?"

"Let him alone," said Hermann drily. "The preacher in the wilderness must earn his spurs."

The others laughed, and their mirth spread to other tables, and followed Friedrich in his flight down to the saloon. But he did not notice it.

Not far from the entrance to the saloon, he met the girl he sought.

"Fräulein Matrei. . ."

She turned, and started slightly, as if she recognised him. "I beg your pardon. You wished—"

"That you would give me a moment's hearing. . ." A slight nervousness came over him. They moved backward a step or two. The girl seemed to perceive his embarrassment; she smiled fleetingly, and came to the rescue.

"You are young Herr Müllenmeister, are you not?"

"Yes. You know me?"

"I saw you a few days ago with Herr Rosen. One of

the other girls told me who you were. I have only been a fortnight in the house."

"Ah—yes. . ."

"You wish to reprove me for being here," continued the girl. "But so far as I know, I have sold only my daytime hours to your house. From eight to eight; and the time between belongs to me alone."

"I had no thought of reproving you, Fräulein Matrei. I—I was merely surprised. . . forgive me!"

"What is there to surprise you? Besides, I was just going home. There is nothing going on here to-night."

"Will you allow me to accompany you part of the way?"

"Why not? If it amuses you—I don't mind."

Friedrich never thought of taking leave of his party above; he had forgotten them for the moment.

It was a clear, cold December night; the air was still and starlit.

For some minutes they walked silently side by side.

"No—there's nothing to be surprised at," broke out the girl suddenly. "*We* want to live, too. When we toil twelve hours a day in the shop, we like to make sure afterwards that we're still human beings."

"And you call this living, and making sure of your humanity?"

Agnes Matrei shrugged. "I'm so sick of it—the beastliness of every-day life. Where else am I to go? In Halensee and Grünau, where the others go, it's so utterly dull. I enjoy things like this. All the lights, the Hungarian music, the lovely dresses, the whole atmosphere. . ."

"The atmosphere is, nevertheless, poisoned, Fräulein Matrei."

"Yes—goodness knows they say so often enough in the preachy novels. But where else in heaven's name are girls like us to go, if we want anything of the

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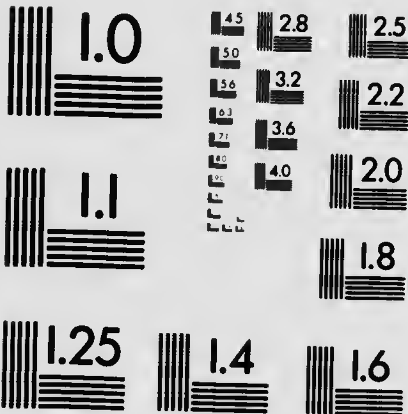

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sort? . . . Oh, God, I'd like to be rich and have a good time. When one thinks how quickly one's youth goes by—and especially when one's lungs are not sound. . ."

"But are there not other ways of attaining a certain inward satisfaction—"

"Oh, don't talk to me about inward satisfaction. I've heard that tune often enough."

"Are you a native of Berlin?"

"No; but my brother and sister live here."

"Why shouldn't we go to some place near here for an hour or so? We can talk better than in walking."

"I should like it. Nobody is expecting me at home."

They went into a café, where now there were few customers, and easily found a corner to themselves in which they could talk unheard and undisturbed. And there Agnes Matrei, over a cup of black coffee, told the listening young man the story of her life.

Her father had been pastor of a Hanoverian market-town. His congregation had adored him—though it was an open secret that for many years he had been addicted to drink. Two children of his first marriage survived. Agnes's own mother had been, before her marriage, an actress in a small travelling company, where she played the "heroines." For five years she endured the life of a parson's wife—stifling to her with her habits and tastes; then, one day, she fled, and was never heard of again. Since then the pastor had deteriorated year by year. After repeated attacks of delirium tremens, he was deprived of his office, and died some years later in a nursing-home, of consumption. About the same time, the elder sister, who had married a Berlin journalist, was widowed, and although she was left wholly penniless and herself had a little daughter, she took in her small stepsister and brought her up.

After her confirmation, Agnes had gone as apprentice saleswoman to a print-shop on Unter den Linden. Then

she had taken a situation in the china department of a big shop on the Leipziger-strasse. Thence Rosen, who had once seen her there, beguiled her by the sanctioned and familiar Müllenmeister method. She herself had had no idea that he was concerned in it. An agent had offered her the much better-paid post, and she had instantly jumped at it.

She lived alone. The eternal "moralising" of her brother and sister had annoyed her, and so she had left them, but without any quarrel. She was just eighteen; they were both much older.

"You see, my sister Lotte is such a poor creature; she's never got anything out of life. . . And my brother is an author who can scarcely earn enough to have butter on his bread. And there they all three sit, in a hovel in the backyard of one of the big houses on the Kurfürstendamm and suck their paws like bears, for hunger! My sister sews her fingers sore at embroidering monograms—at thirty or forty pfennigs a dozen. She works for your house, too, and for five or six other places. . . Well, I ask myself in vain what they get out of life."

Friedrich was silent. He well understood the point of view of the young, pleasure-loving creature, and at the moment could think of no reply.

"Yes, yes, indeed, Fräulein Agnes. Nobody blames you for wanting to enjoy your youth. Only I would rather not meet you in places where ladies go whom a man cannot recognise in the street next day."

"But where else can I get to know real gentlemen?" asked the girl, naïvely.

"And must it be only 'real' gentlemen? For that matter, I doubt very much that you would meet anything very 'real' in those places. At any rate, it's pretty certain that you won't meet your future husband there."

"Oh, my future husband!" jeered Agnes. "Marry! Rubbish! Who'd marry the likes of us? . . . And even if anyone did, there's more trouble to come. Supposing one were left a widow and had children to feed, like Lotte. . . No, no; marriage in our class is only for fools. . . And you needn't think that I'm the only one in our house who goes there. To-night was my first time."

"Thank God for that!"

She looked at him in amazement. He could not at that moment have defined his own feelings. But he was suddenly very glad; it was as if a great load of anxiety had fallen from him. And all at once he found the right things to say to her.

"You shall not go there again. You are much too good and too. . . beautiful for that. And much too delicate as well. To work all day and dance half the night takes too much out of you; even robust people can't stand it for long."

He took her small, beautifully formed hand in his and stroked it—quite impulsively, without thinking. "Now, listen, Fräulein Agnes; I don't count for much as yet in our firm, but I can manage a little relaxation for you now and then, when you don't feel well, or even. . . Please promise me never to go again to that kind of place. The thought would be unendurable to me. Really!"

The girl listened, and a flattered smile just touched her finely cut lips.

"Oh, certainly, if you are distressed by it, I will gladly promise—although I must confess I can't see how it matters to you."

They both were silent. Friedrich, lost in thought, still held her hand closely. On the other side of the room, the waiter was turning out the lights; at the counter "Mamzell" was adding up her bills. They were

now the last guests. . . The waiter stretched himself, yawned in their faces.

"We must go—you're tired!" said Friedrich. She shook her head, but her looks belied her. There were great blue shadows under her eyes, which looked almost supernaturally large in the white, cameo-like face. Friedrich thought, as he looked at her, that he had never seen such wonderful, soft, shining eyes before.

He beckoned the waiter and paid. Outside, he hailed a droshky, and helped Agnes in, after telling the driver her address, and paying the fare. "Then adieu, Fräulein Agnes. . . And don't forget what you promised me."

"No; but don't *you* forget, either," answered the girl, visibly somewhat disappointed. "Adieu, Herr Müllenmeister."

The horse moved on.

Friedrich went through a few streets on foot, then took another cab, and drove home.

He dreamed that night that one morning, coming down to the shop, he found it gone. The salesrooms had been, overnight, transformed into hospital wards. Quite perplexed and even terrified by the happening, he wandered through the long rooms, with their rows upon rows of beds, filled with the whimperings, sighings, and groanings of the sick and dying. He wandered farther and farther, until, at the end, a large operating theatre opened before him. An almost stifling odour of chloroform and carbolic acid met his nostrils. In the middle stood an operating table, with a linen-wrapped form stretched upon it, and the surgeon standing by in his white smock and turned-up sleeves.

"Do you know whom we have here under the knife?" asked the man. And suddenly Friedrich recognised with horror, in the grey-bearded operator, the "German-Japanese" lacquermaker. Madness glittered in his eyes.

"My dear Herr Müllenmeister," continued the pseudo-surgeon, "you need not look so terrified. *Your* throat is not in question. But this patient, Herr Capitalismus, is suffering from blood-poisoning. When he was well, vigorous, and in the flower of his years, he twisted the neck of a hundred thousand men with the permission of the law; then tore open their veins and drank himself crazy with their blood. . . And at last he got blood-madness, and now we have shut him up, and are going to tap him for the other men's blood. . . Watch how it spurts! That must relieve him."

A thick, nauseating smell of blood filled the air; Friedrich tried to arrest the madman's arm, but horror paralysed his limbs and tongue. With a mighty effort, he managed to utter a stifled cry, and—awoke.

The air in the room was oppressively hot; the servant had forgotten to turn off the heating apparatus that evening.

Next morning, Friedrich could regard the occurrences of the previous evening from a much more objective point of view. Indeed, on calm reflection it seemed rather foolish to have mixed himself up in the girl's private affairs, which, as she had clearly conveyed, did not in the least concern him. Once the shop was shut, the employees were their own masters, and could do as they pleased. And with the suspicion of having been something of a simpleton, there grew up a slight sense of confusion. On the impulse, he had promised more than he could perform, for the activities and, above all, the duties of the employees were so precisely regulated that nobody, scarcely even the Chief, could dictate the tiniest alteration without disturbing the entire concern—momentarily only, it is true, but exactly as a great complicated machine may be suddenly thrown out of gear by the displacement of a little hammer or screw.

Moreover, the girl *must* not expect anything from him. She was younger than he. . . His intervention on her behalf would give rise to harmful conjecture, and do her more harm than good.

For these reasons he had avoided seeing her again. Yet he could not, somehow or other, get her out of his head. Some surreptitiously made enquiries confirmed her confidences as to her origin and family. Her step-brother and sister lived, very poorly, in a side wing of the same house wherein the former Frau von Reeren, now Frau Professor Lynegaard, had for years occupied the second floor.

Friedrich was firmly persuaded that his interest in the lovely saleswoman was entirely impersonal, a purely objective "human affair," akin to the patriarchal kind of feeling that the Chief occasionally manifested for individual employees. Once he asked Rosen why Fräulein Matrei had been beguiled from her former situation.

"Because I had been greatly struck with her there. A very beautiful saleswoman—if she is at all efficient into the bargain—is always an acquisition. We have only put her in the toy department as a temporary arrangement. As soon as there is a vacancy in a sphere where her looks will tell more, we shall transfer her."

"I have been observing the girl for some time. It almost strikes me that the very hard work in the toy department, especially at this season, is too much for her."

Herr Rosen smiled obsequiously. "If you have any particular wishes with regard to the young lady, we shall of course make another arrangement at once."

Friedrich almost vehemently protested. "I feel no more interest in her than any of our other employees," he said. "But she often looks pitiably ill."

"Yes, I have noticed that, also, and you are very right

to draw my attention to it," said Rosen thoughtfully. "It would be a pity if she were to break down one fine day."

But privately he had his own ideas. When these young gentlemen suddenly displayed such solicitude for the health of a particular saleswoman, especially when she was unusually lovely and graceful, he was ready to bet a hundred to one that some special interest would be found mingled with the philanthropy. Rosen did not get on particularly well with the elder son; their views were too diametrically opposed. When this emerged in business matters, Friedrich was as yet in no position to prevail. But Rosen knew that inevitably the day must come when he would have to reckon with "the fellow's ridiculous ideas," and that it were wise to oblige him cheaply in the meantime.

Through the head manageress, the superintendent of the toy department was given a hint to treat Fräulein Matrei with particular indulgence. In consideration of her delicate health, and the fact that she was only provisionally employed "in the toys," an eye might be winked at trifling evasions of duty on her part.

Agnes Matrei soon noticed the way the wind was blowing, and as she thought she guessed the quarter whence this gentle zephyr came, there began to dawn in her breast a great, confident hope for the future. Young Herr Müllenmeister had promised to interest himself in her; naturally he was now keeping his word. And as she saw no reason for preserving any discretion as to the occurrences we have related, the whole staff was soon aware that the pretty "new one in the toys" was "walking out with the Fancy Chief," and would probably get on like quicksilver. . . Friedrich had not the remotest idea of the result of his talk with Rosen, nor of the gossip in the house.

Joshua was again in treaty for a site near the ware-

house, and when the purchase was completed, nearly all the departments were to be considerably extended. Feldbergen in particular had prevailed: his long-cherished idea of an art and antique department was to be realised.

"If you thought well, we should give Fräulein Matrei the post of head saleswoman in the new department," said Rosen significantly to Friedrich at the final conference. Joshua inquired as to the young lady thus designated for the somewhat responsible position. . . Scarcely nineteen—that was full young. The salary was a hundred and ten marks a month. . . But Rosen dispelled the Chief's doubts. The girl was notably capable, and had been trained on Unter den Linden.

Friedrich said nothing; it did not even occur to him that Rosen was seeking to please him by this arrangement. But while the two men were discussing the girl and her qualifications as a saleswoman, his heart beat extraordinarily fast, and when Joshua finally declared himself satisfied with Rosen's proposal, it was as if a great weight were lifted from it.

The longer he resisted the desire to see Agnes, the stronger [illegible] became. Often he caught himself thinking of her in [illegible] of his work. It seemed now to be his duty to [illegible]aint her with the impending change. He had something or other to do upstairs, and, as he was passing, he might tell her the gladdening news. . .

Now that Christmas was over, it was a slack time in the toy department. Agnes, talking with two other girls, stood at the counter as Friedrich came in sight. The others discreetly withdrew as he approached her; nor did he notice the looks that were furtively directed on him and Agnes from every side.

"Oh, Herr Müllenmeister. . . I was beginning to be afraid you were ill, it's so long since we've seen you," said she, and looked at him so radiantly with her re-

markably expressive eyes that a sudden happy warmth ran through his veins.

"I did not wish to present myself until I had something good to tell you," he answered, and imparted his news.

"Oh, how good you are! How grateful I am to you!" she murmured, colouring with pleasure. "A hundred and ten marks? And such a delightfully easy post. . ."

"You must thank Herr Rosen chiefly; he has interested himself very warmly in you," pursued Friedrich. "But I rejoice no less than he in your promotion—" He stopped, quite overwhelmed by the shining eyes that rested full upon his face. "God! how lovely the girl is," was the thought that flashed through him. Somewhat confusedly, he took leave of her.

CHAPTER VIII

At the end of January, the Ribbecks moved into the new abode which Müllenmeister had found for them. As compensation for the premature removal, they received a thousand marks down, so there was a little fund for the immediate future. Grief at leaving the dear old house was quite overshadowed by the anguish of parting with Karen. She passed to her new home, by her guardian's desire, on the day of the flitting. And she passed, too, through many violent struggles ere she could reconcile herself to the inevitable.

During the first few weeks she was allowed to spend every Sunday with her former foster-parents, but after that, Erica thought that she would grow better acclimatised to her new surroundings if such intercourse were to cease for awhile, and Lynegaard found her arguments too convincing to be withstood.

Erica hoped at first that the pretty, black-haired child, with her Southern type of beauty, might be turned into a decorative appendage. Ella was just getting too old for that—a grown daughter, in the freshest bloom of youth, was by no means a convenient satellite. But the grave, dark-eyed newcomer was quite unamenable, and directly Erica realised this, the last vestige of her interest and good-will for Karen vanished, and the girl became for her as if she did not exist. Nor did Ella trouble herself about her younger "sister," while the servants gave her clearly to understand that they regarded her as a most undesirable and superfluous addition to the household.

Going to school, too, had brought many painful ex-

periences. The place that she had hitherto attended was very much less rigorous in its requirements; but though Karen had had to pull herself together for great efforts, and was surrounded by absolute strangers, she liked her lesson time. At school, she lost for hours that sense of isolation and loneliness which incessantly oppressed her at home. When she sat all alone in her room through the long afternoons, not knowing of anything that she could do to occupy herself, she almost suffocated with homesickness. She saw nothing of her guardian; he often passed her without noticing her. With her unspoilt instinct, she felt that something was astray between the pair—that Uncle Lynegaard did not look as a happy bridegroom should look, during the honeymoon weeks.

Sitting for hours at a time by her window, and gazing down into the "garden," she often saw therein a girl of her own age. Sometimes this girl cast a quick, shy, curious glance upwards to where Karen sat or stood, and gradually, by the wireless telegraphy of young folks' eyes, a sort of understanding between them grew up. Karen, unable to bear any longer her ennui and loneliness, one day took the initiative, and "made acquaintance." Since then, she and Irmgard Presser had been friends.

Irma was the one little daughter of Lotte Presser, the embroideress, who, with her brother, Hans Matrei, lived in a two-roomed flat at the back of the house. The widow was glad that her Irma, who, like most delicate children, had strong affections, should have found a friend of her own age; and as it required no particular penetration to discover how unhappy the homesick Karen was, the young woman's motherly tenderness was touched, and she warmly welcomed the little forsaken. So it came about that Karen spent more time in the two rooms of the "garden-house" than in the more stately

part of the building, and found, in the modest home of the embroideress, a substitute for the lost one at the Ribbecks'. Nobody asked for her, or looked for her, though she were absent for hours at a stretch. The atmosphere in Professor Lynegaard's new household was arctic.

The honeymoon had ended, surprisingly soon. The beautiful bride was not diplomatic enough to keep her halo long. She showed her cards too early in the game. Professor Lynegaard was accustomed to orderly ways; no two things were more hateful to him than "muddling-through," and getting into debt. When in the very earliest weeks, innumerable bills, mostly of very ancient date, began to come in—when he perceived that for years Erica had been living, with an almost incredible levity, far beyond her means, that her hyper-luxurious *train de vie* nearly amounted to a higher form of swindling, there was a violent scene of "explanation" between them, in the course of which she let slip an admission as hasty as it was unwise of her motive in marrying for the second time. The final result was a definite breach of affection.

Erica did not greatly care. She never fretted, for fretting makes one ugly. Lynegaard, on the contrary, fell into a mood of suppressed, bitter misanthropy. For forty-five years he had remained a bachelor, only to fall a victim, from one day to another, to the wiles of the first mercenary, pleasure-loving worldling he came across. And he had thought the woman profound. . . Great Heavens! That lovely, expensive wax-doll! There was nothing profound in the whole affair but his abysmal idiocy. . . Thus did he seek to solace himself, with self-mockery and bitter rancour; but an afflicting sense of mortification and depression persisted. His feelings for Erica were as if distorted, turned to distaste and irritation; to live with her for any length

of time seemed unthinkable. He would have liked to depart forthwith, never to return; but on the one hand he was restrained by the fear of scandal, chatter, and sensation, from any hasty step; and on the other, he had for some time been feeling far from well. For two years now he had suffered from the after-effects of an attack of acute nephritis, which had set up dilatation of the heart. The great disappointment in his marriage induced a nervous disorder; to sleepless nights succeeded days of exhaustion, of incapacity for work, of distaste for life. And a reflection of his hardly concealed bitterness fell upon Karen.

She was a girl. He had never been a friend to women; now he hated everything that wore a petticoat. Even his friend Nickelsen's marriage struck him in a new light. Till now he had taken Rita's part, and been unable to understand why the misery of the ill-judged union should have injured Nickelsen's artistic career. Darkly he realised that if he continued to live with Erica, he would go the same way. But things should not reach that stage. The object was too paltry. The drama of *his* marriage was a farce, a travesty fit for apes to grin at, and it lay in his hands to play it out, or to throw up his part. The woman had married his purse? Very well: one could pay, observe the decencies, and go. . . In the autumn he would take a trip abroad with his factotum.

Erica received the news of this resolve with her accustomed fine composure; not a feature in her face altered. It was on her "at home" day that he told her; but it was still early, and no one had come. The season of at homes was drawing to an end; many people were gone out of town already, and the rest made use of the long spring afternoons for driving or walking.

Erica again sat in the antique armchair, whose black,

heavy carving was such a wonderful foil to her clear, slender beauty.

"So I shall be a grass-widow for quite a long time," she said, smiling, as she turned the diamond rings on her right hand.

"For a very long time. I do not doubt that the state will be most becoming to you," said her husband drily. "For the rest, 'separated' is a picturesque condition, also. Piquant, very. If I were a beautiful woman, I should do my best to procure myself so irresistible an attraction."

Erica laid her head back. "You are very witty," she said, yawning. . . "Are you staying to-day? Müllenmeister and Henny are coming."

"Delighted to hear it. But the admirable Joshua and I have damned few interests in common, and I think you will get on quite as well without me."

"Any amiability on your part would be a surprise to me," said Erica, indignantly. "But I may at least demand some ordinary courtesy."

"Then you will kindly prepare your acquaintances for the fact that from the autumn our ways part," said Lynegaard, ignoring his wife's reproof. "Where is Ella?"

"Ella? How should I know?"

"It would be well if you troubled yourself a little more about your growing daughter. And where is Karen?"

"Good Heavens, am I your ward's nursemaid? Where is she likely to be? Somewhere in the back premises, which she finds more congenial than my house. It was rather too much, by-the-bye, to saddle me with that girl. Nothing can possibly be done with her."

"Oh, *your* notions of what may be done". . . Lynegaard turned to the door, where at that moment Ella entered, looking very smart and pretty in a dark red

"tailor-made," with a white velvet cap pressed down on her soft, bright, wavy hair.

"I must fly and get a book; I'll be back in a minute, Mamma." Without awaiting an answer, she turned, and, carelessly greeting her stepfather, hurried out.

She got into an electric tram going down to the Tauentzien-strasse. On the way, she drew forth a dainty letter on lilac paper, which she read with some amusement, but with deep interest as well.

Since that pleasant Sunday at the Ribbecks', she had often had similar sentimental little outpourings from Felix Schiller. At first, she had merely laughed at them; there could be nothing "serious" with this young man. Her friends would stare indeed if they ever heard that she, Ella von Reeren, the smartest and most conceited girl in their whole set, was corresponding with a "young man" from Müllenmeister's. Nothing serious could be thought of with anyone below a lieutenant, or a millionaire's son. And yet she could not bring herself to repulse "the charming boy," and so have to do without his letters. Those high-flown, lyrical productions flattered her vanity; none of her earlier dancing-class adorers had written such enchanting things. . . And then she was such an enchanting little person herself! Besides, whose business was it if she chose to be romantic for once, and bestow her favours on one beneath her in the social scale? A flirtation need not lead to a wedding!

So she answered his letters. First with reserve, almost snubbingly—then more kindly; but with each one, the tone waxed warmer, more enthusiastic; and to-day, she had given him the first rendezvous.

Felix had feigned illness, and got leave from the shop for the afternoon. In a remote corner of the chosen tea-house, he was sitting in a finely nonchalant attitude, reading a paper. Ella took in at a single glance his

appearance: "Tip-top." His light grey clothes, perfectly cut, his well-chosen tie, his faultless boots—and that charming curl on his broad, clear forehead! . . .

As she entered, he sprang up and hurried to meet her. He had bought her three exquisite, long-stemmed crimson roses; and then he kissed her hand and led her to her place, where over chocolate and cream cakes they opened a conversation in the most correct drawing-room manner—theatres, Berlin gossip, a cursory glance at the affairs of the universe, and the newest sensation in literature. In the domain of modern novels Felix was more at home than Ella. He had a great friend in a bookseller's, and had just read the translation of a French novel, which in the realism of its treatment was thought greatly to surpass Maupassant and other "piquant" writers, and which had been censored in its German dress.

"Between ourselves, I don't know why the book is suppressed. I read its brilliant descriptions of some higher developments of cultured life in modern Paris with great interest. Improper? Not a bit. A few old-maidish minds might be repelled by some certainly very naturalistic details. . . But the study of such books implies some corresponding enlightenment in the reader; they should never come into the hands of children and immature people. Highly interesting, for all that."

And Felix rolled himself a fresh cigarette; his case, filled with "gold tips," lay before Ella. She took one, and he lit it for her. At the next table sat two older women, who were observing the pair with interest. "Modern youth!" said one of them, loud enough for the others to hear.

Ella bent forward a little, and lowered her voice to a whisper. "I suppose you think me very fast to have given you this rendezvous?"

"I? You—fast! Fräulein Ella! When I've been

nearly dying with longing for you—when I've actually thought of suicide. . ."

"Oh, nonsense! Suicide—don't be so silly."

"But I tell you the truth. If you hadn't answered me, something dreadful would have happened."

Ella looked thoughtfully before her. Close by, the adoring blue eyes of a charming young man, who had thought of taking his life because of his ill-fated love for her, were shining into her face. . . What a goose she would have been, if she had missed this delightful adoration through sheer missishness! The fire in his eyes lit a corresponding flame in her blood; her heart beat quickly, agitatedly; her pulse hurried. But amid it all she had a feeling that, for safety's sake, she must draw the line, so that when the right moment came, she could retire with a good conscience.

"Ah, we society girls!" she sighed with a lackadaisical upward look. "What lives we lead! In our girlhood we are absolutely without liberty, fast tied and bound by all sorts of decorums and old-fashioned ways of thinking, that ruin our youthful years. And then they marry us to a rich man, whom we don't love. There's our destiny. What chance of happiness have we? When are *we* to enjoy our lives?"

"Nobody should marry for anything but love. That's my principle. I am a modern man, but in that I remain an idealist."

"It's all very well for you, but our education and our habits predestine us to a certain manner of living. Unless we have millions ourselves, what can we do but marry money?"

"I grant that. But can one not combine the practical with the agreeable? Is it impossible to love a rich man?"

Ella looked, somewhat perplexedly, into her companion's flushed, laughing face.

"You're thinking: 'what does the poor devil mean? An employee at Müllenmeister's, the son of a half-broken manufacturer!' But I assure you, Fräulein Ella, that I should never have dared to approach you if I did not *know* that later I shall be able to offer you all that you could demand from your future husband."

Ella looked at him again, expectantly this time. Felix threw his cigarette into the ash-tray, and began the biography of the Vanderbilts, Goulds, Astors, Rothschilds, and other *richissimes.* All these families had poor ancestors. But millions were lying about the streets nowadays, and one only needed to know how to find them.

"I. . . Look at me, Fräulein Ella. Do I *look* as if I were intended to lead a poverty-stricken existence?"

"No," said Ella with conviction. "Everything about you is—is smart and. . . and all right."

"There you are! I know that I can do great things, and I mean to do them. Depend on that. *I* shall find the loose millions in the streets! My love for you is the talisman that gives me superhuman force. One of these days, I shall lay millions at your feet. I shall take my fairy-tale princess to a fairy-tale castle. . . I love you, Ella—I love you."

The two ladies at the next table were gone; for the moment, they were the only people upstairs. Felix sat down beside Ella on the plush-covered sofa. She resisted a little as he put his arm round her, but the slight withdrawal was more provocative than discouraging.

"What are you doing? I shall go away at once, if you are not good. . ." But without a word, he kissed her. Then she gave in, and returned his kiss.

CHAPTER IX

At about the same moment that Ella entered the tea-house in the Tauentzien-strasse, her mother was greeting her first guest, the bank director, Ferdinand Van Hoolten. He was an old intimate of the house, and had known Erica in her girlhood. When she became a widow, he was the first to place himself at her disposal as friend and adviser. At that time he had shown her so much attention, and intervened so ostentatiously in her affairs, that everyone—herself included—had looked upon him as an aspirant. His millions would have been sufficient reason for her even then sacrificing her freedom, for in his colossal wealth he had the magic key to the fulfilment of her wildest dreams of overpowering "smartness" and bewildering luxury.

But oddly enough, Van Hoolten *père* never seemed to interpret rightly her hints that he need not despair. At any rate, that was how Erica explained it to herself when he suddenly went abroad for some time, and after his return visited her but little. In her view, he had resolved on quiescence, not daring to risk a refusal; and his continued neglect of her supplementary encouragements was nothing but masculine density and shyness. Their intercourse grew slighter and slighter, and when they had met about a year ago, at a party at the Müllenmeisters', they had greeted one another as those who have ceased to be intimate. But ever since Erica's marriage, Herr Van Hoolten had appeared regularly on her "day"; and now their old intercourse was as flourishing as ever.

Herr Van Hoolten was short and thin, but the quiet grace of his movements, the conscious security of his bearing, gave him the stamp of an influential and unusual man. Despite his want of height, he was an imposing personality, impossible to overlook. He was just fifty-four, but his clear complexion and the almost unwrinkled smoothness of his delicate-featured face made him appear at least fifteen years younger. His eyes had the cool, keen look of a great man of affairs, and under his silver-grey moustache there ever lay, as if engraven, a fine, half-courteous, half-cynical smile.

He handed his hostess a bouquet of orchids, grown in his own conservatories in Wannsee.

"Let me see you in the light, my very dear lady," he said in the casual tone of an intimate of many years standing. "There's a little shadow in your eyes. I hope your otherwise incomparable appearance is not deceptive. . ."

"I am well," said Erica, smilingly. "But the little shadow—who is without one, here below?"

"*You* should be. You should know nothing of shadows. You need, like my orchids, warmth, warmth, and again warmth—the sun, the sun."

Erica sadly smiled. They moved to a little table under a group of palms, and the Indian servant brought tea.

"Now confess, dear friend. . . What can I do to drive the shadow from your lovely eyes?"

She sighed. Lynegaard's intolerable behaviour—as she thought it—had unusually angered her, and in her anger she felt a lively need to speak out plainly to someone. To whom could she better give her confidence than to the old, tried friend who had frequented her father's house, who took so unselfish an interest in her welfare, and who—a gentleman to his finger-tips!—would know how to value that confidence?

"My husband is going in the autumn on another long professional journey," she said, laconically.

Van Hoolten's eyes lit up with varied feelings—there was a little malign satisfaction, a little triumph, above all a little creeping of desire. . .

"I must tell you that the news of your second marriage surprised, not to say overwhelmed, me," he observed, after a long silence.

"Why?"

"Because you are not framed for that Philistine arrangement of legalised union with another human being."

"How do you mean?"

"You are too good for it—no, too good is not the right phrase. You are in every respect an exceptional being. If one may compare women with flowers, you are like a wonderful orchid. The rose is called the queen of flowers. So she may be, but I have no fancy for queens in general. You find roses in every peasant's garden. The orchid is, so to speak, a Queen of Sheba among the flowers." He drew his hand caressingly over the velvety blooms, like mauve butterflies, in the slender crystal vase. "An exotic—a rare soul, for whom one builds palaces of glass, who needs special service, who will not thrive with vegetables and the *bourgeoisie* of the gardens. . . Do you understand?"

Erica nodded. Over the rim of her Sèvres teacup, her eyes encountered the strangely significant glance of the Bank director. She grew a little confused; that same look in his eyes had once made her think that he loved her, and wanted her for his own.

"Can one fasten an orchid to a stick with a hempen cord? And how can an ordinary mortal—and we men, in our lamentable earthiness, are all ordinary mortals—have had the unheard-of audacity and. . . and vandalism, to subject a Queen of Sheba, a woman like you, to

the yoke of a commonplace marriage? We have known one another too long for me to approach you with flatteries. But this is my serious opinion: you belong to that race of solitaries, who, in 'the daily round' together, lose their fragrance, their lustre, their very individuality."

Erica nodded again. "I decided on it with a heavy heart. But there was nothing else to be done. I had been living a little past my means, and ruin was impending. That was *my* fault."

"No fault. A necessity of nature. Superfluity and luxury are for you the mere conditions of existence."

"I would have economised, but for Ella's sake—"

"Why did you not trust me enough to tell me?"

She was silent.

"I will tell you what you want. You want a friend who cares for you, and has perception enough to divine the most mysterious impulses of your nature, and to clear from your path all that might impede you. You want a friend who cares for you too much to lay upon you the heavy fetter of a legal monopoly, who can build a palace of crystal for your orchid-like beauty, who will cherish you incessantly—a friend who is able and willing to set you in the frame that is fitting for you."

He stroked the white hand, stiff with rings, which Erica left in his—strangely overcome as she was by the winning, almost tender tone, whose suggestive sweetness made her forget that the sense of these flattering words was rather peculiar as addressed to a woman of social standing.

A ring at the door destroyed the situation.

Friedrich Müllenmeister, who entered, felt instinctively that he was disturbing something. He enquired for the girls; and was told that Ella might be home at any moment, and that Karen was sure to be in the "gar-

den-house," with the Matreis. That was her fixed quarter.

Friedrich pricked up his ears.

"The Matreis?"

"Yes, I think that's the man's name, at any rate. I don't know them—they are poor people."

Would his hostess permit him to take the child for a walk? He had a slight headache and had only just looked in to say "How-do-you-do."

"But of course. One of the servants shall fetch her."

He eagerly said that he would like to fetch her himself. It would interest him to meet Matrei, who was a writer.

As soon as he was gone, Van Hoolten resumed their conversation.

"Now, dear lady, you will promise me, won't you? that if ever again you feel in need of a friend, you will remember me as your most devoted slave."

"Indeed I will," murmured Erica. "The knowledge that I may count upon you is a great help to me in any case."

But there sounded another ring. Fresh guests arrived, and after a while the Müllenmeisters. It was very seldom that Joshua found time for an afternoon call; but a special purpose had brought him to-day.

They all stood about in little groups or in couples, drinking tea and talking. Joshua and Van Hoolten found themselves together.

"Well, my dear Müllenmeister, how are things going? Can one at any conceivable time be of any further service to you?" said the director, chaffingly.

"Why, in the course of the next year if you could manage from forty to sixty millions—"

"Forty to sixty millions! Ho! ho! Pretty stiff. It must be for a shaky notion, eh?"

"Not in the least. For a sound, demonstrably ro-

bust, vigorous notion. May I give you a hasty sketch of it?"

"You're not in earnest? Forty millions!"

"That might be enough for a time, but sixty would be better. Let us sit down in that corner for a moment, so that I may give you the general outlines of my plan?"

"Certainly; I am all attention to learn what sort of auk's egg of an idea you are hatching now!"

"You know that some years ago I acquired six sites in the Friedrich-platz," began Joshua, when they were sitting together in the anteroom.

"Yes; you intended, as you then hinted, to build a warehouse there later on."

"Quite so. The sites represent to-day a value of nearly five million marks. Their situation, close to the Leipziger-strasse, makes them, for business purposes, positively priceless. I have an idea of building a second place there; I've looked at it from every side, and am of opinion that the venture will pay the better the more grandiosely it is carried out. If, for example, we were to found a company—we might call it 'Emporiums Limited, Müllenmeister and Sons,' with, say, for the present about fifty to sixty millions capital, of which our family would take over about ten millions, I believe that my idea could be carried out in a measurable space of time."

"And your idea is?"

"In the first place, to buy the quadrangle of houses between the Leipziger-, Mauer-, Friedrich-, and Kronenstrasse, within which region my sites lie. On this quadrangle, between two main and two lesser alleys of communication, with entrances in all four streets, one could have a magnificent erection."

"Beyond question. But remember the competition, already in full force, of the big places in that region. And then—the whole quadrangle?"

8

"My dear sir, the man who, in our sphere, dreads competition, should never have put a finger to the business. Moreover, thank God! the competition of the emporiums is as yet based on the sound principle of self-preservation. Our prices are fixed; we're not like the small specialised businesses, and have no notion of 'squeezing' and other manipulations. Our game is not trying to strangle one another, till somebody gives out, and shuts up shop; we rely upon the principle that each shall do his damnedest for his own and the public's advantage. And in that contest we go to the very utmost point of our resources, quite regardless of whether the others are doing the same or not. It's our affair—not theirs. We want to live; but we don't want to kill. . . But apart from all that, a monster establishment is bound to do well in that situation. Within the next few years, the underground railway will run from the Friedrich-strasse to the Spitten-market and it is as good as settled that the Friedrich-strasse station will be somewhere in the immediate neighbourhood of my sites. The Leipziger- and Friedrich-strasse, on account of their narrowness and the constant traffic in them, are not to be thought of for the entrance, neither is the Mauer-strasse. Thus the Kronen-strasse, at the opening of the Friedrich-strasse, would be the spot—so that the whole throng of people coming out of the underground station would be cast up at one door, as it were. The most strenuous methods of attracting customers will in this way be amply repaid."

"Yes—if all these 'throngs' are to be regarded as possible customers."

"You would have to know the physiology of our houses to understand our methods of attracting great throngs. Believe me, of ten persons who enter an emporium with no intention of buying, at least eight will come out with a little parcel, even if it's only a pound

of grapes or a couple of yards of ribbon or a remnant of calico. They'll buy—depend upon it. Therefore the best and most effective advertisement is attractions, which perhaps seem to have nothing to do with the business, but which draw great streams of people into, or even only through, the house. Once we get them in, the buying can take care of itself. For example, I think of building an ultra artistic hall for élite concerts in the middle of the house, and a similar one for popular performances with the cinematograph—both so placed that visitors must go through the ground floor and a part of the first floor to get to them. And then we shall have salons for inexpensive beauty-culture, including baths. Wait till you see how popular-priced manicuring, say, at seventy-five pfennigs, pays! For as the crowd will be big enough to need numbered tickets in rotation, the time of waiting will be passed in looking round, and—buying. Do you see? That's our game—manicuring is trumps!"

Van Hoolten laughed. "Oh, when *you* take up a thing! In the meantime—" His face took a reflective expression, and, gazing at the ceiling, he drew in his underlip beneath the grey moustache, so that for a moment the whole of the upper row of his splendid teeth was visible. "When one's thrashing out a big affair, one asks oneself first of all the general question: Is there a visible need? And in this case I should not absolutely say that there was."

"I grant you that the neighbourhood is not precisely crying out for another emporium; but on the other hand, my opinion is that there *is* a need for a focus of fashionable trade, represented by a really efficient mercantile undertaking. You must not forget that we propose to have something quite unusually good. We want to develop new sides of our business—for example, the export side, the, so to speak, travelling warehouse, the

'Great Despatch' . . ." Joshua stroked his beard and paused. "A few years ago, I made an experiment. At the time, we had just purchased the entire stock of a cretonne factory in Alsace, which had failed. For the first time in my life I had miscalculated; the purchase was too large, and there were a lot of fancy goods, Pompadour designs, which had, in the interval, gone quite out of fashion. Well, I gave my buyer in the Near East a few pattern-books to take with him—and it turned out a surprisingly good idea. We sold, in that year alone, four hundred thousand marks' worth in Herzegovina, Servia, Roumania, Turkey, and Asia Minor. Then I made up my mind to push that line of business all round, in the future—on a definite principle, possibly that of giving our buyers abroad staffs of travellers, who would take goods on trial to regions which were likely to be profitable. But unfortunately such a system is beyond our present resources."

"How did you propose starting this undertaking?" asked Van Hoolten, after a short silence.

"As a Share Company, in which my sons and I, as I said, would participate to the extent of from eight to ten millions. I reckon that the X—— Bank would find me ten millions more, at least. With that, the business would be done, for if the X—— Bank enters to the tune of ten millions, public confidence is at once secured and the capitalists will come in. I reckon also on a great co-operation of former shopkeepers, who, if they take a certain number of original shares, will be given prior consideration when the time for selection of heads of departments arrives."

"Then your primary intention is evidently to have the upper hand whatever happens. Of course that is not only natural, but simply inevitable, since there alone lies the guarantee for the success of the under-

taking. But, look here! it isn't a thing that can be settled like this, between meals, so to speak."

"By no means, indeed! Of course I am at your disposal in every way, and shall lay my plans before you in full detail, with definite proofs of the profit-producing calculations. I merely mean that *this* is the favourable moment for setting about the purchase. I am pretty certain that there are only four of the sites about which we are likely to have any difficulty. The other owners are not disinclined to sell, and we should not even have to apprehend exorbitant prices—provided, of course, that they don't get wind of my plans. I, for my part, have, as I said, not the smallest doubt that 'Emporiums, Limited: Müllenmeister and Sons' will do fine business—"

"'Emporiums, Limited: Müllenmeister and Sons' . . . Wicked waste of time, such a jaw-breaking name!" murmured Van Hoolten, "let us say, for short: E. L. M. and S.—Elmas! Capital!" The little gentleman rubbed his hands gleefully. "Why, the word pleases me; it sounds . . . well, *definite!* One beholds, as in a vision, the whole Elmas Universe. All Berlin walks on Elmas carpets, nibbles Elmas biscuits, dresses in Elmas stuffs, sleeps in Elmas beds, hears Elmas concerts, sprinkles itself with Elmas scents. Well, I'll think it all over thoroughly at home. For the moment, it seems like a fairy-tale, and one has to get used to the dimensions. You've given me a rousing tune; I confess, now I know the *leit-motiv,* I'm anxious to hear the whole work. Are you free in the afternoon on Wednesday week?"

"Of course. Thank you."

They rose to go. For a little while they joined in the ladies' conversation; summer plans were under review.

Van Hoolten soon took leave. His thoughts circled

round the big project, which had risen before him in nebulous outlines, as yet impossible to measure. When a great financial affair occupied him, all private interests sank into utter insignificance. Even the pale, beautiful woman, for whom he had had for years a "strong weakness," faded before the idea of Müllenmeister's new emporium.

Joshua was content with the success of his afternoon call. The X—— Bank had helped him at a time when his undertakings were still in embryo. He did not doubt that they would stand in with him now. In any case, it had been well to prepare Director Van Hoolten beforehand.

CHAPTER X

Friedrich Müllenmeister was something of a fatalist. Ever since he had heard by chance, some little time ago, that the relatives of Agnes Matrei in the back wing of the same house in which his stepaunt resided, he had confidently hoped for an opportunity of coming to know them. Thus he was not much astonished when it offered itself so very conveniently to-day.

And he thought it equally natural to feel, after ten minutes, as much at home with the brother and sister as if he had been for years a wonted guest in the small, comfortable room which served them both as working-quarters.

This little abode, with its pleasant, country smell of lavender, rose-leaves, and a hint of camphor, and its dark, shining mahogany furniture, reminded him of the dear old home on the Alexander-platz, of his mother's time. He even imagined that he saw a slight likeness to that mother in the slim, pale young woman.

She sat at her work-table in the window. After Friedrich had introduced and seated himself, she took up her sewing again. With machine-like rapidity and regularity her needle flew over the white cambric which she was embroidering with graceful letters or monograms.

Hans Matrei had turned round in his writing-chair to face the visitor. Within ten minutes the conversation turned to Agnes. That subject was evidently in the air; the interest of the two in their stepsister was unmistakable.

"Probably you don't at all know that our little sister is employed at your house," said Lotte.

"Yes; it happens that I do. I was struck by her extremely delicate appearance. She is evidently far from strong."

Frau Presser sighed, and began to tell him what a lovely, blooming child Agnes had been. Her little face was like an angel's; people used to stop in the street and ask what the enchanting baby's name was and whom she belonged to; and she had been so sweet and gentle and loving, and so easily led . . . At fourteen, she had had inflammation of the lungs; and since then she had never been really strong, and her whole nature had altered. It was almost as if the fever had awakened some hereditary tendency which till then had slumbered. That burning thirst for experience, that wild craving for enjoyment, which broke out in Agnes a few years later, had had something unhealthy, and disturbing about it . . . When she was confirmed, and had had to choose what she would do, she had obstinately insisted on going into a shop. They had not liked it at first, but after all—and Lotte sighed again—there was not much choice. What it meant for an entirely untrained woman, with no interest behind her, to earn her bread, *she* thoroughly knew. And moreover, Agnes had suddenly got so defiant and stubborn that it was best to let her have her own way.

"And does she like it now?" asked Friedrich.

The widow shook her head. "That is just what's making us anxious. She doesn't seem to like it very much. But we hardly ever see her, I'm sorry to say."

"Our poor little sister is suffering from the malady of our time," said Matrei. "I think that one finds this nervous unrest and discontent in greater or less degree in all the girls who work in the big emporiums. You, as the future owner of one, will naturally take

the other side; but I maintain that the emporium in its present form is a regular witches' kettle for all sorts of dangers and abominations to those employed therein."

"It is my brother's hobby," said Frau Presser, apologetically.

"Oh, I am by no means convinced that the organisation of our present emporiums is ideal, and am grateful for every indication that may improve their internal conditions," said Friedrich.

"Don't you think, then, that there must necessarily be something demoralising in the consciousness of spending one's best strength and best years, in common with hundreds of others, at a fixed and scanty wage, merely to fill the pockets of a single individual? In the small business, there is at least some personal contact between the employer and his employees. I go so far as to say that the whole atmosphere has an unhealthily stimulating effect on those who, day in, day out, exist in it."

"You oppose the emporiums on principle?"

Hans Matrei shook his head. "On the contrary." He was astride on his hobby. As subeditor of a political newspaper, he drew a small, certain salary, which was his means of existence. His free time he consecrated to a great work, "Social Developments" which he hoped to finish in two years. In this book, much space was devoted to the "development of new forms of trade."

His eyes shone, his sunken chest widened, his whole bearing became firmer, as he set forth to the attentive young visitor his ideas for wide-reaching changes in the emporiums of the future. The emporium of the future was not to be in the hands of one or of several capitalists; neither was it to be a combination of special lines of business, repeating in all but outward form the same exploitation of the producer and the employee. In the emporium of the future, every producer and

every employee, down to the house-servants, was to be a co-proprietor and beneficiary of the profits. "How is it to be done? So absurdly easily that one can only ask oneself why it has not occurred to somebody long ago. For the idea is not only socialistic, but profitable. See now—the whole thing is conceived as a sort of gigantic company-promoting under State supervision. The emporium of the present has already disposed of the middleman between producer and consumer; *my* emporium of the future goes a step further, and becomes itself the producer of the most saleable articles. Anyone who has been two years in the service of the house, and has not in that time got into any sort of trouble, is to receive, according to the position he occupies, a certain share, which will increase from year to year. In the first five years, the dividends will be added to the shares, so that this imagined holder does not enjoy until the end of that time the dividend of his share, which meanwhile increases correspondingly. If he leaves the business during those five years, he is paid only the value of his share without reckoning the dividends. I have calculated it very carefully, weighing every eventuality, and have come to the conclusion that it would be profitable to all parties."

Friedrich nodded. "I have always dreamed of something very similar. But our time is not nearly ripe for the promulgation of such ideas."

"Don't say that," cried Matrei. "We live in a age of efforts towards social reform in all directions. Don't say: Our time is not ripe. Say rather: Our time is lacking in the personalities which have the courage to initiate great revolutions. The Columbus of modern trade has not appeared, who shall set the egg upright; the Napoleon, who shall give the world a new illustration of the unlimited possibilities of an undaunted will."

"Yes, you may be right," said Friedrich, rather absently. "I am much interested in your work. I think, too, that there is much both to say and to write about the methods of these great trade undertakings in particular—"

But at this moment, the two little girls, ready to go out, appeared.

Friedrich was secretly sorry to go so soon. He longed to ask permission to come again. The little, friendly room and its pleasant inmates charmed him quite unusually. There was something restful in the atmosphere, despite the strewn writing-table and the monotonous sound of the hostess's needle, ever travelling to and fro—something Sunday-like, a quiet as of quiet churchyards. Yet anyone with observant eyes could see that the three inhabitants had had a grievous legacy from Pastor Matrei. All bore the visible insignia of consumption: the narrow-chested, asthmatic man with the visionary blue eyes, the woman, prematurely aged by care and toil, the pale, hollow-cheeked child.

Frau Presser was evidently still thinking of the first part of their conversation. "I wish Agnes would come back to us," she said, softly.

Friedrich started. Agnes! A strange longing surged up in him. . . Oh, to take her in his arms, and bear her away from the miasmic atmosphere of the shop—to bring her back here, to the home garden where she once had grown. She *belonged* here. Like a tall, proud lily, she should bloom again among these quiet, pallid folk, around whose brows the chills of death were hovering. . . The fancy haunted him, even when he was sitting with the children in the carriage, driving along the Kurfürstendamm to the Grünewald. Vainly he tried to dispel it.

They drove as far as the Hunde-kehle, but got out

there and went on foot across the wood towards Pechsee. It had rained in the early afternoon, but soon the sun had shone out again. The air was so soft and so filled with the aroma of the young pine-shoots that one almost seemed to taste their sweetness. The children went on, hand in hand; Friedrich followed at a little distance. On the horizon there was a drift of sparkling, darting sunbeams and wavering rosy gleams, as if beyond the pale-blue distances invisible hands were showering bright gold upon the earth. It was a world filled with beauty, young freshness, and clear tranquillity.

Such solitary wanderings in the open air were Friedrich's favourite enjoyment; his dreams of the future were intimately bound up with them. He rejoiced in every new sign of habitation—houses finished or only just begun. This exodus of men from the town seemed to him the essential solution of the social problem. Thousands were pressing out; but hundreds of thousands still herded like animals in their stuffy flats—at the best—while many more were in gloomy courts, damp cellars, wretched attics; their longing to get free, to claim their share in the great, wide world of God, restrained by poverty and infrangible fetters. And the land was so broad, so hospitable, with room for all!

In a hundred years, when the great emancipation was completed, the curfew-bell should sound at five o'clock every evening throughout the city. Then all should stream forth—all; only the watchmen should remain behind. And all round the metropolis should be a broad girdle of rural abodes. Beside the splendid villas of the wealthy, there should stand in their own gardens the modest homes of the lesser owners. For then there should be no "rich and poor," but only more or less endowed; and no masters and servants, but only leaders and executants. The consciousness of mutual

dependence, of mutual indispensability, must bring both classes nearer together, must take from intercourse its every sting, not dispelling social contrasts altogether, but equalising them, so that pride and arrogance on the one side, and servility and subjection on the other, should seem obsolete conceptions. . . And so, by six o'clock the city would be in darkness—the city that by day no longer presented a picturesque conglomeration of shops, dwellings, offices, and public buildings. In the city of a hundred years hence, all these would be arranged in blocks—a bank and a law-court block, a school and a shop block; and every square should have its own railway station, whence a network of underground railways should take men through the town, and out into the country parts. . .

Thus did Friedrich, in his wanderings, build up plans for a new social order in whose fulfilment he hardly dared to believe. But to-day, strangely enough, it all seemed far less visionary than heretofore. A curious consciousness of strength welled up in him—a self-confidence that he had never felt till now. As the future proprietor of a great emporium, it might be that to him was entrusted the task of setting upright, like Columbus with the egg, a drastic reorganisation, a standing example of what might be. He only needed to set the stone rolling. . . And suddenly he felt as though he saw the world with new eyes. The wood through which he was walking was a real, actual wood, not a piece of scene-painting; and all the splendour around him was warm, vitalising sunshine, not Bengal lights —and he himself was a man, conscious of the will and the capacity to bring sound ideas to life. . . But what had come to him in the last few hours? "Agnes," said a soft inward voice. . . And he heard the faint rustle of a woman's gown beside him, saw the delicate mouth that smiled its answer, the great dark

tender eyes, like stars—and again that burning thrill went through his being, and left him breathless.

He called to the children, telling them not to go too far, and then sat down on some pine logs, warmed by the coming sun.

"Gracious Heaven!" he thought. "I love Agnes."

The recognition was a relief. "And why should I *not* love her?" he mused. "Is there any reason why I should not? She is the daughter of a clergyman. Her relatives are well-educated, estimable people. She is not fit for the shop—she is too delicate and too refined for the noise and heat and struggle. She must leave it as soon as possible. . ."

His heart was beating fast, his face was burning. A great anxiety surged upon him. Suppose she disdained him? . . . And while, flooded with the rosy sunset, he sat upon the pine logs, making figures with his walking-stick in the hard sand at his feet, the thermometer of his hopes leaped rapidly from zero to boiling-point and back again, and he experienced a foretaste of all the joys and torments of first, conscious love.

The little girls, tired of romping, came back, and sat down on each side of him.

"Will you do me a favour, Herr Müllenmeister?" asked Karen, confidingly.

Friedrich looked up in surprise.

"Willingly, Karen," he said.

"Then please, Herr Müllenmeister, go and see my Aunt Mieze some day, and ask her why she never even writes to me now. I'm afraid she may be ill. I may not go there, and I feel so lonely without her. I wonder if she might come and see me just once? If she couldn't come to our house, she might come to the Matreis'. Frau Presser would let her, I know."

"Aunt Mieze? Isn't that Fräulein Meier?"

"Of Meier and Drinkmann in the Jägerstrasse—yes."

"I will see to it, Karen. I'll go to-morrow." He looked at her kindly, and stroked her black, wavy head. Agnes must have been like Karen, as a child. . . Karen smiled at him. Friedrich was the only one of her new "step-fostermother's" belongings in whom she trusted, and to whom she felt drawn.

CHAPTER XI

The firm of Meier and Drinkmann was giving up business.

Lisa Drinkmann had accepted Selmar's offer, and was to be married in the autumn. Mieze had at first intended to continue the business with the help of a manageress, but had changed her mind. In spite of a high-class clientèle, "the tailoring" was no El Dorado. There were already numerous applicants for the taking-over of the business; and if all went well, if all the outstanding debts came in and the price demanded was forthcoming, Mieze might have a couple of thousand marks over and above her invested capital—and that was her whole profit from the fourteen years of strenuous labour.

Much could not be done on the interest of her little capital. But even if she *had* earned a competence, Mieze would have felt disinclined, still fresh and active as she felt herself, to sit down with her hands in her lap. In these past weeks, she had been to see Joshua Müllenmeister, and he, who for years had known the pretty, friendly proprietress of the renowned *atelier* as a good customer, had promised her that she should have, in the autumn, the post of head of the reception-room in the much enlarged new department for ladies' dressmaking, with a salary of a hundred and fifty marks a month. Thus she had no anxiety about the future. One day, she was sitting at her desk and making out the accounts to be sent to customers. An unusual expression of bitterness and annoyance quite altered her pleasant face. For months she had seen and heard

nothing of Karen. Her letters had been unanswered, and now she had just heard from young Müllenmeister, who had been to see her, that Karen had never received them. They had been intercepted and suppressed, so that all intercourse might be cut short.

That was the end of all things! As if she, Mieze Meier, who loved the child as her own, who would gladly have shared her last crust with her, had not at least as much moral right to Thor Nickelsen's orphan daughter, as the guardian, and above all that. . . that. . .! Mieze choked back a naughty word, and stuck her pen so vehemently into the ink-bottle that there was very nearly a breakage.

Oh, *she'd* show them whom they had to deal with! And her pen flew over the two folios of a heavy bill. There were items that were four years old. No sooner had a hole been stopped than a fresh one was made. But now, credit was at an end. There was no longer any need to consider the customer's susceptibilities, and *this* lady had a husband who, it was to be hoped, would pay her debts.

Once Mieze stopped writing, and took up a newspaper with the report of a charity bazaar, that spring season, at Kroll's. There was a description of the wondrous smoke-blue chiffon gown worn by Frau Professor Lynegaard—formerly Frau von Reeren—who had been honoured by a conversation of five minutes and a half with Her Imperial Majesty. "Yes—the gown doesn't proclaim that it's on tick," murmured Mieze, maliciously, putting the bill in its envelope.

Then she rose, dressed to go out, and drove to the Kurfürstendamm. It was a warm, blue afternoon in May. The green of the trees had something triumphant about it; and a reflection of the spring sunshine played in the happy faces of the strollers on the promenade. The sweet summer-like air and the radiant green awak-

ened all sorts of hopes and dreams in the souls of men.

Mieze well remembered the time when a day like this had filled her with immeasurable joy. Since Nickelsen's death, she had never again been so gleeful as that. Under her veil, she felt her eyes grow dim. Now Karen had gone from her, she was more painfully conscious of her isolation; for Lisa, since her engagement, thought of nothing but her approaching marriage and her future household.

For the first time in her life, Mieze now often had moments in which a vague sense of losing heart fell like a thin cold mist upon her apparently dauntless spirit. After all, what did one live and strive for, when one had nobody in the world to cherish and love? . . . But fortunately her energy and gay courage soon drove away such moods; and even to-day she choked the tears back and tried to conquer her sentimental thoughts and memories.

Karen was just coming out, as Mieze rang. Their meeting was pathetic in its joy; and then Mieze had to go with the little girl to the Matreis'. She and Frau Presser soon made friends. Lotte had long had a warm, maternal feeling for Karen, and this common love for the orphaned girl broke down the external barrier between the simple, quiet seamstress and the lively Mieze, who, as ever, betrayed her old connection with the stage by the brilliant daring of her attire.

"I am shocked at Karen's looks," said Mieze; "she might have only just got over a serious illness. But I shall give the Professor a piece of my mind."

Frau Lotte nodded. "I don't interfere with anyone, nor gossip about their affairs, but I *do* think if people are bringing up a child, it's their duty to take some interest in it. Karen's left to herself the whole livelong day."

"Just like that incarnate fashion-plate of a creature,"

said Mieze bitterly. "I never could bear the woman. It's a sin and a shame."

An hour later, she sent to ask the Professor for an interview.

Lynegaard was keeping his room on account of a slight indisposition. When Mieze entered, hand-in-hand with Karen, he rose from the *chaise-longue* and greeted her. He had often seen her at the Ribbecks', and Thor Nickelsen had told him how devotedly Mieze had nursed little Rita, and what a true friend Karen had in her.

"You have come to take a look at your former little charge, Fräulein Meier," he said, pleasantly. "That is right! And I'm sure Karen is a little lonely without you—eh, Karen?"

"I have come on Karen's account, too—but it was primarily a business matter that brought me here to-day," said Mieze. "We are going into liquidation and are obliged to collect our outstanding debts. I wanted to ask you to look over your wife's account."

Lynegaard took the paper, and glanced over it.

"Four thousand two hundred and twenty marks, eighty pfennigs!" he exclaimed. "It must be a mistake."

"Madame will testify to its accuracy. She made a small payment on account now and then, but some items have been owing since 1895 and 1896."

The Professor shook his head. Erica was having her "toilet-day," and might not be disturbed. But indeed he hardly doubted that the account was correct; only it *did* seem a little stiff. . . Four thousand! And he had thought that all claims had been met. . .

"A batiste gown at four hundred marks?" he asked, mechanically.

"Yes; fifty marks for making. . . Two workers were busy with it for three days, morning and evening; and the rest of the charge is for real Valenciennes, Cluny,

and Brussels lace, and fine Karlsbad hand-embroideries, for all of which we paid down, so that we have lost considerably on the transaction."

Lynegaard went to his desk and wrote a cheque in discharge of the bill. Mieze receipted, with thanks.

"And now about Karen, Herr Professor. I shall make you no reproaches, although I do not think we have exactly deserved that the child, whom we brought up to girlhood, should have been taken from us *nolens volens,* and then wholly estranged. Karen learnt nothing bad with us; above all, she left the Ribbecks' a healthy, happy child—and see the poor little creature now! Is that the way a healthy girl looks? Had no one here a glance for her? You are Karen's guardian, but I, too, have some little moral right to her, for if all had happened as we hoped and arranged, I should be her mother now—yes, I can show you in writing. The child is the only thing left me of my hopes, and the only thing I have in the world that belongs to me and loves me. I *will* not have her taken from me like this—no!" Mieze's voice was choked, her pleasant tranquillity gone—in another moment, she would have sobbed aloud.

"But we do not want to take Karen from you, Fräulein Meier," said Lynegaard, gently. "We only wanted her to get used to us. Why, come here, Karen—is anything making you unhappy?"

The child shook her head. "I am so homesick for Uncle and Aunt Ribbeck and Aunt Mieze," she said very low; then, on a sudden impulse, she threw her arms round her guardian's neck. "Dear Uncle Inge! Let me go back to the Ribbecks'—do! I'm nearly dying of homesickness, and I'm only a burden here—"

"A burden? Who says that?" Lynegaard made her stand before him: truly, she was deadly pale. Had Erica not noticed it? Pooh, what did she care about "the strange child that had been flung at her head"?

"In future, I shall send Karen either to the Ribbecks' or to you on Sundays," he said hastily, without awaiting Karen's answer. "And our family doctor shall be consulted about her delicate looks. Are you easier in your mind now?"

Mieze said yes, and took her leave. She was a little upset by the unexpected success of her visit to the Professor. She had not dared to dream that he would instantly pay his wife's big bill, and had been prepared with a circumstantial statement. Almost as little had she anticipated so kindly a response to her wishes about Karen. She could not resist going back to the Matreis and telling them all about it.

"I'm sorry for the man," she said, shaking her head. "He deserved a better woman. But that's life. Men are never so foolish as when they're choosing a wife. The cleverest come to grief. And he looks miserably ill; I shouldn't be surprised if he kne . already what a creature he's saddled with. . . But it's none of my business."

When she took leave of Lotte, she made her promise to come and see her next Sunday, with her brother and Irma; and of course Karen was to come, too.

Lynegaard had wakened that morning with a violent sick headache, which grew worse every hour. To deaden the unbearable throbbing at his temples, he pressed his head hard between both hands. He did not want to think, for thought made the pain greater, but he could not help being horribly annoyed by this business of the bill.

Four thousand marks! It was unbelievable. And Erica had positively assured him that she owed nobody anything more. For a moment he thought of calling her to account, but he did not feel fit for an explanation. Nor could he have seen her, since she used the day

on which she could not go out on account of her hair, for her complicated programme of beauty baths, which took up three hours and more. For these baths, she changed the water no less than seven times. The first was of fine soapsuds; then followed one of borax and almond paste. From that she changed to a water mixed with aromatic essences; then followed a light massage, for which the Indian servant was utilised—indeed, he attended her all through these baths. Erica had entrusted this office to the Oriental—who was very quick and skilful at it—on the rather peculiar ground that he knew no German, and in any case could not be regarded as a *man*—scarcely even as a person. . . When the massage was over, she had several sponge baths of perfumed water, and then, after another and more drastic massage, rested for some hours. On these days she was not to be seen by anyone on any pretext whatever, and very certainly not for anything disagreeable. That might have spoilt the whole effect.

Lynegaard suppressed an oath; a feeling of physical disgust almost choked him. A strange restlessness was in him, but his limbs were like lead, and every step caused frightful pain in brow and temples. The interview with Mieze Meier was still running in his head. The girl was right: it *had* been preposterous to take Karen from the people with whom she had a real home and was happy, and bring her into the arctic atmosphere of a woman who knew no other interest in the world than her own doll-like beauty. Erica did not even look after her own daughter. Ella was growing up, wholly undisciplined and unguided; she had picked up the external manners of a woman of the world from her mother, and was quite mature in such respects already. The indispensable veneer of education, proper to a society girl in Berlin, had been given her, but that was all. No one had any "duties" in this house—not even the

servants. It was no place for a child; he had seen that himself. Karen must go to school as soon as possible.

His headache was growing more painful every minute. Suddenly it occurred to him that if anything were to happen to him, Karen would be quite penniless, and that it was his duty to provide against such an event. He rose again, heavily, literally groping his way to the writing-table, took a sheet of paper, and began to write.

"MY LAST WILL

"I intend, in case of my death, that my ward, Karen Nickelsen—"

But what next?

He and Erica had no property in common. His legal heirs were his mother, who lived in Denmark, one unmarried sister, and the children of another who was dead. If he left Karen sixty thousand marks. . . or—yes; Karen should—

But his thoughts were scampering like mice through his head, eluding him as he tried to capture them; then tumbling about like drunken things—and all the while something cold and strangling, a dull, dead something, was paralysing his intelligence. Again he pulled himself together, with a violent effort.

"I intend that my ward, Karen Nickelsen shall have, after my death, a yearly income. . ." no. . . "until her majority. . ." no. . . "a sum from my estate, to be paid in full, of ten". . . no. . . "a hundred thousand". . . no.

He could do no more. The pen fell to the ground. He caught his head in both hands, and fell forward.

When, at eight o'clock, Karen, after vain knocking, entered her guardian's room to summon him to supper, she found him lying senseless on the floor.

The doctor pronounced it to be an acute attack of nephritis, with paralytic symptoms.

Erica was much dismayed. A tedious illness! That was the last straw. When she went one day by chance into her husband's study, she found the vague draft of the will upon the writing-table. She started—then tore the sheets and threw the fragments into the waste-paper basket. Any emotion was known to be most detrimental to the appearance, and as a rule she avoided it, but in this case she could not avoid a movement of indignation. In her view, Lynegaard's dearest duty was to provide for *her* in case of his death, and apparently his one anxiety had been for the "strange" girl. That embittered her so much that she could not prevail upon herself to go into the sick-room.

In the fourth week of his illness, Lynegaard died of heart failure.

His relatives telegraphed that they wished him to lie in the family vault in Denmark; and the unmarried sister came to take away the body.

The lady could not speak a word of German. She concluded, from the splendour of the house, that her brother had married a rich widow. She gave her sister-in-law to understand that she might have a certain number of Lynegaard's works, and that his own place, Lynegaardhuus, would be hers also.

The pose of bereavement was well utilised by Erica. In a few days all fashionable Berlin was talking of the tragic fate of the "lovely Reeren," who was now a widow for the second time after scarcely six months of happy marriage. It was hard luck. Erica thought so, too. Lynegaard might at least have secured her future. The marriage had not been worth while, from any point of view. Lynegaardhuus was a white elephant, which brought in only a negligible rent. The fact that a considerable number of her debts had been paid scarcely

counted beside the other fact that some fine wrinkles were showing round mouth and eyes, graven by vexation in the smooth enamel of her countenance.

There had been no talk of Karen in these agitated times. It was only on the day after the funeral, when the little girl happened to come in her way, that Erica bethought herself that *now* there was no obligation of any kind to keep the "strange child" any longer. That very evening Mieze got back her darling. By her request, Tobias Ribbeck was made guardian in place of Lynegaard. Mieze would keep Karen with her till the autumn, when she was to take up her post at Müllenmeister's; and then Karen should go back to the Ribbecks'.

The sojourn in the grand house on the Kurfürstendamm became for Karen an episode which, when she mused on it in after years, lay behind her not like an actual experience, but like a nebulous dream, or a picture in a book of which she had but turned the leaves.

CHAPTER XII

In Müllenmeister's shop, closing hour had struck ten minutes ago. The various departments were slowly emptying. In the "toys," the girls were collecting the things on the tables, and disappearing one after the other. Agnes Matrei was one of the last to enter the staff's dressing-room upstairs.

Languidly she drew on her thin, light-grey coat and arranged her cheap, but boldly curved, straw hat. Her special friends, Fräulein Hella from the hardware, and Fräulein Emersen of cash-desk 19, waited until she was ready.

"I say, Agnes, your coat deserves a follower! It has grown grey with honour—dare I say shabby?" said the Emersen girl.

"You may well say anything! But where's another to come from, unless I steal it?" shrugged Agnes.

"Let somebody give it to you!"

"Yes, Agnes, she's right," said Fräulein Hella. "If I had such grand admirers as you, I'm blest if I'd go about in an old worn-out coat, and a hat with crow-quills! If I couldn't get as much as *that* out of him, I'd chuck my rich friend. Why, I'd rather have my poor stock-taker than the Fancy Chief, for at any rate he knows the proper thing to do."

Fräulein Emersen nodded approvingly. "Then it's a regular, ideal love?" she said, rather mockingly. "I mean your affair with the Fancy Chief. On his side at any rate it looks like it, if he can't even make you a present of a new coat."

"Rubbish!" murmured Agnes, angrily. "What are

you talking about? I have nothing to do with the Fancy Chief."

The others laughed. In fact, nobody in the house really believed in the story. Matrei must have been bragging. Friedrich Müllenmeister was rarely to be seen in the shop, and never in the toy department; and Agnes always went about alone. Nor were there any signs of a particular understanding between them. The new antique department was not opened; perhaps that, too, had been bragging, and she was not to be head of it at all.

Agnes knew everything that was said and conjectured, and it greatly angered her. She had been so sure of her ground—else she would never have opened her mouth.

The three friends went part of the way together before they separated. Emersen was to meet her "young man" in Prälaten—he was a confectioner from the Spandauer-strasse; and Hella was to meet *her* friend, the head of the silk department at Müllenmeister's, at nine in the Potsdamer-platz.

"And what are you going to do now?" she asked Agnes.

Agnes shrugged. "I'm going for a short walk."

"You ought to get hold of something real," cried Hella. "Better a bird in the hand than a pheasant in a stranger's poultry-yard. Good-bye, child, and *do* better yourself."

They all went off in different directions. Agnes strolled on down the Königstrasse towards Schlossbrücke, and from there up the Linden. She was neither hungry nor thirsty, and the soft, caressing evening air did her good after the stifling atmosphere of the shop. She was peevish and exhausted. The pointed remarks of her colleagues had not improved her temper. What was her position in the shop now? She was simply laughed at.

And for *that* she had wasted all the really delightful winter months, had only been, with a few companions, to the Halensee, and for the rest—being convinced that she was secretly watched by Friedrich—had behaved like a nun. Some quite clear instinct had told her that he would come to her one day, and she had trusted to it.

But as week after week went by, and the weeks became months, without a word from Friedrich, she began to waver in her confidence. Perhaps she had just made a mistake. . . that was a humiliating thought. And she knew that she was beautiful! If only she had had some nice clothes—but in her threadbare garments, nobody would notice her. . .

As she went along the Linden, she stopped before nearly every shop-window. To plunge herself in this paraded luxury caused her an actual physical well-being. She could have spent hours before each window. She walked slowly, very slowly. There was no need to hurry; at home, in her dreary lodging, she would be sooner than she desired, and her scanty supper would not run away.

The Linden was her favourite walk. At every pore she drank in the atmosphere of luxury and refined enjoyment which prevails there. The movements of the idle, strolling, flirting, coquetting, chattering people, the indefinable hum of voices, the frou-frou of graceful women, the flood of light from the shops and hotels—all enchanted her, and made her forget for a moment her needy existence.

The great electric lamps shone like moons in the pale violet twilight of the spring evening. From the baskets of the flower sellers floated the sweet breath of blossoms. And all was enjoyment, beauty, refinement, with their many accompaniments. Behind the immense panes of a flower shop there shone a charming arrangement of orchids and La France roses—a symphony in mauve

and rose colour. Waves of fragrance from the exotic butterfly-blooms and the pale roses seemed to penetrate the crystal, whose soft, enhancing clearness gave to the flowers almost the illusion of life Agnes sighed with enchantment. . . Slowly she went on, to stop again before the display of a great jeweller. Over the black velvet cushioning there flowed a stream of petrified rainbows. Electric reflectors drew chords of colour from the bewildering glory of the gems. Between the sparkling dewdrops of the diamonds shone the deep radiant green of emeralds, the fresh dark crimson of rubies, the grave tranquil blue of sapphires. Dead-white pearl necklaces seemed, with their soft glimmer, like dreams amid that arrogant, insistent life. Agnes held her breath, a hot glow throbbed to her temples, her heart pounded. . . And a couple of doors farther on, a charming boudoir "interior" was arranged behind the glass: a gilded toilet-table in rococo-style, and lying on it a great, flung-down bunch of Parma violets, and an old Venetian fan. Elsewhere there stood a bronze vase with a bouquet of giant poppies, against a background of tapestry in splendid, faded colours. And a glass case held all sorts of costly trifles—porcelain, miniatures, chains of coloured beads, gems, clasps. Right in front, cast as if negligently on a gilded chair, was a dress—a dress? No! but a fairy-tale, a poem, of a strange opalescent silk and silver-glittering lace, fragile as a breath, fragrant as a meadow mist in moonlight. On the old-rose coloured screen hung a hat in white chiffon with cloudy, uncurled feathers. . .

"My God, my God!" said Agnes softly to herself. Her lips quivered, she tottered rather than walked, as she looked from the brilliant façades towards the dim promenade. But after about fifty steps she literally threw herself against the dazzling window of a *lingerie* shop. Almost deliriously her eyes fastened on the sea of lace that flowed in foamy billows over a bright gold

velvet background. She pressed her face close against the panes that she might see it all the better, as if drunk with the colour and beauty that she had fed on for the last half-hour. Her hat, with its "crow-quills," had fallen back on her neck; she cared not, she had but one burning, irresistible desire—to fling herself headlong into this rippling mass, and revel in it, feeling the cobweb-like loveliness against her skin, burying her face in the rapturous whirl of cambric and lace.

"And imagine all the sorcery of the needle enshrining the warm sweetness of a beautiful woman's form!" said a low voice beside her.

She shrank back, terrified. The man put up his monocle. He had followed her for some minutes, watching her with interest. Slowly she came back to place and time, and pushed her hat straight, confusedly. The man smiled into her face, and kept along beside her. "Perhaps she felt as lonely as he did," he said, laughing—"Would she spend the evening with him somewhere?"

Agnes looked indignant. "Why? Why should she?"

But he laughed again. "Why so stern, dear lady? A cross voice doesn't suit with your dear little face."

"Whom do you think you are speaking to?" asked Agnes, incensed by his light trifling manner.

"Somebody like myself," he answered; "a beautiful young lady who is looking for company, just like me. It's quite simple."

Agnes turned her back on him brusquely, and hurried into a side street. Soon she stood still, breathing deeply; and when she saw that the man had not followed her, a feeling of mortification and depression came over her. She felt suddenly that there was no reason why she should have fled. He had made a not unpleasant impression on her, and looked very well-bred, nor had he said anything actually offensive. . . But it was

always so. She was forever expecting some indescribable luck, "over life-size," as it were; yet had no clear idea of the form it was to take. But she was sure that only a man could bring it to her, and that it was inseparable from a great deal of money. For with money one could procure everything that made life sweet—dresses and jewels, a charming house, travelling, enjoyments. She knew several shop-girls whose luck had come to them through making the acquaintance of a "real" gentleman. These went to business every day, but in the evening, like grubs turning into butterflies, they stripped off their plain attire, and were metamorphosed into dazzling scions of luxury who, all a-glitter with diamonds, sat with their cavaliers in the boxes at the theatres, and supped at Dressel's. . . She knew others who did no more work at all, but lived like princesses with their own servants and carriages; and these were the most enviable in her eyes. It was for a lot like theirs that she panted. And she was aware that almost without exception these girls had made acquaintance with their "friends" in the shop, the streets, or the dancing-saloon; and so she often sought *her* luck in the same places. But somehow it never came off. At the decisive moment, some little thing—a shade of manner, a smile, often nothing actually perceptible—awoke in her a haughty stiffness, an irritating defiance, which utterly prevented her from yielding to the suggestions of her interlocutor. She was often sorry for her temper afterwards. "I haven't even the *nous* to make use of the opportunity when it comes; *I* shall never have any luck," she said to her friends "It's my destiny."

Again to-night she was minded to blame her "destiny" for the negative outcome of her adventure; but this destiny was nothing, in reality, but the influence of her childhood's home, of the sister who had guarded her in early youth, and, not least, of her own innate

purity, which defended itself against her own will, as it were.

"It is not intended for me; I must moderate my claims," she thought, discouraged. And following this resolution, she pondered on Elias Bielefeldt, the slim, elegant superintendent in the "gentlemen's tailoring," who had shown her marked attention and was plainly awaiting only a sign from her to approach more decisively. She did not dislike him; but hitherto she had been entirely discouraging. Two hundred and fifty marks a month—it would be a destiny like Lotte's! She *couldn't*. . . But to-day, tired, a little hungry, dejected, and melancholy, as she got home to her lonely lodging, the encrustation of vanity, thirst for enjoyment, and pride began to break away under the sense of isolation, and the influence of the warm, love-laden spring air. Suddenly she envied Emersen and Hella. They were strolling now with their sweethearts, or sitting somewhere in a music-garden, talking and laughing and enjoying themselves. No girl in the whole shop was so lonely as she. Tears of self-pity came to her eyes. But it should not go on. . . Elias had lovely brown eyes. . . I've *done* with that silly Friedrich Müllenmeister!"

Everyone in her lodging-house was out. But as she entered the dark little room, there floated towards her the sweet, heavy scent of red roses. On the table lay a great bunch, wrapped in tissue-paper, and a letter beside it. She hastily lighted the candle, and tore open the envelope. Her hot, avid eyes devoured the lines.

"DEAR FRÄULEIN MATREI:

"Forgive my boldness! The wish to see you again has lately got so strong that, even at the risk of being misunderstood by you, I cannot repress it any longer. I should so like to have a few hours' talk with you again. Will you grant me my wish? Perhaps you are free to-

morrow afternoon? I would, in that case, await you at four sharp at the Brandenburg Gate. I hope I need not assure you that you may confidently trust me. But should you prefer to speak to me at your sister's house, I shall be glad to meet you there, for I already know your relatives. In this case, please let me know. In the hope of a speedy and happy meeting,

"I am, yours devotedly,

"FRIEDRICH MÜLLENMEISTER."

Agnes slept little that night. Over and over again she lit the candle and read the letter once more. "Confidently trust him". . . The dear boy! A great sense of triumph welled up in her. So luck was really coming to her, too; the hoping and waiting had not been in vain. And it had been worth while to keep herself—for the One—who would make it worth while indeed!

Despite her joy, she looked so ill and worn-out next morning that her announcement that she did not feel very well was instantly believed. During the first "break-off," her colleagues in the toy department heard all about it, and in the second, Fräulein Hella and the Emersen girl, under pledge of "strictest secrecy" were allowed to read the fateful letter. By dinner-time the whole shop, from Rosen to the youngest "learner," knew that the Matrei girl was going out with the Fancy Chief. Her "leave" was surprisingly soon granted—by twelve o'clock she was free to go.

She had a strange, feverish sense of hesitating expectancy, of mysterious, decisive events to come . . .

A few years ago, in her intercourse with men, she had had but one purpose, one aim—the definite relation of marriage. But life in the shop and companionship with the girls had gradually demoralised her views; her moral sense was now impregnated with the poison of light love. She knew that in their circle there were

three categories. First, the "sensible" ones, the Philistines, the "geese," who went straight for the "whole thing": marriage with a minor official or a shopman was their highest, and indeed their only, goal. Then came the so-called "respectable girls" who took a sweetheart from inclination alone, and "walked out" with him. And then the "grand ones," the very clever girls, for whom the best was only just good enough, who meant to drink life in deep draughts, and for whom, therefore, the "rich friend" was the thing. And Agnes considered this last category the wisest and most practical . . .

At the appointed time, she and Friedrich met at the Brandenburg Gate. He had a carriage ready, and they agreed to drive to Tegel.

"I hope the roses did not cause you any annoyance, Fräulein Matrei?" said Friedrich.

"Annoyance—how should they? I was immensely pleased."

"I was afraid that your landlady or someone in the house—"

"Oh, they're used to that sort of thing," said Agnes. "Three of us lodge with Frau Schulze. Both the others have their affairs, and are often sent flowers. No fuss is made about *that.*"

"If I had such delightful relatives as you, I wouldn't live in strange lodgings."

"They're too far off for me. Remember how early I'd have to get up, so as to be in time. And I need my little sleep in the morning."

"Of course. But perhaps they would move a little nearer, for your sake."

Agnes frowned. "To speak plainly, I'm tired of my stepsister's and brother's rules and regulations. They always treat me like a child. Do you think that Lotte gave me a latch-key? Not she; I had to be in

at ten sharp. Of course I couldn't stand that. When one earns one's own living, I think one is entitled to a certain independence."

"Your sister means so well by you!"

Agnes shrugged. Both were silent for a while . . . Friedrich put his hand over his eyes. For an instant the dancing-saloon with its loud, painted women rose before him, and darkened his happy mood.

"And did you keep your promise? I mean your promise not to go to a dancing-saloon again?"

"Yes, I kept it," said Agnes; "and not only for your sake. I should not have cared to go there again. The company was too mixed for my taste."

"That is good—that makes me happy."

She coloured under his ardent look. He had never found her so enchanting. Her slender neck rose like a delicate flower-stem from the little square-cut collar of her simple muslin blouse. And the exquisite oval of her face! Possibly a finer array would have greatly despoiled her charm for him; it was just the note of poverty in her clothes which lent her the little halo of suffering, and moved his susceptible heart to irresistible emotion as he compared it with her almost startling loveliness.

During the drive the sky had clouded over; but as they drank their coffee on the terrace of the "Tusculum," the sun suddenly broke through again, and splintered into a million dazzling, glittering, dancing reflections on the sea, so that the waves quivered like blue flames, twisted in and out like gold and silver chain-work.

"Do you see the sun, Fräulein Agnes? That's a good omen."

She nodded, smiling. Then they strolled through the wood to Heiligensee. When they returned, it was growing dark. They had drawn so warmly to one another

in the eager talk of the last couple of hours that every trace of shyness had gone. Agnes had related all sorts of stories about the shop—the vexatious and the absurd accidents of every day; and Friedrich had heard with interest. Her tales of the daily life and activities of the female staff; of their thoughts, desires, opinions, were all new to him, and most arresting. For the first time, he understood something of the longing of these girls to wear the wreaths of pleasure in their evenings, after the dull, strenuous working-day.

It was real twilight now, and very quiet in the wood. Agnes ceased her chatter; for a while they went in silence. Then Friedrich drew her hand under his arm, and stood still. A glamourous sense of happiness enwrapped him; his voice was hoarse and urgent. "Agnes—Agnes. . . I love you. Do you know it?"

And she nodded gladly. "I know it, and I love you, too, Friedrich Müllenmeister."

He pressed her to his heart, and almost stifled her with his kisses. "How long have you known it, tell me, Agnes—how long?"

"From the first, I think."

"Yes, I think so, too—I think I loved you from the first moment. I hadn't the courage to tell you. I thought it was impossible that a girl like you could love an insignificant fellow like me."

"But, good gracious! you are Friedrich Müllenmeister," said Agnes, somewhat perplexed.

"Yes, and that is a mighty poor thing to be," laughed Friedrich. "But I understand what you mean," he added, more gravely. "People take it for granted that Friedrich Müllenmeister has inherited some of his father's qualities. And I hope I shan't fall *too* far below him. You at any rate believe that I have it in me to do something worth while—don't you?"

Agnes nodded.

"And you can wait—will you wait?" he asked. "In the autumn I'm going to America for two years. All that time you'd be quite alone, a lonely little love! We couldn't think of marrying for three years. Would you have patience with me for so long?"

They were walking slowly arm in arm. At Friedrich's last words, Agnes suddenly stopped, and flung herself on his breast with a vehemence that almost alarmed him. "Marrying? . . . Are we really going to be married?" she cried.

"Yes, of course: what did you think I meant? That I was going to love you platonically forever?"

"But I'm only a poor shop-girl," she murmured, almost sobbing.

"You are the finest lady in the whole world. . . A dear person," added Friedrich simply. "Oh, Agnes, you know that you are very beautiful. But, believe me, your beauty alone could not have so enthralled me. Mere beauty holds a man only for a time. I love you because I feel that you are good. I love your soul even more than your body. Do you believe me when I say that?"

She pressed her soft, glowing face to his. In that moment she believed everything. She believed in her own goodness, believed that no love but the legitimate married love had ever seemed possible for her. And she believed, too, that she loved him for his own sake, and that she would be true to him, even if to-day or to-morrow he were to lose all that he had, or ever would have, in the world.

It was quite dark when they came out of the wood. Hand in hand they went towards the lights of Tegel—laughing and caressing one another, wrapped in the moment's bliss, like the children of Paradise—before the Fall.

CHAPTER XIII

By the urgent advice of his doctor, Joshua Müllenmeister had made up his mind to knock off work for some weeks at midsummer, and accompany Henny to St. Moritz. The rest and the glorious mountain air had, during the first weeks, sensibly restored his jaded nerves, but then he was all at once seized with a feverish restlessness, an irresistible longing for work; and by the beginning of August he was back in Berlin.

The business had been in his hands for thirty years now, and all that time had been one continuous progress. At first, to steady march music, then at a running pace, then at a gallop. . . but just lately the speed had been terrific, so terrific that the lungs often threatened to give out. In these last six months the staff had been increased by more than a hundred. The vital organs of the gigantic, ever-developing body corporal were literally revolting against its own exuberant life; room was imperatively needed for the unlimited developments which were showing themselves as inevitable.

And yet Joshua did not feel that undisturbed satisfaction in his amazing success which he had been wont to feel when his efforts reached their desired goal. The consciousness that an alien influence was growing up beside him, and often overshadowing his own, paralysed his vigour at times.

The first incitement to acquire the cloth factory at Aix-la-Chapelle had come from Rosen; and it was Rosen, too, who had induced the firm to buy a patent for the production of cheap cloth from rags and inferior wool, which was turning out splendidly, though

the inventor had hawked it in vain round every textile factory of the country for the last two years. The cloth, which was sold at two marks a yard double-width, had a beautifully glossy surface, and unlike most cheap materials, was made in as attractive colours as the more expensive stuffs. It had already been four months on the market, and during that time business had increased tenfold in the already well-assorted department. "Müllenmeister's two-mark cloth" made a sort of sensation in Berlin; again people flocked from the furthest suburbs to see for themselves, and be convinced. And as the wonderful cloth (apart from the fact that sheen and colour would dull with wear) was undeniably a little heavy, it was a foregone conclusion that customers should ask to be shown an article that "would wear better."

In a neighbouring building there had been instituted a packing-room and a wholesale department; for orders were raining from the sky. In the factory the looms were busy day and night, making the new wares; but those on which the finer stuff was woven were also full. And Rosen's speculation had turned out as he had hoped in another respect: by his advice, the red cloth had been cut into pieces of from three to ten yards, and specially-instructed travellers had been sent to offer these to the military tailors for uniform-collars and facings at a "ridiculous bargain." The proverb of the sausage and the ham had come true in this case.

Moreover, the travellers for these cheap remnants took with them samples of fine "regulation" grey and dark cloths for cloaks and uniform coats, and the perfect carrying-out of all orders insured further custom. The great dream of an army contract was not, however, as yet realised.

In the beginning of February the firm acquired, through Rosen's agency, the bankrupt shoe factory of

Bergheim and Sons in Andreashof. Of the early history of this negotiation, Joshua himself knew next to nothing. It was in fact a question of a cleverly launched mortgage arrangement, which had got the Bergheim firm (none too well thought of in expert circles) into difficulties and driven them to call a meeting of their creditors. Through one of his numerous sources of information, Rosen had discovered that the firm was tendering for an English army contract for India, and was likely to be favourably considered. The preliminaries for its fall were, therefore, hurried on with feverish activity, while circuitous attempts to get into touch with the English government contractor were made at the same time. And before the taking-over of the factory was actually arranged, Müllenmeister's held the contract for delivery of twenty thousand top-boots, at forty marks a pair.

The Bergheim firm had made a speciality of ladies' light boots and evening shoes. In the middle of June began the great selling-off of the bankrupt stock. The beginning of the holiday season was the best time for light foot-wear; and that department at Müllenmeister's was in those weeks crowded as only Christmas time as a rule saw any special part of the shop.

The proprietor might well rejoice when he looked down upon the swarming crowds. The cash-boxes in the cloth and footwear departments were often scarcely able to hold the takings, and the figures for the whole day's business mounted daily, despite the otherwise "dead" season, until at last they surpassed anything that had been known in the house.

If only there had been more room! Joshua might have bought five more houses on both sides, and they would hardly have been enough. The want of space was becoming a real calamity. Already one newspaper had pointed out the "crying scandal" of Müllenmeis-

ter's premises, and had, describing the low ceilings, the narrow doors and staircases, demanded energetic action by the authorities to force the owner, on hygienic grounds and for the protection of his staff and the public, to set structural alterations in hand without delay. In some of the southerly rooms, the heat was unendurable during the summer months; many of the assistants had had fainting fits. And anyone who visited the shop during the dog-days breathed as if restored to life when the street was reached again.

Joshua could not but recognise the justness of such reproaches, but it was not in his power to make really drastic improvements. Ventilation was arranged for as best could be; but "to make structural changes in the interest of hygiene" meant, in plain words, pulling down the whole building and making a new one. The house was not fitted for such immense custom as the last few years had brought it. But there were many pros and cons with regard to building an entirely new establishment.

In these circumstances, Joshua would gladly have taken back his consent to the starting of a small department for antiques and works of art, especially as he had never taken the project very seriously. At present there was no space available, except a small isolated room of about seven by six; and that space could have been more usefully employed for some department already in existence, which would have enabled the "cloth" or "foot-wear" to be correspondingly enlarged. Rosen was strongly of opinion that the new arrangement ought to be given up for the present; but, oddly enough, this time it was precisely his intervention which induced Joshua to keep the promise he had given.

Rosen's credit with the Chief, and his power in the house, had both been much increased by his recent fortunate operations. Joshua was even beginning to en-

tertain the idea of associating him with Hermann in the future. Nevertheless there was always something in his mind that vaguely repelled him from the young manager. Rosen's manner had never given him the smallest reason for mistrust, and yet he was frequently conscious of the indefinable feeling that there was now an influence in the shop which, while outwardly loyal, was secretly undermining it—as if the apparently impregnable principles on which the house was conducted were, under the new régime, tottering even to their fall. But when he analysed such impressions, he was obliged to admit that there was no tangible ground whatever for them. They probably, he told himself, grew out of his own nervousness. As long as *he* held the rudder, there was no danger of the ship's foundering.

In the beginning of September the antique department was opened. It had a separate entrance from the street, and was connected only by a door with the shop. Feldbergen and Friedrich had personally superintended the purchases, and a collection of genuinely choice, rare pieces, some of which would have enriched any museum, raised the department far above the average dealers' business. Several of the Berlin newspapers published *feuilletons* on the new undertaking and its most notable treasures, and thus attracted the attention of connoisseurs.

Amid the faded Gobelin tapestries, the antique mass vestments, the old pictures and the carved furniture, Agnes looked like a beautiful, pale, wax figure of the Renaissance period. From the purely business point of view alone, it had been a happy thought to bring her here, where her beauty shone out as from its destined frame. Besides her, there was a young salesman, but he was often employed for buying as well, and so was frequently absent. Very often, when she was alone in her kingdom, Friedrich came, and they would sit in a

corner of the coloured, fantastic room, and make plans for the future.

In the summer, Friedrich had sent her for a month's holiday to the Spreewald. Besides Sundays, he came out at least twice a week, and they had had picnics in the neighbourhood or long tête-à-tête days in a boat amid the pleasant weather—it had been a glorious time.

Agnes was literally blossoming forth. A delicate rosy light now seemed to play through her pearly skin. Even unprejudiced people remarked that she grew lovelier every day. She still wore the shabby grey jacket and the hat with the crow-quills,—and wore them with a certain pride, as of a spellbound princess. The pretty, graceful, though not extravagantly sumptuous, things that Friedrich gave her, she put on only on holidays or when they went out together. All *that* seemed so unimportant now: this time of poverty-stricken clothes and crow-quills was nothing but an episode, beyond which stretched the wide, radiant future. Frau Agnes Müllenmeister! Often she would say the three words over in her mind for hours at a time, intoxicating herself as with rich, sweet wine.

The Emersen girl and Hella had been told of her secret engagement, and both took care to spread the sensational news. Two parties arose: one laughed at the credulity of the Matrei girl, who swallowed young Müllenmeister's humbug as if it were solid truth, and really imagined he would marry her; the other was outraged by the audacity of the creature, who could tell her colleagues such lies merely to make herself interesting and important. And this second party had the upper hand. Agnes had no suspicion of the sudden hostilities and jealousies she had awakened. The girls put their heads together and whispered: "What *was* she, after all? Young Müllenmeister had picked her up in a notorious dancing-saloon—she said so herself. . . And *that* was

the one who was going to play the Chieftainess over them!". . . The older women were particularly incensed: the young gentleman ought not to behave in such a way; it was putting a premium on immorality and disreputability. Would the Chief stand it? He ought to be told.

And anonymous letters began to fall on Joshua's writing-table. He read them, and put them promptly in the waste-paper basket.

While the adverse current in the feminine camp was confined to anonymous letters and whispered comments which instantly ceased so soon as Agnes appeared on the horizon, the masculine employees of the firm gave open expression to their annoyance at the behaviour of the Matrei girl, who had "flung herself into the arms of the highest bidder." For Agnes was not beloved by the "gentlemen," on account of her reserved and chilling manners. The one most affected was Elias Bielefeldt of the "tailoring"; but he quickly resigned himself to his fate. He had greatly admired her; but as a modern man, who knows higher ideals than love, he considered it beneath his dignity to mourn her long. Elias was the President of a Commercial Club, and much occupied with sociology. For a few days he went about, pale and cast down; then Agnes Matrei retreated into his past. *He* was not angry; but there was another admirer of hers who took it much more dramatically.

Emanuel Tük, first buyer in the linen department, had never obtruded himself on her notice. He had been too sure of his game to make any particular hurry; for Herr Tük was a dazzling *parti*, for whom every girl in the house would have given her eyes. The son of well-to-do parents—they had a curtain factory in Plauen—and himself, as heir to an aunt, the owner of a considerable property, he could have been independent any day he liked. But for the present he preferred his safe,

well-paid post. His salary was eight thousand marks a year, and as a friend of Rosen's, he was that personage's right-hand man in the business. By the staff, who knew his power, he was even more dreaded. He was said to be pettily susceptible, most rancorous, and entirely unscrupulous in his methods when he wanted to "get anyone the push."

With regard to his future wife, Emanuel Tük had various ideals. She need not have any money, but she must be a paragon of beauty and all the womanly virtues. Almost from the first moment of his seeing Agnes, her wondrous loveliness had made such an immense impression on him that he [illegible] rid of the desire to possess her.

Everyone in the shop knew that Elias Bielefeldt admired Agnes; but of Tük's hopes and wishes not a hint had got wind. [illegible] he watched her carefully, and it had been a great satisfaction to find that she repulsed all advances from the others, and maintained a cool, reserved demeanour. His time had not yet come. Even the ever-increasing rumours about her relations with "young Muhenmeis[illegible]" found no credence with him—until one day a [illegible] convinced him of their truth.

From that mo[illegible] his feelings for her altered into an irreconcilable and revengeful hatred. He had thought of offering her the enviable position of his future wife: that great, dazzling happiness had been intended for her, and she—she threw herself at the head of the first eligible young man that turned up! *He* had meant to make her into a queen, and she was ready to black another man's shoes. . . The fact that she had not the remotest idea of his intentions did not excuse her in his eyes. She had disappointed and mortally insulted him. That he could never forgive. And though his usual methods of reprisal—such as dismissal and other little tricks—could not be employed towards

young Müllenmeister's fiancée, he promised himself that she should some day have cause to think of him. In his raging spite, which was the more virulent because so outwardly repressed, he found a certain satisfaction in making friends with his companion in suffering, Elias Bielefeldt, who, for his part, was completely puzzled by the suddenly manifested cordiality of the buyer. But intimacy with so influential a person offered advantages which Elias could not afford to neglect. And so, at this period, Emanuel Tük and Elias were very friendly, though their opinions differed radically on almost every subject. Tük stood for the capitalist and a definite division of classes; in all discussions between chiefs and employees, he took the chief's part—while Bielefeldt never concealed his democratic views, and was eagerly agitating for an official trade union of shop assistants.

Tük was never very agreeable; but at this time he went about like an angry bull, ready to attack anyone who came in his way. When, as now, he strolled through the departments, glancing to right and left, it was a pretty sure thing that he would spy out something wrong, and that somebody would have to pay for it.

To-day he seemed to be in a particularly bad temper. In his right hand he waved a long-stemmed crimson carnation, which he put every now and then to his nose with a grotesque gesture. The veins stood out like thick, blue cords on his peaked forehead, above which the close, bristling hair rose in a reddish tuft. His brutal, square chin and full lips were hidden by a cropped red beard. The compact figure, with the broad swollen neck and the aggressive, forward bearing had something brutal, repellent, alarming about it. . .

Before the counter in the lingerie department stood Lotte Presser, delivering an order. In the course of her conversation with the manageress, she was suddenly attacked by a terrible fit of coughing: one of those shock-

ing attacks in which her little, meagre form was bent double, so that she had to hold on with both hands to the counter, lest the paroxysm—first straggling, choking, then rattling like the fall of bits of glass, then hoarse, broken, gasping—should bring her to the ground.

The manageress fetched her a chair. She was so exhausted by the attack, which had lasted a full minute, that drops stood on her pallid brow, and she panted for breath.

"My God, Frau Presser," said the manageress, pityingly, "how ill you look! You ought to take care of yourself."

At this moment, Tük came up. He had heard the last words.

"Yes, indeed, Frau Presser; you ought to get your sister to exert herself on your behalf," he said, with such unconcealed malice that Lotte looked up with involuntary amazement. "Fräulein Agnes might let you share a little in her luck."

"I do not know what you mean."

"Don't you?" Tük swung the carnation gracefully towards his nose. "I mean that your sister might surely intercede for you with her friend, Herr Friedrich Müllenmeister. He ought to be able to find you a post in the house, or a more lucrative employment. When one has the Pope for one's cousin. . .!"

Lotte rose. "I do not understand you yet, sir," she said quietly. "But it seems to me that your words contain a slander on my sister."

"A slander—very good." The carnation was flung on the counter. "What do *you* mean, madam? I speak in your interest alone. What are the love-affairs of our pretty lady in the antiques to me? Absolutely nothing. They do not interest me in the least. But you will scarcely deny that the—hm—*friendship* is a *fait accompli?* Your sister is so desperately proud of it that

she makes no concealment, I assure you. Only yesterday I saw the wondrous pair together at the Wannsee." He laughed loudly, and went on swinging his carnation.

The manageress gave Lotte the bill of delivery. "Do not be so upset, Frau Presser," she said with a sympathetic look at the little woman's deathly face. "You can't stop people's mouths."

Lotte nodded. She went mechanically to the cash office, where she got her money. Lately she had been feeling particularly ill; her work always tired her dreadfully in the hot summer days, and the coughing just now had so exhausted her that she could scarcely hold herself erect. In the corner where the jewel sale had been the year before, there were a few chairs; she took one, and sat down to think.

This Agnes! Here was a new anxiety. Since she had left them, the fear that she might have inherited her mother's light nature had kept the brother and sister in constant apprehension. Circumstances, joined to her wild longing for enjoyment, and her frankly confessed lightness of principle, would almost certainly drive her to something catastrophic. How often had the thought that Agnes, emancipated from family influence, and no longer under the protecting roof of the common home, might come to destruction, kept Lotte awake at night! But though Agnes was under the guardianship of her stepbrother, and though Lotte had acquired a moral claim through her early care for the little sister, the two quiet folk were lacking in such energy of initiative as to force her to return to the restraining influence of the family circle.

And now the trouble had really come. The trouble? Perhaps it was not so bad as all that. The name of Friedrich Müllenmeister tranquillised Lotte a little. She had a clear recollection of the young man's visit in the

early part of the year. It seemed to her that nothing really evil could come from that quarter. All the same, even if it were nothing—a mere flirtation or even a chance meeting—danger was present, for any attention from the young Chief might turn Agnes' head and get her talked about.

Lotte pondered, and suddenly an energetic decision braced her dejected spirit. She herself would go at once to the Chief and beg him to find some pretext for giving Agnes notice. Yes, that was what she would do! She would tell him all, make her reasons clear to him—that was the best, indeed the only solution. For she knew that it would be idle to appeal to Agnes. Ever since she had left them, Lotte had tried to keep in touch with her; she had ignored many mortifying rebuffs, and yet had not been able to prevent the girl's slipping away from them more and more, till she was now entirely emancipated from their influence.

With her decision there came a certain calm. But when she stood in the anteroom of the private office, her heart began to beat hard. She was fortunate: it was just the hour which was reserved for all personal applications of the staff to the Chief. In the anteroom she found Tobias Ribbeck, whom she had come to know through Mieze Meier. They shook hands. Tobias did not look flourishing either. His overcoat matched Lotte's cape in shabbiness, and on his wrinkled face Dame Care had visibly written her autograph.

Although he had been waiting longer, he let her go in before him.

When she stood before Joshua, Lotte suddenly felt confused again, and could not think how to begin. He came to he[illegible]d.

"You [illegible] for us—I know that much," he said, with his customary kindliness. "Do you wish to complain of anything?"

She drew a deep breath, and began to pour out her trouble, without circumlocution; the longer she spoke, the easier she found it. Joshua listened attentively.

"I understand your uneasiness, my dear madam," he said when she had finished. "But I really think you are making yourself needlessly unhappy. You have no idea of all the gossip that goes on among the staff. Your sister has been, though not long with us, promoted to an important post on the recommendation, I understand, of our Herr Rosen, and also because of her knowledge and capability. But such a course arouses envy, and envy soon evolves slander, as I need not tell you. I think I can answer for it that my son Friedrich is the last person to get any young lady in this house into difficulties. But, for your ease of mind, I shall personally observe the matter and let you know the result. Should you then still desire to remove your sister from our establishment, I shall willingly further your wishes, but until then, it is scarcely reasonable to deprive the young lady of her good situation, is it?"

Lotte rose, not quite at ease, yet hypnotised by the convincing power of the kind, considerate words. She faltered her thanks, and turned to go. Joshua opened the door for her himself, and invited Ribbeck, now the last of those demanding audience, to come in.

Lotte bowed to the shoemaker, and hurried past. Out-of-doors, where the midday autumn sun shone in summer-like radiance on the pavements, she had to put her hand over her swollen, reddened eyes, for the garish light hurt and almost blinded her. Her limbs were like lead—she went out so seldom, scarcely ever except on Sundays, for Irmgard usually delivered her work for her. Her feet were swollen from much sitting; it had been with difficulty that she got on her walking shoes. And these last nights had been sleepless ones; when she went to bed, at about three o'clock, the cough would not

let her rest, the terrible cough which for years she had been fighting in vain with every known remedy.

She leaned for a moment against one of the great brass bars of the windows. All the pains and aches of her poor frail body seemed to concentrate in a sense of infinite misery, and then to vanish, leaving her in a state of almost blissful annihilation, which drew as it were a soft blue veil about her eyes. Such attacks were familiar to her. For an instant, she let herself go, and sank into a great darkness, a divine Nirvana, wherein for a space the agony of life was forgotten. . . Then she pulled herself together resolutely. The moment was over; and with uncertain steps she hurried on to the stopping place of the trams.

Symphonies of deafening noises tore the air: ringing and whistling, rattling and cracking, screaming and humming—the concert of a hell choir, a whirl of countless ear-piercing discords. . . Through her burning brain mad fancies rushed like weird night birds.

"This *is* hell," she thought. "The world and life are the hell through which the poor lost souls from another earlier existence must be goaded. . . God knows all *I* must have done of evil to be so punished now." The fancy that in a former existence she had committed some infamous crime and was being punished for it, had long taken possession of her brain. Often at night, when her weariness had passed into a state of semi-consciousness, she would think of turning on the gas, and sleeping on with Irma into the delivering nothingness. . . But then the dreadful fancy held her back from that last step. If it was as she imagined, it would be useless, for either there was another hell elsewhere, or she would awake new-born, to begin a new life of expiation.

CHAPTER XIV

Joshua had greeted his former friend with a handshake, and pushed forward a chair for him. With the attention which he gave to each visitor, he had taken in at once the general appearance of the shoemaker; and in the moment before Ribbeck began to speak, had summed up the case: "Bad times." His acuteness never failed him. The threadbare work-a-day coat was naught; something else spoke, and made all clear to the observer—a shade of difference in the bearing of the aging craftsman. This was not the Tobias Ribbeck of the year before, who still kept, through all his troubles, his stubborn self-confidence, even a cheery belief in his final victory; who in his bearing and his intercourse with others was still the man with an assured position of his own. He who sat there to-day, uncertain, embarrassed, timid as an unpractised beggar, was the *cobbler* Ribbeck, the little, crushed craftsman who had lost, along with his trust in the future, nine-tenths of his free, proud manhood. Even his voice seemed softer than before, as though he had to make a humiliating confession. The last year had shown him unmistakably that handiwork was in a worse plight than ever he had dreamed, although he had not carried many illusions with him into his new way of life. The few customers, mostly of Müllenmeister's sending, who got him to make them "distinguished" boots, by no means sufficed, though they paid well, to keep up an abode in the front of a house in the Königstrasse—including a shop. The thousand marks which he had been paid as indemnity for his removal had gone almost entirely for rent, and he had to

count himself in luck to have had them at all—else he would have been distrained. On the first of the next month he was entering upon the tenancy of a small ground floor flat in a side wing of the same building.

It had been a heavy blow when, in April, his old friend Siebenschläfer had got inflammation of the lungs, following on influenza, and one night, with his favourite phrase "That sounds very well" on his lips, had slipped into the country of the real Seven Sleepers.[1] He had worked for a small wage, and as in the course of years he had become, so to speak, a member of the family, and had his board and lodging free, while his other personal needs were non-existent, he had never been hard put to it if in particularly slack times his weekly pittance was only half-paid, or even altogether missing. The new man was paid by the piece. And of course it had soon become clear that a standing workman was a mere superfluity. Ribbeck had then managed to do without him altogether, and for months had been doing all the business himself. Even for him there was not always anything to do. The few repairs were soon disposed of—for on the bench Tobias was second to none—and orders for new goods came in but sparingly. And living cost so much! Tom needed help, though the boy managed pluckily, and never willingly made a call upon his father's purse. And Tina was ailing again. Poverty was consuming her scanty strength; care was literally killing her. . . Yes, yes, there was no denying it: things had been rushing down hill during the year; and it was the old, long-familiar anxieties that had travelled to the new abode with them, more unconcealable, more crude and cruel than they had ever shown themselves before. . .

Master Tobias came to an embarrassed pause, and Joshua was not less confused by the secret consideration

[1] The name literally means this, in German.

of how he should best spare his old friend the painful request for a loan—for that was what he thought was the matter.

But Ribbeck began to speak again. In his many undesired leisure hours he had conceived the idea of filling up his free time with some lucrative work for the factories. . . Certainly, if anyone had told him a year ago. . . But life was now so hard. . . And besides. . . He had seen in the pay sheets that light dancing slippers were paid for at the rate of six or eight-and-twenty marks a dozen, and as the profit was clear—because the factories delivered the various parts ready for mounting —one might manage to do with it. Light dancing boots and shoes had been his speciality; it was just the fine, delicate work that he understood better than anyone, and he hoped, even with his private business, to be able to make at least one-and-a-half dozen weekly. . . And then at last Tobias came to the point: the Bergheim firm had gone in principally for ball footgear—would they now consider *him* favourably as a candidate for orders?

Joshua cleared his throat. Tobias Ribbeck—who a year ago had proudly rejected his offer to be manager of the department—was now begging for home work. . . The thing positively oppressed him, shook him, seized him a little. . . Then he swiftly promised. The factory was actually under Rosen's special sway; as he himself knew absolutely nothing about it, he had definitely entrusted this enterprise to his manager. . . but of course there would be work for Tobias. . . and with visible haste he scribbled some words on a card and handed it to Ribbeck, who as quickly thanked him, and vanished.

A quarter of an hour later, the leading men in the house came to a conference in the Chief's office. After the discussion of some current affairs, the "great pro-

ject" was again talked over, for Joshua's big plans for the future had been known for some time to the confidential personages of the establishment. Beyond that little circle of initiates, nothing had got out, and was not to get out, before the capitalisation was assured. The Chief's first cautious hints had met with such universal approval that he now had no hesitation in speaking quite openly of his ideas, though not as yet of the whole extent of them. And again they hailed his proposals enthusiastically, even those regarding the future management of the two houses. Hermann had, when the subject came up, exchanged a brief, triumphant glance with Rosen. Most willingly would he see his brother Friedrich at the head of the great new Müllenmeister establishment, if *he* might remain at the head of the old, original business. And now that the project had been ventilated, it was decided to be advisable not to wait too long for its realisation.

For everyone was in activity. A great Western establishment was known to be contemplating a new building which was to put in the shade everything that had hitherto been seen in the way of bigness and splendour. There were rumours, too, of a company which, in the extreme West, near the Zoological Gardens, intended to erect a gigantic place. Everywhere this young life, this spirit of the great shops, was dreaming dreams of magnitude, of immensity. And if a far-reaching new undertaking was in view, the sooner it was set about the better, before the others could anticipate; and it must be the Real Thing, it must be something stunning, something sensational in magnificence and range; that should beat all known combinations; else they might as well put up the shutters beforehand.

Ever since his father's first surprising disclosure of these plans, Friedrich had been in a fever. His boldest dreams were going to be fulfilled. While *he*, in the se-

clusion of his room among his books and pictures, or on his solitary walks, had chased the golden butterflies of fancy and helplessly watched them flutter away into a nebulous blue distance—a faithful steady hand had quietly planted the flower of his dreamings in the ground, the flower which would one day bloom forth in radiant actuality! Already it was striking root, was even budding. What he had hardly dared to hope for would come true. . . For nights and nights he never closed his eyes. Even his love for Agnes was for many hours and days obscured by the new greatness which dominated his thoughts. But there came moments in which he was ashamed of this detachment from the One and Only, she who had thrown golden tendrils round his heart and senses—it seemed like a breach of faith towards her. The time for his departure on the journey to America was coming as with seven-leagued boots, and he had not yet clearly decided what was to happen. That something must happen, was profoundly felt. He could not leave Agnes like that—for two whole years. But he could not provide for her either. To assign a certain sum of money to her use, whereby she might arrange her life more comfortably. . . no, that would not do, his instinct told him. If it should come out, it would compromise her; and besides and more than all, he was sure that the suggestion would vex her, and that she would coldly refuse it.

The shortest way out would of course have been to confide in his father. He felt sure of that father's admirable feeling; at any rate, there would be no fear of his suggesting a mean evasion of any kind. But always, when he tried to make a clean breast of it, the words stuck in his throat! It was not cowardice, but rather a hesitating modesty, a slight lack of self-confidence, and perhaps a faint sense of guilt. In his own opinion, even, he had no right whatever to bind Agnes to him. Who

was he, after all? "Why, you're Friedrich Müllenmeister!" she had cried. Yes; Friedrich, the son of Joshua, to whom the people attributed some of the ability and immense energy of his father. . . How grateful he had been to her for that cry! *She* believed in him, without waiting for proof. . .

"You might stay just a moment, Friedel," said Joshua, as the others prepared to go.

"Yes." Instantly it flashed through his mind that this might be a good opportunity for making the confession.

"Sit down for a minute—just a moment." And Joshua made some notes. "Well, Friedel, the time's running on," he said, still writing. "We were saying only yesterday that no one could tell whether you liked the idea of going or no."

"If it were only a question of liking, I had rather stay here," said Friedrich, simply.

"Really?" Joshua laid down his pen, and turned towards his son.

"Yes, indeed. Of course, only in one way. In another, I look forward greatly to all I shall see and learn; I hope it will turn me into a practical man at last."

"Hm, hm. . . yes. . . Yet at your age a journey abroad is usually attractive, at least unless there is something especially dear to be left behind—a little bride, or a secret love-affair." Joshua laughed. "For that matter, my boy, do you know that everyone says you *have* a love-affair!"

"I? A love-affair. . . Nonsense!"

"Isn't it? That was what I thought." Joshua's face turned suddenly grave. "There, where you are sitting now, sat only half-an-hour ago a poor little woman, ill and withered, one of those pitiful creatures who are, so to speak, the 'food for the guns' in our modern battle of life; she was complaining to me that her young sister,

who is employed here, was suffering under all sorts of slanderous talk in this house; and she begged me to dismiss that sister. I calmed her as well as I could, and promised to go into the matter. And do you know with whose name this young girl's is connected?"

"Mine?" cried Friedrich, beside himself. "Good God! what an abominable thing!"

"Yes; such rumours crop up, no one knows how. People are said to have declared that you had been seen with the girl at Wannsee."

"That's true. But to make a vile piece of gossip out of it. . ."

"My dear boy, if it's true, you can scarcely call it *vile* gossip. It is only too easy to understand that a tale should be made out of it." Joshua glanced at his son's burning face. "It was a chance meeting, I suppose?"

"No, Father. I asked Fräulein Matrei to come."

"That was inconsiderate, to call it nothing worse." Joshua shook his head disapprovingly, paused a moment, and then continued, before Friedrich could protest. "You know my views on that subject. Goodness knows I'm not petty-minded, nor a harsh judge of young people's follies. I have left you all imaginable freedom. Ever since your confirmation, you have had as pocket-money a sum equal to the salary of an intermediate official in our house; and for some years I have not limited your expenses. I have never sought to control the way in which you spend your evenings, so long as you come home at night. I have even, without protest, paid all sorts of bills in our name which did not exactly represent a young man's personal needs—bills from jewellers and florists, from modistes and ladies tailors. . ."

"Not of mine."

"Whether they were yours or your brother's, the principle is the same. All I mean to imply is that I am not a 'Philistine' in my views. In our position, young

men must become early accustomed to an independent manner of life, and I could accept this the more easily because neither of you has any tendency to wastefulness or debauchery. But one thing I have always preached: Keep our own house clean. Take your amours and your follies where you will, but leave the girls in my shop alone."

"Father. . ."

"No, let me finish! I will permit no relations of any kind between my sons and the girls in our business. I should not allow them in the case of our chief officials. I may be old-fashioned in this—I don't care. I take my stand on the principles which have entered into my blood, ever since my father's days. We then had seven girls in the house, and every one of them was like a child of it. My parents regarded these girls as something for which they were responsible, over which they must keep watch, and for which they were answerable to a certain degree. Times have changed, of course. With our huge staff, we could not preserve that old, patriarchal relation. We could no longer entertain the members of it to chocolate and cakes on my birthday and twice in summer to a picnic at Treptow. That is particularly regrettable for the girls. *They* have suffered most in the evolution of the small retail businesses into these immense affairs. Then, they had the same social standing as any citizen's daughters; and if to-day the label 'shop-girl' carries with it a certain depreciation, the fault lies for the most part in the new form of trade, which withdraws these young creatures from the personal influence of the Chief and his wife, and delivers them up to the public. In those days it would hardly have been possible for any rascally fellow who happens to be on the lookout for an adventure to walk into any shop he sees, and choose his prey among a lot of pretty young girls. . ."

"But, Father—"

Friedrich's eyes were getting brighter and clearer every minute, but Joshua had been suddenly swept into an unwonted tide of eloquence.

"It's a monstrous social injustice. The daughters of the houses in Victoria-Luisenplatz and the Kurfürstendamm are assured of a certain decency from the most licentious young men. No one pursues *them* with unavowable motives, *they* are not called upon to defend themselves, in the most literal sense of the word, although it would be easier for them, because they have the triple protection of home, family and society. But a poor little shop-girl, who stands behind the counter as on a stage, who is obliged to be pleasant and meet people half-way, who must show a quiet composure in answer to the shameless chaff of the young men who form a part of the public—why, that's an affair only fit for the *canaille*. The deuce! it's a fine thing, isn't it? when one of those fellows does succeed in 'having some fun' with a girl like that! Wonderful! to 'have some fun' with an unfortunate little wretch that slaves from morning till night, and then wants some air and movement and light! Hands off those who eat our bread. . . That I should have to say such things to you—!"

"Let me say *my* say at last. It is not as you think. In any case, I should have told you before I went. I love Agnes Matrei, I have engaged myself to her, and if you consent, I should like to announce the betrothal before my departure, and bring Agnes to you."

"Good Lord! Are you in earnest?"

"Father! Do you think I should make a joke of such a thing? For Heaven's sake! If it has come to their attacking her reputation on my account, there is nothing to be done but to proclaim our engagement without delay."

"You think so? And your idea was that it merely

needed a word from you to set everything straight; you are to sit there and tell me that you want to marry one of the shop-girls, and I am instantly to fall on your neck with my blessing. Was that your idea?"

"After what you have just said to me, I do not doubt that—"

"Go on, please!"

"You have just said that shop-girls deserve the same respect as the daughters of the Victoria-Luisenplatz, and, therefore, I do not doubt that the mere fact that she earns her own living will not prevent you from—"

"As a matter of principle, no. But I should like to know something even about the Victoria-Luisenplatz girl, before I accepted her as a daughter-in-law. How long has this been going on?"

"Since the early part of the year. That is. . . it occurred to me sooner. . ."

"And she has ostensibly a real affection for you?"

"Ostensibly? Why only ostensibly? She is so dazzlingly beautiful that she might easily have an admirer for every finger on her hand. I don't know how she could have looked at me."

"Oh, my dear boy! You are Friedrich Müllenmeister. It would need a considerable portion of self-denial in a girl like that to refuse *you* as a match."

Friedrich was silent. He had never regarded Agnes's reproachful cry in that light.

"She is a lady," he said, breathing hard; "and she has the ideas of a lady. She is of good family. Her father was a pastor, and she has had a thoroughly good education. Her brother and sister are delightful people."

"Good. But suppose I still say: 'Friedel, my boy, I don't like it, I won't have it. Put this nonsense out of your head.' What then?"

"Then we shall wait. Two years, three years, longer

if it must be. But to give up Agnes, to throw away the happiness of my life. . ."

"You do not need my consent, of course. You are of age, and your mother's fortune—"

"Don't say that, Father. You know quite well that without your consent, I shall neither announce the engagement nor marry. But you would give me such great happiness, and I should go, with a tranquil, joyful heart, to America."

Joshua took off his pince-nez and leant back with folded arms. His look went, in involuntary questioning, to the portrait above his writing-desk. . . "What do *you* say to it, Mimi? What are we to do with this silly boy? how set his head straight on his shoulders, and rid him of his foolish longings, without injuring that something in him which he cannot be himself without, because, lacking it, the whole complex structure of his personality would fall to pieces?. . ."

He knew the lovely girl in the antique department by sight. Immediately after the opening, she had shown him round. He remembered that he had followed her intelligent explanations with pleasure; nor had her charm escaped him. And, despite the sister's poverty, she had unquestionably the manners of a lady of the highest standing.

Joshua looked thoughtfully at the glasses in his hand. Before now he had felt apprehensive of the part that a woman might one day play in Friedrich's life. He was different from other young men of his age; it was impossible to measure his probable action by the same standard. With him all was soul, all feeling, and along with his extreme sensibility went much persistence and tenacity. He was the very type to be ruined by an unfortunate love-affair; any disillusion would most probably influence disastrously his entire future.

Joshua sat up, and pondered more deeply still. His

brain was accustomed to swift, practical decisions. Like lightning, it illumined for him the advantages and disadvantages of his consent or refusal. It was plain that this was no ordinary flirtation. Perhaps the two years' separation might solve the problem—the girl might get tired of waiting; but, if that were not so, one must be prepared, seeing the youth's nature, for any issue.

"I am far from desiring to influence you in your choice of a wife," he said at last, throwing his glasses on the table. "I am merely expressing my opinion. Everyone must cut out his life to the pattern that fits him. If you, at your age, feel equal to so momentous a decision, I won't stand in your way. So far as I am concerned, you may announce the betrothal."

Friedrich jumped up. In a joyous impulse he threw his arms round his father's neck, just as he used to do as a child when some long-refused wish was granted, for a "surprise." Joshua patted him on the shoulder, and pushed him affectionately away. "That's all right, my boy. May it be for your happiness! Now go and tell your news. You may introduce her to us this evening. By-the-bye, she will keep her post for the present."

"Oh, that won't be suitable, Father."

"That will be very suitable. I see no reason for taking the girl from her pleasant, ordered, and interesting work, merely because she happens to be engaged to you. If she really takes an interest in the business, she would not desire it herself."

"I only mean that people may think it strange that my future wife should go on being a shop-girl."

"I care nothing for what 'people' may think. For that matter, 'people' will probably think the engagement strange; 'people' will say I must be a fool to permit it. . . Your mother did not disdain to take a hand in the shop now and then; at Christmas with the toys, at Easter with

the eggs, at Whitsuntide with the hats, she was as good a saleswoman as there was in the shop. And what Frau Joshua Müllenmeister could do, without hurting herself, will certainly not injure Fräulein Matrei.''

''As you like. I am much too grateful to disagree about anything. I'll go over to her at once: how she'll stare!''

The clock struck two—lunch-time. But Joshua, unlike himself, delayed a little. As often recently, he had a slight, uneasy feeling of dissatisfaction. The sun was gleaming on the portrait of his first wife; but the features had assumed, in that radiance, a most strange expression of annoyance, such as had been very rare with her in life. He only remembered seeing her look like that once: at a time when he had been led by a cheap offer into buying a consignment of dress material, which turned out a fraud. Then her face had worn that same disapproving, almost rebuking look.

Pooh! it was nothing but nerves. . . He shook off the superstitious feeling; but he did not recover his right mood that whole day.

CHAPTER XV

At the house in Halensee the eldest son's fiancée was received with all the fitting cordiality. Henny had soon got over her astonishment at the news, and resigned herself to the inevitable with that composure which made her mistress of all situations that life could offer. As they made acquaintance, it was quickly evident that she and Agnes would get on very well together. Their souls had a certain affinity, and this soon induced friendliness.

Agnes admired Henny's "smartness," her incomparable knowledge of the world, the grace of her appearance and that charm which distinguished her in family, as well as in social, intercourse; and did her best to imitate them all. She soon saw that, in life, scarcely any art was so valuable as that of hiding one's feelings impenetrably under a mask of pleasant equanimity. And her first opportunity of practising this art arrived when she learnt that her position in the shop was not to be altered in any way.

In Henny's eyes Joshua's wish was monstrous, and could not but injure the girl in her social relations. Even Hermann, who spoke of his brother's engagement to his intimates as "one of Friedrich's sentimental idiocies," ranged himself on his stepmother's side in this. To keep the fiancée in the subordinate position of a saleswoman was an absurd idea of the governor's. . . But Agnes herself declared that she thoroughly sympathised with her future father-in-law's intentions; and this suppression of her real sentiments gained her so kindly a nod from Joshua that she was satisfied.

Her happiness knew no bounds. It was as if she were

floating on a soft, fragrant stream of ever-changing, never-ceasing joys; and not until the morning when, with the family around her, she stood on the platform at Lehrte and said good-bye to Friedrich, did she at all stir in her dream; but even then her eyes retained their shining brightness. Only, as the train started, she broke into an almost involuntary sob of passionate grief; and that night, and many days following, were marked out for her as those in which she realised what separation meant.

She could not then understand how she had been so blithe in the weeks that had just gone by. To what dangers was not Friedrich now exposed—and, simultaneously, her own happiness! The steamer might go down. . . and just at the time there came from America columns of description of a catastrophe in which thousands had perished. Or Friedel might fall head-over-ears in love with an American girl. Those transatlantic women with their terrific smartness were perhaps a greater danger than earthquake or conflagration. . . She felt a sharp little pang at the thought, and thus made quite sure that she really *was* in love with Friedrich Müllenmeister.

But she was growing much vainer; daily she discovered new depths in herself. Hitherto she had been vain of her beauty alone, but now she was becoming convinced that she had much besides to prize. Lots of girls were beautiful, yet they did not get hold of such a fiancé as Friedrich Müllenmeister. He himself had said that it was not her beauty, but her goodness, which had enthralled him; so it must be true. And as she gradually mounted one step after another on the ladder of self-esteem, to the topmost one of a sovereign consciousness of being a "super-woman," she really seemed to grow outwardly as well. Never had her delicate head turned more haughtily on its slender neck. . . She was become a blessing to them all! Already Hans and Lotte and little Irmgard were sunning themselves in her luck.

Joshua had taken a nice little four-roomed flat in the front of a house in the Landsberger-strasse for the brother and sister, and was paying a hundred and fifty marks a month for the keep of his future daughter-in-law. Any further assistance, unless it directly benefited Agnes, the two had politely, but firmly, declined.

And then, the staff! At present she had no actual influence, but she made up for it by royally lavishing promises of change in every direction. With the announced betrothal, the feeling in the shop had completely changed. The magnitude of her luck had disarmed her enemies; envy and disfavour were stifled. The fact made them one, as it were: this betrothal was an honour to all the female staff. From *their* ranks, the future Chief had chosen his wife; one of *them* was good enough to be the present Chief's daughter-in-law! That gratified them all, from the head superintendent to the youngest learner. And more luxuriantly than ever did there flourish in all the dark, in all the fair, heads, as they laid themselves on their pillows, those fantastic dreams of a future fairy prince, who should take his modernised Cinderella from the counter to his glittering fairy palace. What the Matrei girl had done, any of them might do. At any moment he might come—the fairy prince!

When Agnes appeared, all faces beamed, eyes and lips laughed, each vied with the other to say or do something pleasant, to heighten the mental thermometer of her self-esteem with a soft pressure of the finger. For the moment, she could have boasted of having nothing but partisans in the house. Her one adversary, Herr Tük, of whose state of mind she knew nothing, had taken two months' leave for reasons of health. When it leaked out that he, by his attack on Frau Presser, had set the ball rolling, and been indirectly the cause of the great happening, Herr Tük underwent a nervous seizure from the effects of which he was now recovering in South Tyrol.

Agnes dearly loved, in business hours, when her colleague could take her place and there was no fear of a surprise visit from "Papa Joshua," to make little tours through her future kingdom. Sometimes she would spend a minute or two in the "gentlemen's tailoring" with Elias Bielefeldt, her old admirer, to whom she showed—purely out of kindness, as she was solicitous to assure herself—a double portion of gracious friendliness. She knew his socialistic hobby, and occasionally let fall hints of future changes in the house with regard to the well-being of the staff. Then Herr Bielefeldt would look at her with an odd light in his beautiful eyes, and say smilingly: "Yes, Fräulein Matrei, the staff has every reason to congratulate itself on the future 'Chieftainess.' When one has learnt, by one's own experience, the needs of the employees, one sees things with different eyes from those who have always been in the higher places, no matter how good a telescope they may use."

When he looked at her on these occasions, such unrestrained admiration shone from his eyes that it almost passed the bounds of decorum.

"He is uncommonly cheeky," thought Agnes, yet she could not feel angry with him. . .

Thus she wandered between the counters, and flung the roses of her favour into the eagerly stretched hands of her colleagues. Even by Mieze Meier, in the separate department for dressmaking. would she now and then cast anchor, to look at the fashion papers and talk over designs for her trousseau. Mieze listened patiently, threw in a hint here and there; but when Agnes had left she always shook her head reflectively. Much as she liked the brother and sister, Agnes did not attract her. Her own comment on Professor Lynegaard's marriage jingled in her ears: "Men are

never so stupid as when they're looking out for a wife; the cleverest come to grief. . ."

Mieze's new post was not precisely a bed of roses. Hitherto her brave, gay temper had won friends for her everywhere; and, as formerly with her own customers, she enjoyed particular favour with the public and the higher authorities; indeed, only the most bitter prejudice could have resisted her cheerful sweetness. Nevertheless, she met with a freezing reception from her feminine colleagues, for no reason that she could discover.

At first, she had not been much surprised by the stiff reserve of the others, finding it quite comprehensible that they should like to know something about her before they became "chummy." But as week after week went by without any change, as her friendly advances were always met by the same cold withdrawal, her occasional little jokes by a faint, mocking smile, as she noticed again and again that whenever she approached, backs were ostentatiously turned and chatter cut short—she gradually realised that she was being confronted by an organised hostility.

From that moment, she played a waiting game. Her post as head of the reception-room for ladies' dressmaking was relatively light, for the *atelier* had not been open long, and was not greatly frequented. Her well-meant offer to help in the "ready-made" during her idle hours, was almost rudely refused; and once she had overheard a jeering remark, which unmistakably referred to herself, fall from the manageress, a snappy little person, still to be termed youthful: "Old women as ornaments are quite a new fashion."

Old women. . . Mieze looked at the glass in dismay. Was she really an "old woman"? The glass laughed at the joke. With her milk-white skin, her clear fea-

tures, her bright eyes, she was fresher and prettier than nine out of ten girls of twenty-four or five. Moreover, the ladies in the "ready-made," with the exception of the model (and even *she* was not a chicken) were all "getting on." Fräulein Iversen, the head saleswoman, was forty-five if she was a day, and looked even older with her grey hair and wizened face; the others were of much the same standing.

Mieze shook her head, but contented herself with observing further. The study of this unfamiliar sphere claimed her whole attention. The internal conditions of the emporiums had been to her, as to all outsiders, a sealed book. How often, when she had been shopping at Müllenmeister's, had she admired the order and cleanliness of the different departments, the pleasant, obliging service, the home-like, patriarchal atmosphere that seemed to belong to the place. Most people who bought there were persuaded that everything was very "comfortable," and the staff like one huge family party.

Now, when she breathed the thick, dust-filled air from morning till night, she knew not how anyone could stay in the place a moment longer than was absolutely necessary. Early in the morning, when she arrived, this part of the house was, as a rule, piercingly cold, for it was bounded by the wall of a staircase. If a window were open anywhere upstairs, and a door, leading to the staircase downstairs, were open, too, there was such a tearing draught in this room that the dresses on the stands actually blew about, and anyone who happened to be in the "ready-made" at the moment felt as if a wet, icy-cold cloth had been slapped about her feet. As the hours went by, and the central heating "drew," the temperature rose until, towards evening, when the lights added their heat and the exhalations of the crowds rose to the low ceil-

ings, it became so terrible that to remain any length of time in it was like the torments of hell.

Mieze began to understand why the girls in the big shops faded so extraordinarily soon, even the youngest of them looking quickly dull-skinned and tired. At first, when she got home in the evening, she used to feel as if she had spent the whole day in the train. Later she grew hardened, but even in her hardest working-days in her own business, she had never felt so utterly exhausted as now in the comparatively easier physical stress.

Only reluctantly could she picture Karen in the hubbub of the shop; but the child pleaded with characteristic pertinacity that she might be allowed to enter as a learner after her confirmation. The unfavourable conditions at the Ribbecks' had as yet prevented Karen's return to their roof. Tina was growing steadily worse; the little abode which they had taken up on the first of November was so cramped that scarcely even another bed could be squeezed in, and though they would have welcomed back their darling with open arms, and no thought of being paid for her keep, Mieze did not like to saddle them with the care of even a child, now that they were fighting so hard for their own bare lives. She herself could only have paid a very tiny sum towards defraying the expense. Nor did Karen herself desire it. During her stay at the Lynegaards', she had grown remarkably silent and thoughtful, even a little precocious. One day, she surprised Mieze with a talk about her future.

"*Something* must be done," she declared. "I am not an idler—I want to have my own place in life. Aunt Mieze, I want to work, to earn money. I have no talent. By far the best thing will be for me to go into a shop and learn to be a saleswoman, like Trude Schiller. You can learn better in a big shop than in

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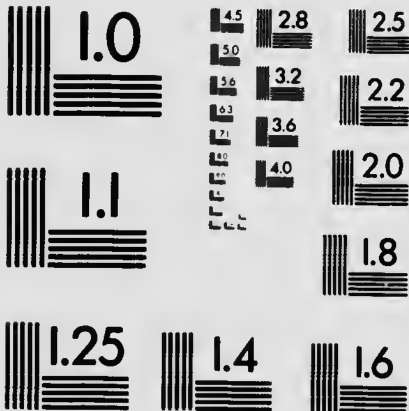

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a private business, Trude says, for you come to serving sooner, and learn much more."

Mieze tried to talk her out of the idea, but she stuck to it. Possibly Trude had influenced her.

Trude had entered Müllenmeister's in November as a cashier, and as such got thirty marks a month from the first. It was a genuine love for the thing that attracted *her* to the shop. Even as a little girl, it had been her greatest delight to loiter about in the emporiums for hours, enchanted by the noise and bustle, the thousand gay sounds and sights. Like a horse that scents the long-expected fodder from afar, she would, with her pretty little nose, snuff up, as it were, the bright, hot, palpitating air of the crowded bazaars. This parti-coloured world was her Paradise, her ideal, and for long beforehand she could scarcely await the hour when the gates of Eden should open for her.

Her father had made few objections. Of course, his Trudel was not just anybody, nor was it really necessary that a daughter of *his* should be a shop-girl. But —one must not stand in the way of young folk's happiness, and nobody could tell that it might not be just at Müllenmeister's that Trude should find hers. . . For instance, young Herr Müllenmeister had evidently been particularly interested in her last year at Ribbecks'. . . And besides—but this was no third person's concern—they might need the little help that thirty marks a month would be. Business was miserably bad. He had lost his chief customer, Müllenmeister, for Müllenmeister now had his own fringe-makers, and only gave out small orders which were very wretchedly paid. Prices for the arduous hand-work were lower than ever; with some things one could scarcely earn enough for dry bread. His son Johannes, who had always helped him a little, had had a long ill-

ness—inflammation of the lungs—in the autumn; he had caught it at the manœuvres, and had gone to the hospital. He was not really well yet. After his return from the Convalescent Home in Aix-la-Chapelle, he had not yet been found fit for active work, and was relegated to barrack service. The long illness had run away with his few marks of savings; if hard times came, no help could be looked for from him.

The younger, although he had been a salesman at Müllenmeister's ever since October, never seemed able to make his small salary do, and needed considerable outlays when it was a question of clothes or any extras. In these circumstances it was an agreeable matter that Trude, instead of costing money, should begin to earn a little.

But with Karen there were far other motives than any love for the thing itself.

"It doesn't signify *how* one earns money," she said to Mieze. "If one is efficient at something, one can always get on. If I came to Müllenmeister's, I should always be near you, Auntie."

This last argument was conclusive for Mieze. And besides—the child was right. She could not be entirely sheltered from the struggle for existence. . . So one day, Mieze went to Feldbergen, who was in command of the staff, and begged him to arrange that her little adopted daughter should be taken into the ready-made department as a learner.

As a matter of fact there was no vacancy for a learner in the "ready-made" that year; but Mieze pleaded so earnestly, and looked at the old man with such beseeching, pretty, sparkling grey eyes, and smiled with two such roguish dimples in her cheeks, that Feldbergen suddenly emitted a quite inconsequent question.

"Tell me, how old are you really, Fräulein Meier?"

"I? . . . Why, you have my papers, so it's no good telling a fib," said she laughing. "Only don't tell anyone! I shall be thirty-nine in no time."

"Well, I never!" exclaimed the Manager. "I should not have taken you for nine-and-twenty. Then at Easter the little girl comes away from school? We'll see what can be done, Fräulein Meier!"

Two days later, Mieze held a definite agreement that Karen should enter the ready-made department as a learner on the first of May. But often she still sorely doubted if she had done well to yield to the child's desire.

She had frequently had to practise self-control in her own business; but the manners here adopted by the public to the assistants often passed all endurance. The girls trembled at the mere threat of a complaint, and submitted to all indignities. For in a case of complaint the customer was of course backed up, and any repetition of dissatisfaction entitled the firm to immediate dismissal of the attendant. Indeed, even when there was no possible doubt that the complainant was in fault, the employee hardly gained an advantage: it was considered that she had not shown the requisite tact with customers, and would not make a good saleswoman.

When, one morning in the middle of March, Mieze entered her department, she saw at once that something quite out of the usual run had happened. Whispering groups were in every corner; all faces were either disturbed, pale, angry, or grieved and pitiful. In the "ready-made," sat Fräulein Iversen, crying. The other attendants stood round her, sympathising and whispering: a serious event was plainly under discussion. Mieze, as she passed through, caught a look full of positive hatred from the victim's red, tear-swollen

eyes; and the others' faces, too, expressed bitterness and contempt.

In the first lunch interval, Mieze beckoned to Fräulein Salomon, one of the *mannequins,* and the only person who was civil to her; and begged for an explanation. Fräulein Salomon had one of those rare figures which combine a Botticellian slimness with a certain roundness of form, and are as good as three separate *mannequins* to a ready-made department. The most elaborate "confections" suited her as well as tailor-mades; nay, her rounded slenderness could even display to some advantage the "Number 48" which, in ready-mades, stands for the very opulent figures. She knew her advantages, exacted a fitting wage, and permitted herself, in full consciousness of her assured position, many a little liberty which was forbidden to others. She was on the verge of thirty, and looked quite as yellow and faded as her older colleagues.

"What has happened, do you want to know?" she whispered, as she unwrapped her lunch, and sank down beside Mieze on the little basket sofa in the reception-room. "Well, to-day is the fifteenth, and blue letters are dropping about. Fräulein Iversen has had one. Levy and Bry are hanging on the brink, too, and will soon be pushed over."

"Fräulein Iversen been given notice! My God; why? She is almost irreplaceable in her business efficiency and knowledge," said Mieze, in consternation.

Salomon shrugged. "She's too old. Yes, that's it. . . She has worked in this house for fifteen years, and it *is* hard, especially as she has to keep her old mother and a lame sister. But anywhere else, she'd have been kicked out long ago. She won't easily find another place like it."

"That is really grievous. But I can't prevent it—

and I should like to know *why* they all look at me so reproachfully."

The other munched her bread and cheese, and stared. "Why, that's only human. I can understand her feeling."

"But why? It's not my fault that she's got notice."

The *mannequin* lifted her eyebrows. "Well, you know, it *is*, Fräulein Meier. Put yourself in her place. . . You have kept your looks marvellously and are still very pretty, though you're no longer a chicken; and that's why they're all so infuriated—that you, at your age, when the long-service girls are given the push, should have stepped into your good, easy post. Iversen might just as well have been given it. *She* has grown old and grey in the service, and is now chucked. . . And the others are saying it will be their turn next."

"Ah, then, that's the reason," said Mieze, thoughtfully. All was clear now. . . "I never dreamed of supplanting anyone," she said, after a little silence. "I simply went to the Chief and asked if he could make use of me in any way in the house. And he said, 'Very decidedly, Fräulein Meier,'—and a fortnight afterwards I had a letter to say that I was to be head of the reception-room in the dressmaking. If I had known how things were, I'd have thought twice about taking it. But if I were to go now and say that I was retiring in Fräulein Iversen's favour—"

"For goodness' sake, don't. It would be utter folly and would do not the slightest good. If the old guard is to go, it must go. What has been decided above can't be altered from below." And Salomon went on with her lunch.

Mieze looked dejectedly at the rolls in her lap. But soon the other began again.

"It's the way in our business. Anyone who hasn't

made her position secure at forty, may go and hang herself. We mayn't even grow old! It doesn't bother *me* much. If I keep my figure, I'll be useful at fifty; though Rosen has already given me to understand that I ought to paint." Then, after a pause: "But, compared with other houses, the old ones have been decently treated here till now. The Chief and Herr Feldbergen have never brought themselves to kick out anyone without some reason, who has served them faithfully for years. It's only since Rosen began to put in his oar that the great spring cleaning has begun. He must have said to somebody (they say he *did*): 'We want new blood. Young, pretty faces are needed behind the counters; the staff must be changed every five years.' And they did it so slyly at first! Only one at a time was dismissed in the departments; but when the general shove began, there was no mistaking." She shook the crumbs from her closely clinging dress, and got up. "Nearly all the scrubbers and dusters here were saleswomen in their young days. And when one thinks that one's slaving away one's life for that. . . But it's better not to think of it."

"Great light, great shadows," said Mieze thoughtfully.

Salomon sighed. "Very great shadows." She nodded pleasantly and hurried away—already she had been summoned.

Mieze wrapped up her rolls again: her appetite was gone.

CHAPTER XVI

THE house of Müllenmeister was having another of its great field-days, on which the exclusive ladies of the West End did not disdain to seek the old establishment on the Alexander-platz, and sh[illegible] in the wondrous bargains. This time it was an exhibition of exclusive Paris Spring models which was exercising the ancient fascination. Herr Rosen had bought them himself, and truly they were the flower of the first French houses. Even Mieze's practised eye could find no fault with his taste.

About twelve o'clock, the passage between the dress stands was full. Mieze was continually addressed by some former customer of her own, and asked for particulars about the "signature" and price of the models. Suddenly Rosen appeared in the throng, and requested her to attend to Frau Professor Lynegaard.

Erica greeted her coldly, and Mieze bowed with equal reserve. The lady gave extensive orders. Her official period of mourning was drawing to an end. Already, finding that the dead-black was unbecoming to the yellowish edges of her white-rose beauty, she had lightened her weeds by a wide stole of chinchilla. At the bottom of her heart, she hated sales on account of the plebeian flavour that attached to them. In that respect, she was not miserly, and always agreed without haggling to the most exorbitant prices. But these two last years had urgently impressed on her the value of money; hence she had come to perceive the very evident advantages of the sale opportunities.

Van Hoolten senior had kept his promise of standing by her in perplexing moments, to the fullest extent. The management of her property had been in his hands since Lynegaard's death, and since then she had had a tolerably comfortably income. On the first of April she moved into the first story of a house belonging to Van Hoolten in the Margareten-strasse. As yet there had been no mention of the rent; for him the chief point was that he had a good tenant, or at least he said so—and Erica had no reason to doubt his word.

He visited her almost daily. They were often seen driving together, and society had been whispering for some time of a third marriage on the "lovely Reeren's" part. Henny Müllenmeister had retailed all the gossip piping-hot to her sister, with unconcealed satisfaction; but Erica energetically defended herself against any misunderstanding of her "entirely platonic friendship, which excluded all other ideas," with Herr van Hoolten. As a matter of fact, she was now perfectly aware that nothing was further from his thoughts than to bind himself by marriage. And she was quite of one mind with him. She was easily persuaded so to be, since the persuasion brought with it so many agreeable [illegible]nces for herself. He had so often depicte[illegible] the advantages of a modern, free love over th[illegible] of the antiquated marriage relation that her original opinions were gradually being swamped. She was not of a passionate temperament, but neither had she any principles. Hitherto, her life had kept her in the paths of social discretion, not because the generally recognised moral law chimed with her own convictions, but because she had had no reason or opportunity to oppose it. She was not as yet confronted with a definite choice, but she knew that if one day she *should* have to choose between a life of unbounded luxury at the price of her quondam moral standpoint,

and a needy existence of "counting every penny," she would unhesitatingly decide for the former.

Mieze was taking down her orders. Erica's exquisite taste was in full swing; they were the treasures of the exhibition that she selected and ordered to be sent on approval—an evening cloak of Irish lace with sable trimming, an afternoon gown of strawberry panne, and a tea-gown of rose-coloured Liberty satin.

Close behind her stood Ella. In the last year she had grown nearly as tall and slender as her mother. She had turned away from the display, and was looking with enchanted eyes at a girlish Empire-frock of white tulle, thickly embroidered with tiny garlands of roses. Suddenly she turned and whispered to Erica, who glanced at the frock, and shook her head.

"But, Mamma—it's so absurdly cheap!" said the girl almost imploringly. "Let them send it on approval, at any rate. I *do* love it."

"That frock is, in fact, the least expensive in the whole exhibition, and it would suit the young lady beautifully," put in Mieze, who had been watching Ella's face, and was sorry for the young creature, who had plainly fallen in love with the white tulle. "I even think it would fit without any alterations."

"Yes—it would, it's my number," interrupted Ella. "Herr Rosen showed the things to Aunt Henny Müllenmeister and me a week ago, in the wareroom."

"Then may I enter it?" asked Mieze.

But Erica shook her head.

"No; my daughter has quite enough frocks."

Ella began to speak, but checked herself; then turned brusquely and left her mother. Her pretty head high, her hands convulsively clasped within her ermine muff, she went, with her long, swaying, graceful steps across the department to the refreshment-room. There

she got into a descending lift, which put her down in the silk department on the ground floor. She loitered between the counters and tables until she discovered Felix Schiller. He was standing in a corner, talking earnestly with an elderly woman, apparently a customer whom he had just served. After a while, she took leave of the young salesman with a friendly pressure of the hand. Ella seized the moment to sidle up to Felix.

His face beamed when he saw her. As always when she came for a little talk with him, he collected a lot of pieces of silk before him, so that he might seem to be serving her.

"Who was that?" asked Ella, casually.

"That? Oh, a customer, Frau Klebel. A very wealthy, most kind lady. She—just imagine! has taken an absurd fancy to me, and asked me to go and see her. Lots of fellows in our business go to her house—"

"Congratulations," said Ella drily. "What conquests you are making—quite incredible!"

"What is the matter with you, Ella? Darling! You look so—"

"I've been angry, furiously angry." She took a chair, put her elbows on the counter, and began to pour forth her woe.

. . . She had fallen in love with the tulle frock at first sight, and scarcely ever in her life had she coveted anything so desperately. Never for a moment had she imagined that Mamma would refuse to buy it for her, especially as she wanted a new evening frock. . . "And when she's getting eight hundred marks' worth of dresses for herself, at one blow! But for me—oh no! any thing does for me. I know she can't bear me; she hates me. Why? Because I'm young. Oh, you don't know what she is. As long as I wore socks and baby hats, she spoilt me, but now the sooner she

gets rid of me the gladder she'll be. When we meet schoolboys in the street, young cubs that were with me in the dancing-school, and they look at me instead of her, she's quite cross: did you ever hear of such a thing? But that's just what she is. All the world must look at *her*, only *her*. It doesn't matter who it is, silly boys or old mummies, gentlemen or workmen; *she* must be the one the heads are turned for, everyone must be on his knees to *her*. Oh, I know her!"

"But, Ella darling. . ."

"And now—just to spite her, I'd like to have the dress; and if I could steal it—oh, if I knew how to. . ."

"She wouldn't let you wear it, even if you could."

"Yes, she would. She's always knocked into a heap by the *fait accompli;* she has only energy enough to refuse you, to play dirty little tricks on you; she never stirs a finger when the thing's done. And she's much too stupid. . . I thought of borrowing from Mimi Müllenmeister, or asking Herr Rosen to let me have it on tick."

"No, no, Ella; not Rosen," implored Felix. "If I could only give it to you!"

"You? you poor dear!" Ella deeply sighed. "Oh, money, disgusting money! What is a poor wretch like me to do but make eyes at a rich man, who will give me my independence for the price of a wedding-ring? Yes, Felix, you must get used to the thought that one day it will all be over between us. The Vanderbilt millions *aren't* lying about the streets, as you imagine."

Felix rolled some lilac silk round his fingers. "I've always begged you to be patient, Ella. One can't do things from one day to another. Give me time, and I'll lay the world at your feet."

"Yes, yes; but meanwhile I'm miserable. I can't stand it much longer. Oh, that dress! A wretched hundred marks!"

"*Only* a hundred marks?"

"Yes—isn't it ridiculous? But when one hasn't got them. . . Goodness, Felix, you *shall* see me in that dress!"

Felix bent over the counter, adroitly displaying a crimson "merveilleux" the while, and devoured Ella with his eyes. "Look here! I'm not such a beggar that I can't manage a hundred marks."

"Oh, Felix, how could you? And I wouldn't take it."

"But you'd take it from Rosen!" said Felix jealously.

"Oh, as a loan. . . No; don't let us talk about it. I'll just have to bear it. One has to bear so many things. . ." She pressed her handkerchief to her suddenly streaming eyes.

Felix looked hastily around. No one was near but the good Frau Klebel, who was turning over the remnants on the tables.

"You must not cry, Ella; I can't bear it. You shall have the tulle frock. But I promise you! A hundred marks—why, it's nothing. Laugh, Ella; be happy—why do you shake your head? Do you think I'm bragging—promising something I can't perform? Laugh, mousie, *do* laugh!"

"Oh, *you*—"

"And when shall we meet?"

"To-morrow evening at nine, at Schilling's, the old place?"

"Yes, of course. Are you going already? *Auf Wiedersehen,* darling. Be happy, do you hear? Adieu, my treasure."

As Ella turned, she met the curious, searching look of the woman who had been speaking to Felix.

"She must have caught something as she passed," thought the girl, and lifted her little head with a

haughty smile on her still flushed face. The woman smiled, too, when she had passed.

When Ella had disappeared, this woman took a remnant of silk from the table and went with it to Felix, who, very red and visibly excited, was rolling up his silks with nervous, awkward movements. He started. "Frau Klebel?"

"Yes—only Mother Klebel," said the woman with a little good-natured laugh. "I see you are in the seventh heaven. And I don't blame you—she *is* a pretty girl! So smart—so graceful! Of high family, I take it?"

"The very highest. . . Our Chief's niece."

"Do you tell me so? A Müllenmeister?"

"No; a Fräulein von Reeren."

"Ah! And a very dear friend of yours, eh?"

"Oh, Frau Klebel. . ."

She laughed again. "You're thinking that old Klebel is an inquisitive animal! Aren't you? But don't be cross with me. I'm a lonely old woman. I have nobody of my own in the world, but my heart warms towards young folk. And young folk in the emporiums always make me so sorry. . ."

She drew out the last word in a plaintive drawl, putting her head on one side. Under her half-lowered lids she observed the young man, who was visibly fighting against many contending emotions. Frau Klebel was a well-preserved woman of fifty, with straight, pleasant features. In her long loose coat of black cloth, with a good fur stole, and her velvet hat discreetly feathered, she was a type of the honest, well-to-do *bourgeoisie*. The good-humoured smile was all in keeping, and heightened the agreeable impression.

"My acquaintances," she went on, "call it my hobby, but I don't care—it's *me*. I know no greater joy than helping young folks. When one of them comes to me

with his troubles and his needs and pours out his heart to me as if I were his mother. . . Ah, the difficulties they have! One will have quarrelled with his sweetheart; another has debts. . . and they all ask me so trustfully: 'Now, Frau Klebel, you'll put it straight, won't you?' or, 'Do help me out of the mess,'. . . and, you know, it's my delight if I can reconcile the lovers, or help the young man to keep out of the hands of the Jews. . . That's me! I'm an old, lonely woman, I've no one belonging to me, and more money than I want for my little fancies. . . Why do you sigh?"

"I wish *I* had a friend like that. I want one badly."

"And you don't trust Mother Klebel? If I could be of any sort of use to you. . . I've been noticing that you seemed worried about something. . . I'm an old, lonely woman, but I love young people—and nowadays I'm so sorry for them". . . Again she drew out her "sorry," and sighed as she spoke.

Felix struggled with himself for a moment. "I wish I had somebody to lend me a hundred marks—"

"Only a hundred?" said Frau Klebel, gently. "Good Heavens, is *that* all?"

"Yes; but I must have them at once."

"You shall have them this very evening, on the security of your honest young face!"

"Repayment?"

"When you like."

"Interest?"

"Now I could be angry with you! Do you think I'm going to suck your blood? Good God, the world's bad enough, but there still are folks who feel for young people. . . Only you must let me ask one motherly question! What's it for? Are you in debt? Is it gambling, tailors, or—a sweetheart?"

"The last, if you must know." Felix got as red as

a girl, but Frau Klebel's kindly laugh loosed his tongue, and unhesitatingly he now laid his heart bare to her. She heard with interest, her eyes shone, and the delicate colour that rose in her pale, somewhat spongy cheek, made her look almost youthful.

"That's pretty, that's romantic, ideal!" she cried in ecstasy. "It's just the kind of thing for me. Now look! You can count on me at any time. You are quite right to want to give the young lady a substantial proof of your love. She must see that you're ready to make sacrifices, so that she may the more gladly make *her* sacrifices of waiting. Now, ordinary people would say, 'This love is hopeless, and you should not spend money and get into debt for it'; but I have more romantic notions. It is my delight—this kind of thing. And do you know what we'll do? I. . . *I'll* get the dress, for if you were to see about it, it would seem odd, and set the tongues clacking. . . So come to-morrow evening for a little talk, and we'll arrange it all quietly. You must tell me a lot about your lovely young friend. I love to hear about such things. And who can blame me? I'm an old, lonely woman, I've nobody of my own in the world, I live only for others—"

"You are an angel of goodness, Frau Klebel," said Felix enthusiastically. "I'll come, if you'll allow me. . . If only I knew how to show you how grateful I am!"

"Who knows—perhaps you may get a chance to show me!. . . Then, the white tulle with the rose garlands—oh, I'll soon manage, I have some friends up there! I'll go straight up. Adieu, my dear young friend, adieu! You know my address? 41, Commandanten-strasse. . . Adieu, *auf Wiedersehen!*"

She went off quickly, as if uplifted by some great, joyful excitement, and caught the very last place in the

ascending lift. She got out on the first floor, and went straight to the crowded ready-made department. For a while she lingered among the throng; then discovered an attendant, who, when she saw Frau Klebel, started a little and tried to hurry past with a quick nod; but the woman stopped her.

"One moment, my dear. . . I want the white tulle there, with the rose garlands. Just take it down, please."

The girl looked anxiously around; but there must have been something imperious in the smiling face, for she then went to the stand, took off the frock, and, followed by Frau Klebel, carried it to the window to show her customer.

Klebel feigned to examine cut and material, meanwhile saying a few barely audible words to the saleswoman, who quickly changed colour. But the transaction was apparently simple. Frau Klebel now went, with the same girl, to the blouse department, and bought, almost at random, a woollen blouse for two marks fifty. The attendant wrote out a bill for the last purchase, and took both articles herself to the packing-counter, while Frau Klebel paid her two marks fifty at the cash-desk. The girl waited at the crowded counter until a certain packer was at liberty. The two looked at one another, and the packer imperceptibly nodded. When Frau Klebel came with her note of amount, the box containing the frock and the blouse was silently handed to her. She took it, thanked them, and left the shop.

Next day, Ella received the longed-for white tulle, with a glowing love-letter from Felix. She was delighted with her present, and thought no more about the circumstances. Her prognostication was justified. When she wore the frock for the first time, Erica showed some surprise, but, in her horror of useless

scenes and irritation, she suppressed the question on her lips. She chose to assume that her daughter had followed the sanctioned example of simply getting the dress "on tick," and, as always with accomplished facts, she chose the easy way out, and took no notice.

CHAPTER XVII

"EMPORIUMS, Limited, Müllenmeister and Sons,' was floated with a capital of sixty million marks. The X—— Bank had, in association with a private one, taken several shares at par, and offered them for subscription at a hundred and one and a half. The subscription list opened on September 20, and closed on the 28th. With the exception of fifteen millions which remained in the hands of the Müllenmeister family, and ten millions which the Banks retained for speculative purposes, all the remaining shares passed into the hands of great capitalists and speculators. Interest in the new venture was of course particularly keen in wholesale circles; but individual business men had engaged themselves to the amount of several millions.

Fifteen years before, Müllenmeister had acquired not four, but six, sites on the Friedrich-strasse, two of which were bought in the names of "men of straw." About the time that he conceived the idea of the company, he bought, again through a middleman, two more houses; so that when, immediately after the banks had taken the shares, the transfer of the whole complex concern was begun—again through agents, who operated singly—he could hand over the sites in his possession, with an enormous profit on some of them, to the company. Before there had been a turn of spade or trowel towards the new establishment, Joshua had raked in, by his sites alone, a clean profit of three million four hundred and twenty thousand marks. On the day of the official distribution of shares the huge building site had, with the exception of eight

pieces of land whose proprietors had apparently got wind of the things that were in prospect, passed into the hands of Müllenmeisters, or rather of Emporiums, Limited, Müllenmeister and Sons, otherwise "Elmas."

From that day onward a vigorous propaganda began for the new undertaking. At the most frequented corners, newsboys sold pamphlets with illustrations and detailed descriptions of "Elmas." The whole daily press of the city made the colossal new venture the subject of leading articles and *feuilletons.* The evolution of the firm of Müllenmeister was described, its small beginnings were chronicled—the cheap umbrellas which had first attracted a great influx of people to the old business; then were recapitulated the gradual ascending stages of success which, at first slowly, then with dizzy rapidity, had led to the coming "Elmas" palace. "Müllenmeister" and "Elmas" had suddenly become catchwords in Berlin. There were whisperings of the huge surprises that the new house was to offer. Elmas was pledged to realise all dreams of the complete and perfect method of great wholesale trading.

Already the active demand which had sprung up between the opening of the subscription list and the flotation on the stock exchange gave reason to anticipate that Elmas shares would develop into paper of the first rank. That had not lain in Joshua's plans; and the thought worried him at first, and almost spoilt his pleasure in the rapid development of the affair.

The demolition of the houses was begun with the New Year. On February 14, "Elmas" was quoted on the Exchange for the first time at a hundred and five. The newspaper articles and manifold rumours had set up an appetite for the new paper in capitalist circles; and enquiries far outran offers.

At this time the eyes of all interested parties were

fixed on the old house in the Alexander-platz. The successes of the original business were to a certain extent the pillars of the new house. A morning paper had declared that Müllenmeister had wound up the last business year with a clear profit in round figures of three millions. And on the morning of the Elmas début in the Burgstrasse, it was related on the Exchange that Müllenmeister had got an immense army contract for regulation gray cloth.

The fact was that Hermann had, by what might be called backstairs influence, got hold of a small approbation order for ten bales of uniform cloth. One evening he met his former Commandant, Non-Commissioned Officer Schiller (now employed at the tailoring-rooms in the barracks), in company with Selmar, the military master tailor, and the Superintendent of the military tailoring workshop, in which the uniform cloaks were made. Hermann invited the three to take a bottle of wine with him, and this gradually led to much conversation. Hermann showed his most agreeable side; the one bottle became four and five before they thought of breaking up. When the atmosphere was thoroughly mellowed, Hermann confided to them the "great dream of his life": an army contract. The Superintendent asked about quality and price, and promised to take an opportunity of mentioning the firm to his superior officer, who gave large orders on his recommendation.

Three months later, the firm of Müllenmeister was invited to send in samples of the cloth for military cloaks produced by their own looms. The result was the above-mentioned approbation order.

The brokers had big orders for Elmas. But the upset price remained low, and the quotations rose from a hundred and five to six—seven. . .

The little jobber Seligsohn had still a whole page of

orders to get through. "I'm buying Elmas. Who's selling? I'm paying a hundred and eight. . ."

"A hundred and nine! Elmas, a hundred and nine. . ."

There was a slight commotion. Some of the bigger brokers were apparently ready to deal. "Elmas, a hundren and ten! Ten!"

"Gentlemen, hold Elmas! Elmas is the paper of the future. Stick to it! Stick to it! Twenty per cent. yearly dividends. . ."

"Don't touch it! A newspaper with over a million subscribers can't go on; and an undertaking that's over-capitalised suffocates in its own fat. Didn't 'Printemps' smash, because it had too much working-capital?. . ."

The murmur of individual voices was lost in the general uproar.

About twelve o'clock Joshua Müllenmeister entered the Bourse. Van Hoolten, who had telephoned to him, came forward.

"I congratulate you, my dear fellow. This is a great day in the future annals of Elmas. You are the lion of the moment, and Elmas is the battle-cry of the Burgstrasse. . . Do you hear them? We're at a hundred and twelve, and shall, I hope, end at a hundred and fifteen. It's a sensation, such as we've hardly had since Laure's young days. . . See you again—excuse me."

Joshua kept a little apart. He did not care for the Bourse. Something seemed lacking to him there, the calm, almost infallible certitude, which lent him, in his office, that entirely natural air of sovereignty, of unlimited mastery. In the hubbub of the crowded shop, he felt like a captain on his bridge; but the swarming Bourse always oppressed him; its atmosphere was alien. The voices in that black, restless sea sounded like the dull seething of breakers. As if upborne by countless little waves, the word "Elmas" floated on the surface.

Sometimes it shrilled out, as if hurled by a towering billow, sunk and rose again, thundered and growled, murmured and splashed. . . "Elmas—Elmas". . .

"Elmas, a hundred and thirteen". . . He lifted his hat, and passed his handkerchief over his brow. The dizzy rise, so cleverly engineered, was almost unpleasing to him; it revolted his solid business instinct, which always reckoned with concrete things; he simply could not understand this juggling with words in the air. Again it was almost a superstitious feeling, as if he saw, in the anticipation of results which only the hard-won success of the house could realise, an evil omen. . . But by this time he had been perceived. People thronged about him, surrounded him, assailed him with questions, demanded all sorts of information. . .

Van Hoolten stood again by his side. In his delicate, usually so impenetrable countenance, there gleamed an evident joy in the amazingly quick success. It had been no easy matter to bring off this gigantic transaction; now it was being shown that his "flair" for good business had triumphed again. As he talked eagerly with Joshua, not the smallest fluctuation in the mood of the "House" escaped him. In the middle of a sentence he would stop to listen, break off, and plunge again into the knot of Elmas fanatics. . . The excitement was apparently dying down. Two well-known brokers—Simonreit and Felge-Fischer—were getting rid of Elmas shares. From a hundred and thirteen the price had gone back to nine. Van Hoolten slightly frowned. Felge-Fischer and Simonreit were his son's agents. Eddie had subscribed for a round million of Elmas. Evidently he was now getting rid of some of them. The director quietly gave his own orders, and a hundred and ten was quoted as the closing price.

Van Hoolten had invited Joshua Müllenmeister, three

members of the Elmas committee, and two of the chief shareholders, the Town Councillors Wewermann, owner of a great textile factory in the Rhine district, and Liebsohn, proprietor of the well-known porcelain factory of Liebsohn and Sons, to a little supper. They went in two automobiles to the Bellevue-strasse, where Van Hoolten and Eddie inhabited a large double flat with separate entrances.

They had just entered the drawing-room when three more men arrived; Herr Markus, head of the great building firm of Markus and Hennigs, and the two architects of the future Elmas palace, the Government architect, Dr. Seelen, famed for his delightful ground plans, and a young German-American, Herr Cornelius Arfst, creator of the four façades and the internal architecture of the future house.

They went to table at once. Edward arrived at the last moment. Both father and son lived very well; the former's cook was renowned, and his little intimate dinners and suppers had quite a name amongst gourmets. The dining-room—not too large, with genuine antique furniture of the French Late Renaissance period, in black oak, ran out in a round alcove to a winter garden, filled with rare palms and a collection of orchids. An invisible system of lighting filled the luxurious room with a warm, rosy glow, which harmonised with the soft, golden radiance of wax candles in heavy Renaissance silver holders. Similar candles burned on the sideboard, gleaming tranquilly on the rare old pieces, and the copies of Hildesheimer plate and other famous antique vessels. A valuable tapestry covered the wall opposite the sideboard; to the right and left of it hung old masterpieces: a "Poultry Yard" by D'Hondecoeter, an animal piece by Wouvermann, and a "Peasants Fighting" by Jan Steen, together with a remarkable landscape by an unknown French master of the sixteenth

century. Each separate piece testified to the fastidious taste of a wealthy connoisseur.

Supper was served. . . First, consommé Lyonnais, with sherry in costly long-stemmed glasses, followed by a wonderful fish course with vegetable sauce, and Hamburg *poussins* with mixed salad. The men were all—with the exception of Joshua, to whom meals meant merely an unavoidable waste of time, and possibly the young German-American architect, who ate hastily and absently—great gourmets; they lingered over each dish, and drank the rare wines with a kind of reverent comprehension. Mendel Mühsam was there, from the Tiergarten-strasse—him whom they called "Pastry Mühsam." His great-grandfather had established the well-known confectionery in Central Berlin under Frederick the Great, and for the sake of the tradition the family still kept it, though the Mühsams now were millionaires. But Mendel had invented a special kind of cake which had been much appreciated; moreover, he liked to worry out recipes and help his cook in the preparation of dishes. He was both gourmet and gourmand; he ate with flattering zest, like a starving peasant, had two helps of fish and three of fowl, delivering himself, between the courses, of choice stock-yard anecdotes and phrases, a peculiarity which, joined to his bluff, noisy manner, had gained him a reputation for being very original and *chic*. He was so corpulent that he took up two places at table, and in his rosy, laughing obesity presented an amusing contrast to Herr Markus, of whom it was said that he spent fifty thousand marks a year on his kitchen, and who, despite his passion for the rarest and most expensive delicacies, was so thin that his bones seemed to be starting out of his yellow, wrinkled skin.

Herr Markus bore the nickname: "Money makes not happiness"—a phrase that was often on his lips. Ma-

licious tongues maintained that he was particularly apt to produce it when one of his employees—he had a large land-agency business—asked for a rise of wages.

Opposite him sat the third member of the Elmas committee, Herr Richard Breuer, who put each morsel to his lips so slowly that he seemed to be smelling it all over first, but, on the other hand, disposed rapidly of his glass. His grandfather had laid the foundation of their enormous wealth by buying sites in Schöneberg; his father had speculated as luckily in land at Rixdorf, and he himself carried on the traditional success in the Grünewald colony. His most ardent ambition was to become a Town Councillor. To this end, he interested himself personally and financially in all great undertakings which were likely to excite widespread public attention, was chairman and committeeman of several important societies, and in that capacity was noted and feared by his co-operators on account of the noisy zeal and tireless energy with which he sought to impose his by no means negligible or unintelligent opinions.

The talk inevitably hovered over the great success of the début on the Bourse.

"I would like to know what ox it was that upset our price at the last moment with his rabid sale," said Herr Mühsam, who had just dealt with the last liver-wing, and laid down knife and fork.

Eddie Van Hoolten laughingly bowed. "I am at your disposal, Herr Mühsam."

"You?" Mühsam flung back his head in such amazement that the adipose tissue of his cheeks lay like two rosy flaps on his tall collar. The others, too, looked up in surprised disapproval.

"I'm still interested in Elmas to the extent of half a million," declared Eddie, coolly. "That's quite as much as I'm able for. The second half I took in too great a

hurry, and so made use of the opportunity to get rid of it."

Breuer shook his head. "You should not have done it. We're going strong; you sold too quickly."

"I think you were quite right." Joshua Müllenmeister took a sprig of lilac from a vase, and smelt it. "If you, as you say, bought too hastily, it was very wise to sell now. I do not think the price will rise; it is much more likely that the excitement will die down."

"How so?" asked several of the men as with one tongue. "It's not to be supposed. . ."

Herr Markus laid his hand on the table. "It depends on you, Herr Müllenmeister, on you alone. The whole Bourse, the whole of Berlin—what am I saying?—the whole world looks to you now. Every transaction of yours, every penny's profit in the shop, will influence the price."

The elder Van Hoolten nodded. "Yes. To-day's brilliant result is a great personal triumph for you, Herr Müllenmeister. For the rest, I have myself acquired a greater part of my son's prematurely relinquished shares."

"And so the wealth of the nation will not be appreciably diminished if Elmas *does* pay a twenty per cent. dividend," summed up Eddie.

But at this moment there came an interruption: the great sensation of the supper was borne in. It was apparently a sweet dish in the form of a tart, rose-red and massive, with decorations of froth; but, in reality, a salad—the recipe for which came originally from the kitchen of the Strozzi in Florence, and had been perfected and subtilised by Monsieur Dupuy, Van Hoolten's cook, who kept it in a secret place as if it were a momentous diplomatic document. He was wont to relate that many thousands of marks had been offered him

for it. The solid part consisted of a hundred and thirty-three ingredients, which were mixed and "handled" at a powerful expenditure of time and trouble. An indefinable aroma of caviare, bitter almonds, and many other intangible spices permeated this costly, ineffable lyric of the kitchen. The guests interested themselves in the "sensation" according to their characters and aptitudes. Markus carried it in tiny morsels to his lips; a soft, almost imperceptible smack testified to his appreciation. Breuer smelt at every spoonful, as always; and Mendel Mühsam stuffed himself with as much as he could hold.

"Superb!" said he. "Your chef is a great chap—here's to him!. . . Well, but I'm excited about this matter of public opinion on the doings of to-day."

"We only need to stimulate the press," said Breuer. "The press isn't in it yet—except the financial papers, of course."

"There was some rare good fun to-day," began Mühsam again. "Stieglitz had invested nearly all his 'Alma'-fund in Elmas; and Alma, poor brute, has been living for months on sausage!" With a loud laugh, he clapped the young German-American, who sat next him, on the shoulder. "Do you know what the 'Alma-fund' is, Mr. Architect? Of course not; you don't belong to these parts. Well, Stieglitz is a crazy jobber, who has got rid of nearly all his wife's fortune—and *she* was a daughter of the rich Immermann. So his old woman put him on a financial régime. All the same, he succeeded in landing a hundred thousand marks—and that's what we call the 'Alma'-fund. He speculates with the money, and carries all his winnings to his lady-love, Alma of the Apollo Theatre. You may see her any day walking up and down outside, when he's on the Bourse—a little gone to seed perhaps, but not bad. My word! Alma was pleased to-day!"

"Are you taking your Herr Rosen over with you?" asked Breuer of Müllenmeister.

Joshua looked up in some surprise. "How do you mean? Rosen?"

"Your manager—yes. He is said to be a remarkably good business man. We may want people like that."

"According to my present intention, Rosen will remain with my son Hermann, at the head of the old establishment," answered Joshua a little coldly. "We shall find a suitable staff, depend on it, Herr Breuer."

"Indeed I think we may confidently leave all that to our Director," cried Van Hoolten; "and now let us drink a toast to the prosperity of Elmas, and above all to the health of our honoured Director, Herr Joshua Müllenmeister, the father and pillar of our undertaking."

The men rose and clinked glasses; Joshua returned thanks; then Breuer spoke "a few well-chosen words" on the high, ideal aims which the new emporium was to realise; how the house was expected to furnish a pattern to social culture, since the staff was not to be treated according to the usual method, but each employee was to be regarded as a partner in the concern. He was carried away by his own eloquence, and the others covertly smiled. Too plainly did his inspired speech portray his own ideal of the future Town Councillor. He concluded with a bow to Müllenmeister, and Joshua had to return thanks for the second time.

The turkey pastries and asparagus were got through without any more attacks of eloquence, and at dessert Van Hoolten announced that he had a surprise in store for his guests. They all rose; the servant pushed back the folding-doors into the brilliantly lit Louis-Seize drawing-room.

At the far end, a deep curtained recess formed, as it were, a separate room, and here stood, on a large octagon table, a miniature model of the new house. Lit by

hundreds of tiny lamps, it shone forth like the embodied Christmas dream of a child's heart.

The first impression was of an oriental building, or rather an oriental town; for the immense erection had so many wings, it had been so cleverly spread over the sites—some of which might not, in the event, be obtainable—that the extent of the ground plan was disguised: the dimensions had, as it were, absorbed the space into a comparatively moderate compass. The splendour of the four façades seemed oriental by reason of their richness of colouring, but on closer inspection it became clear that there was no decided style of any kind. Rather, the building was a kind of volapük of styles—a mixture and absorption of every architectural form, the antique, the Byzantine, the most mannered of rococo; yet the whole was so intelligently composed that even the inexpert vision could not fail to appreciate the extraordinarily pleasing effect. Unlike the traditional "glass-house" look of the emporiums of yesterday, and the proud, tranquil façades of those of to-day, was this giant building with its wall surfaces of Italian mosaic, alternating with artistically subdued marble facings; its slender towering columns, gilded cupolas, battlements, and minarets; its costly stained-glass windows, glowing frescoes, grandiose portals—a veritable fairy-tale palace in the grey uniformity of the street. Gay, glowing, various in their charm as the wares that were offered behind those glistening walls were the façades, so magical in their power of toning down all coarse, cheap effects. Taken altogether, it was an unusual and yet an infinitely pleasing erection, a warehouse of the nations, a universe of retail business, which should gather together the treasures of the whole world, and spread them out in its chambers.

The men stood round, gazing at the model which, toy-like as it was in itself, gave a really faithful image of

the future house. Markus was surrounded and congratulated on the delightful idea, in which nobody could find the smallest fault of any kind. But he modestly declined the honours, and indicated Cornelius Arfst. Markus could afford to be magnanimous, for the Elmas house was to be built in the name of his firm. Huge placards announced that the work was being carried out by Markus and Hennigs: they were publicly responsible for the great achievement—hence a few crumbs of praise could be allowed to fall to the as yet unknown young architect's share, in strictly private circles. Cornelius Arfst, for that matter, was far from looking overwhelmed by the congratulations. He acknowledged them rather absently, and then turned again, with just such shining eyes as a child has at sight of a Christmas tree. to contemplate his work—the work which meant a dream come true to him.

Cornelius Arfst was the son of a Polish Jewess and a German father. His parents died early; he had had to earn his living since he was twelve years old. After many years of hard work, he had at last succeeded in the desire of his heart, and gone in for building. For eight years he had done practical work at it, and earned enough to enable him to go to Germany and attend the lectures at the Technical College for four terms. He had been with the firm of Markus and Hennigs for a year. For an annual salary of seven thousand marks he had sold his name, his art, his whole knowledge and his whole strength to the firm; had degraded himself to the level of a labourer who carries out another's bidding, who is the mere tool of his employer, who delivers up even the work into which some of his soul has gone, to another's interference at any chosen point. . . But what was all that to the fact that he had really made his dream come true—that all his old ardent ideas and ideals of "poems in stone" were coming to life under

his hands—that, in short, he was "finding himself" for the first time in his life!

He had his mother's eyes—those deep, dark, melancholy Jewish eyes which can irradiate even the plainest, most inexpressive features. He was clean-shaven, clear-featured, with close-shut lips, that made his face look a little hard, almost sinister. But just now the unyouthful features were lit up by that pure, keen joy which those artists know to whom their art is all, and who have just gained their first real triumph in it. As if waking from a dream, he started when Joshua laid a hand on his shoulder and asked him to lunch next Sunday at Halensee. Then, as he accepted, he was assailed on every side by questions about the details of his work, for now that the first surprise was over the guests bethought them of their rights of criticism. Not to depreciate the work, but merely to show that they were interested and "knew something about the subject," did they now cross-question the creator of the future Elmas façade, about the reason for this grouping of pillars and that arrangement of windows, the meaning of that frieze and this balcony. . . while Mühsam expressed a fear that Berliners "would soon get used to the extremely gay and somewhat too sugary façade—no offence, Herr Arfst!—and that they should have to ha g themselves out as signs!"

While the architect was allaying the various apprehensions, a pretty maid brought coffee, the manservant following with liqueurs and cigars.

"Anyhow, it's very fine, and the Berlin boys will stare," said Mühsam, helping himself to chartreuse. "But where does the draught come from—do you notice it, Director?"

Van Hoolten nodded. "There's a window open; I'll see to it."

One of the windows in the west room was open, and

he went to shut it. The street-lamps lit the street as if it were broad daylight—the street and the closed droshky which stood before the door, and from which there descended a lady in a long, dark fur cloak, with rich ermine bordering. She paid the driver, and in doing so, turned her head so that the light fell full upon her face, which was lightly veiled in white. Van Hoolten, immovable with amazement, stared in horror at the half-revealed identity; he quite forgot to shut the window. And, after she had entered the building, he still listened awhile before he did so.

"Incredible audacity!" he murmured, and cast a hasty glance into the drawing-room, where Joshua Müllenmeister was eagerly talking to Cornelius Arfst. Van Hoolten went up to Eddie, who precisely at that moment was receiving a whispered message from the servant-maid, and rose directly. His father approached him as it were by accident, and looked at him significantly; Eddie seemed to understand; he made a reassuring gesture, and left the room.

Half an hour later, the guests were gradually taking leave of their host. Joshua was the first to move; he had to go to the shop and make up for lost time.

CHAPTER XVIII

"ONLY a quarter of an hour!" said Henny Müllenmeister, as Eddie Van Hoolten entered his sitting-room. She had left her fur cloak outside, but kept on her cap, and merely pushed her veil up.

"Not a quarter, but two, three little hours at least—dearest of all ladies," laughed Eddie, and, going behind the couch, he drew the pins out of her cap. "That fur thing will make you hot—give it here."

"No, leave it alone. . . What do you say to my coming?"

"I am enchanted. But. . . did you know that my governor was giving a dinner to the Elmas wolves to-night?"

"To-night! For Heaven's sake. . . My husband—"

"They're all absorbed in coffee and liqueurs—"

"He telephoned that he wasn't coming home to dinner."

Then she threw up her head. "After all, what is there to find fault with in my fetching you to go together somewhere?"

"What indeed? But where are we going in this wretched weather? I wanted to show you my collections."

She nodded, and now permitted him to take off her cap and put it outside.

"You're very cosy here," she said, looking about.

"May I show you my home?" And as she stood up, he took her arm as a matter of course, and led her through the charming, tasteful rooms. Years ago, while his passion for artistic beauty was still aflame, Eddie

Van Hoolten had collected a quantity of rare and lovely things: pictures, sculptures, bronzes, old porcelain, all kinds of curios. As he showed them to Henny, his face flushed as with a reflection of the old enthusiastic days when he would ransack every antique shop in Berlin in his zeal, and nearly lose his head with delight when he made any sort of "find."

"Ah, those were the days". . .

Involuntarily he murmured his thought half-aloud.

"What did you say?" asked Henny, absently.

"I think we won't waste any more time over the old rubbish. An evening like this doesn't last forever." And again he took her hand, kissed it quickly, and put it back in his arm.

"You are rather bold, '*Mister*' Van Hoolten. If anyone were to see you! How they'd laugh. You know one's dear friends always believe the worst."

"And isn't the 'worst,' according to one's dear friends, usually the best of all?"

They had gone through the portière into the adjoining room, which was furnished in oriental style, and dimly, fantastically illumined by a Persian standard-lamp and a Turkish lantern. Eddie led his guest to a broad, soft divan, and took a stool near her.

A heavy silence ensued. In the uncertain light, Henny could not see the twitching of his lips beneath the fair moustache. . . They had been accustomed for years to see one another almost daily; and the pretty, fast, piquante woman had at first attracted him, but nothing more. Then his feeling had become warmer, turning to a certain interest; and the interest had gradually developed into a mild, half-cynical, half-sportive passion. . . It might be good fun to try how much she would stand.

And now that, for the first time, she was with him secretly and alone in his own quarters, he felt a pre-

monition of that decline in interest which follows the attainment of a desire that has not been made entirely facile. For she had not made it entirely facile until now. But fruits ripening to their fall—*will* fall when the moment arrives. . . The silence was growing oppressive.

Henny twisted her rings nervously. She had pictured this first tête-à-tête quite differently. Did he not mean to make use of his opportunity? Then all her disquietude, all her *crise de conscience*, beforehand, had been quite unnecessary. A bright, angry flush rose on her cheek. His behaviour had been significant enough, and at first she had fought against its meaning, and told herself how wrong and dangerous such an "affair" would be; but when she *did* make up her mind, the thought of this visit had kept her, night and day, in a state of alternate fire and ice. She was of radically different temperament from her cold-blooded sister. For her there were many relations more desirable than platonic friendship, but hitherto she had had no opportunity of realising her dreams.

Eddie Van Hoolten was not the sort of young man whose homage can be put by with a smile and a jesting word. His stormy "past" was much admired in the drawing-rooms of the West End; and his light, ironic manner had an almost hypnotic charm for most women. And moreover. . . since her marriage a restless, discontented feeling had come over her, almost like a disease. She had persuaded herself that her union with a much older man, who spent his whole time at his shop and cherished a sentimental fidelity for his *bourgeoisie* first wife, had been a mere incident, a perverse happening, which offended Nature was bound to avenge some day; and nobody could struggle against a fate which was in the natural order of things.

Eddie pulled himself together and caught her hands, kissing them passionately, one after the other.

"Herr Van Hoolten, you misunderstand the situation," said she in a troubled voice.

"On the contrary, I at last understand it! Or do you think that I can make better use of it than by sipping my honey, as the bee does from the flowers?"

Henny drew a long breath, but she hardly resisted when, seating himself beside her, he put his arm round her waist.

She did make an attempt at taking it as a joke.

"Now, now—you want to make too sure of my maternal affection for you! My sons are not younger, but I am ten years older than you."

"Oh, people talked like that in the good old days. We moderns don't arrange our desires by the register of births, Frau Henny. . . sweet Frau Henny. . ."

"Do you love me?" she panted, with shut eyes.

"If you mean a so-called romantic love, with all sorts platonic trimmings—no. But if you call the recognition of the fact that we belong to one another 'love,' you have used the right word. In that sense I love you more than anything."

"Or anyone?"

"*Tempi passati*. . . More than any of the others."

"And this love is true friendship, real, true friendship—isn't it?"

"We will label it as the superlative of the most subtle friendship."

"That is what I want," said Henny, eagerly. "Oh, life is so cold, one *has* to try for a little warmth and radiance. . ."

The lips under the fair moustache were twitching again, but again she did not see. . .

"Don't talk, Henny! Hush—and let me kiss you."

"But first tell me that you love me, that if I were free you would marry me."

"Henny Müllenmeister, dearest friend of my heart, beloved treasure, for goodness' sake let us not soil our first hour of love with the most Philistine of all conventional problems—marriage! Good heavens! Child, dear one, it is as if, at a banquet of the rarest delicacies, someone should stick a plateful of *sauerkraut* and bacon under one's nose. Of course there are people who can eat it, but to us gourmets at the table of life the very smell is fatal to appetite."

"I really believe you are taking it all as a joke. That is very wise. . . I am going now," said Henny. With her hasty withdrawal from his arms, there swept forth a gush of perfume—the sweet, heavy odour of ambergris, her favourite scent. Eddie drank it in voluptuously; ambergris was one of the few spells that still could act on his senses. His grim, mocking mood vanished, and with her angry eyes and hot cheeks, the pretty woman seemed suddenly more desirable than ever. What a fool he was not to take what would certainly be given to someone some day!

"I see all situations with the eye of the laughing philosopher," he said softly, holding her hand close. "And in that I know I am like you, Henny. It is precisely what attracted me to you from the first. We are both creatures of our day, who look at the superfluous sentiment in life with sensible, ironic eyes, that have no veil of tears over them. Come, be nice! No 'Ifs' and 'Buts,' and 'To-days' and 'To-morrows'. . . People like ourselves take what the moment offers, without staring about and wasting our time in sentimentality."

She turned away her head, but he feigned to take it for assent and drew her to him with an assured air, as

of one taking possession of his own. And she did not resist him.

Some time after eleven, Eddie Van Hoolten took his fair friend home in an automobile. At the gate they met Joshua, who was just coming home, too. Henny turned white under her veil, but her husband greeted Van Hoolten tranquilly and thanked him for escorting his wife. Since he could be so little with her, he was glad that she should enjoy herself with others and leave him in peace.

"Where did you go?" he asked, as they went up the garden path to the house.

She started. "To the Lessing Theatre."

"Ah, and what was on?"

"Rosmersholm," she said at random, for she did not at all know. Joshua had apparently asked as vaguely, and heard with only half an ear. He was exhausted with the excitement and toil of the day, which had kept him at his desk till after ten o'clock, and had left him too nervous to have any hope of sleeping. Henny dared not refuse when he asked her to come into the sitting-room for half-an-hour.

Walking up and down, he told her of the engineering of the Elmas shares, of the Elmas house in miniature, that dream come true in gold, marble, and colours, of his idea of starting an Elmas journal, and arranging, in the new establishment, for a regular course of popular lectures on the origin, production, and character of the various things—finally, of his plans for an entirely novel organisation of the internal methods. Also of his fears that it might not always be easy to keep the peace between the several interests in the Elmas councils, and that the uncalled-for intervention of the members of the board might prove extremely vexatious.

Henny listened patiently. Deep-sunk in the great

armchair, she bent her head in such a way that her face was a shadow; the light of the electric standard-lamp fell on her daintily shod feet, which were nervously tapping the floor. Now and then she threw in a word of polite sympathy with Joshua's ideas, but he soon perceived that she was not really interested, and was looking very pale and unstrung.

"You're tired, Henny; go to bed," he said, kindly.

"Yes, I am. Those Ibsen plays get on one's nerves; I'm quite done up. Good-night, Joshua—and go to bed soon, yourself."

As the door shut behind her, Joshua stood still a moment, and covered his eyes with his hand. Once more he saw, as in a vision, where his pretty, smart wife had sat—his lost Mimi. . . *She* was not dressed in the *dernier cri* of fashion; her full form had none of those graceful lines; her large, white, ever-busy hands moved mechanically in a piece of sewing or knitting—but over the work, her sweet eyes gazed eagerly into his face, as he brought her his cares and hopes. *She* had never been too tired to listen to him; and if there was a weak spot in his plans and prognostications, she always said some sensible, well-considered word, which often loosed the knot in an almost disconcertingly simple manner and showed the right way out of the dilemma.

Yes; Mimi had been one of the old-fashioned German housewives; she had never talked about emancipation, and yet had been such a good, loyal comrade. . . Joshua lit a fresh cigar, and continued his tramping up and down—up and down. A great, sad longing penetrated his soul, like a gentle chord of music. . . it was homesickness for the Lost Island of those years. But then, the present came to its own again, crowding out such sentimental reminiscences; the rich, bright present with its excitements, expectations, hopes, wishes, demands, and almost overwhelming toil. In the midst

of his whirling impressions the thought of the elder Van Hoolten's discreet and powerful co-operation seemed like an anchor for his mind. The certainty of having him at hand to depend on had something tranquillising about it. Van Hoolten was most of all responsible for the swift organisation of the Elmas boom.

He and Joshua had grown to be friends in this period, had learnt to value one another; though in private life there was a deep gulf between the artistic, orchid-loving financier, and the honest, sober-minded merchant.

CHAPTER XIX

CORNELIUS ARFST had asked to see some antique draperies. Agnes smiled to herself as she spread before him half-a-dozen mass vestments and some pieces of old brocade and velvet. Since the young architect had met her for the first time, some months before, at the Halensee Villa of her future father-in-law, he had come with remarkable frequency to the antique department, asking to see this, that, and the other, prowling about—and always going away without buying anything. More than once it had occurred that he stopped short in the middle of their conversation, and stared at the lovely saleswoman with his soft melancholy eyes —absently, as if lost to all earthly things.

That happened again now. She drew his attention to the superb work—an heraldic device—in the ancient fragment of Genoese velvet she was showing; but he did not even pretend to listen. His eyes were fixed on her delicate features with an absolutely convulsive intensity. She smiled gaily, flattered enough, but he did not seem to notice that either.

"You are a happy bride," he said, very low, with his soft lilting accent.

"A very happy bride," assented Agnes.

"I shall paint you," he went on, with a sigh. "For the music saloon at Elmas. I shall do you as Saint Cecilia, in the Pre-Raphaelite manner. Just as you are now, in this dress, in this environment, if I may?"

"Oh, please. . ."

"Soon". . . He took his hat, and went out with bent head, saying no farewell.

Agnes shrugged. "Mad!" thought she, and next moment had forgotten her queer customer. She was used to spontaneous admiration from men; and the worship of this tedious, black-haired person, a mere employee of Markus and Hennigs', was not exciting.

She went to the back of the shop, climbed on to a carved Renaissance bench in the form of a sarcophagus, and drew from her pocket a letter in the reading of which the architect's entrance had disturbed her.

". . . You should write more about yourself, Agnes! Don't misunderstand me: every line from your dear hands is precious and interesting to me; but I should like to read only of *you*—what you do and think, and how the things that are happening around you affect you. When I read your letters, it's as if I were talking with you, and often I want to interrupt you and stop your mouth with kisses for whole minutes; but on the other hand I sometimes feel as if you were concealing the inmost depths of yourself from me, as if I must dive into your soul and fetch up the real, the only You—and so at last discover my Very Agnes.

"It is splendid here, Agnes; I often wish you had come over with me. One literally becomes a different person; one learns to look at life with new eyes. In our country, people think that America is the land of crass money-getting, and the American an individual who carries a money-making machine in his bosom, instead of a heart. It's all nonsense. Now that I know this country and people by personal experience, I positively declare that in the bigness and grandiosity of the methods here consists the whole poetry of business life. The American has his ideals, only in a different way from us. With us, ideals are mostly pure abstractions; we build them up, adorn them like a fairy castle, and settle down in them as in bowers of vines and roses

wherein one withdraws from the common life, despising it, and dreaming of new modes of existence. We *feel* ideals; here, they *live* them. They don't dream impossibilities, they take the world and humanity as they find them; but within the attainable, they set the aim so high that they often enough reach, nay! pass, the boundaries of what *we* think the possible.

"I understand how men can become so acclimatised here that in the course of a few years they are not only externally, but in their innermost souls, Americans. At first, what impressed me most was the indescribable calm and *sangfroid* with which the work is carried on behind the scenes in the American Emporiums. We get the same amount done, it is true; but the leading men here seem to me more like athletes playing with the hundredweight catch-ball, so lightly and so surely do they handle the most fabulous transactions.

"And the odd thing is that the life here is not nearly so 'levelling' as with us; at least, they have not to the same degree as we the feeling that the employees are the mere wheels and screws in a gigantic machine. Every worker over here is a *person.* That is a good state for him and for others. Here, the salesman is enthusiastic about the shop and the things he sells. That is sometimes the case with us, too, but not so whole-heartedly. To sum up: Every ideal one brings with one from the old world is recoined here into practical notions, and the small residuum that is really quite unrealisable and that yet one would not be without, is volatilised into a soft fragrance which hangs round the firm outlines like a red-rose breath, and stands for our German poetic feeling.

"Just now I am doing practical work as a salesman in the basement, where the bargains are sold; later, so as to get as comprehensive a survey as possible, I shall

be employed in the most diverse situations they can find for me.

"I had a long letter from your brother yesterday; I hope that later on he will undertake the editing of the Elmas journal. 'Elmas'—how mysterious it sounds, doesn't it? And it will be a brave piece of work, a worthy piece of work—our proud palace of the future! . . . I am greatly interested in the various newspaper articles about the undertaking; there seem to be only the dimmest rumours as yet about the internal organisation; and yet that's the chief point—that Elmas should initiate a real reform in matters relating to the staff. The thousand employees of Elmas are not to be hammers, wheels, screws, and other little bits of the machine, but every single one is to be part, in the future, of the productive force of the undertaking, an atom of the house's soul—that house which is not to be a mine in which hundreds and hundreds toil in the sweat of their brows, at the sacrifice of life and health, for a mere pittance which barely feeds some of them; but a beehive in which each one has his honey for his pains.

"Do you dream of the time when we shall be working side by side in the new building, at the head, or rather in the midst, of a thousand-headed staff of fellow-workers, none of which is toiling for himself or one other only, but each for himself and for all?. . . It makes me so glad!

"I have ever so much more to say to you, but the time is flying by, and if my letter is to go by the European mail, I must end at once.

"Adieu, my love! Ever thy

"FRIEDEL."

Agnes thrust out her under lip, and pondered. For a long time she had been noticing that her fiancé's let-

ters were not so full of honeyed love-words as at first. Descriptions of the shop and of business life took up more space in them all than love-making.

"Rubbish!" she said half aloud, with a malign little smile, as she crumpled up the sheets and put them in her pocket.

Often now she had these cross, ambiguous moods, full of inward unrest, impatience, and discomfort. The overwhelming happiness of the first weeks had slowly ebbed away, and left a uniform grey stagnancy, all dejection, annoyance and ennui.

What had she gained by their engagement? The Sundays at Halensee were—now that the novelty of the dinners and the intercourse with fashionable people in luxurious surroundings had worn off—lamentably tedious. She was seldom invited during the week: Hermann and Mimi both had their special friends, her future father-in-law lived only for business, and Henny now had young Van Hoolten almost always at her side, as her declared admirer.

Again the malign little smile lurked at the corners of her rosy mouth. She was not very farseeing in intellectual matters, but her feminine intuition—a certain gift for seeing and hearing, an inborn detective capacity—was highly developed. Though she had neither seen nor heard anything positive, she felt instinctively that there were secret understandings between the pretty gay woman and the young libertine, which would shun any definite light. She did not blame Henny; if she had been admitted to her confidence, she would have been delighted to stand by her in any way; but to be overlooked and "made a fool of" like the rest, offended and embittered her.

And there was nothing but misery at home. Lotte had succumbed at the end of April to a violent hemorrhage, and could not even yet leave her bed. The doc-

tor came daily, and the Müllenmeisters sent all sorts of restoratives and delicacies; as soon as she could be moved, she was to go with Irmgard to a sanatorium at Göbersdorf; but the doctor held out little hope that she would soon be so far recovered.

Agnes had never got on well with her brother Hans, and so her residence at home was now a real torment to her. There were hours in which she wished herself back in the old conditions. Then, when the shop was shut, she could go where she liked with her colleagues; but now, as Friedrich Müllenmeister's fiancée, she had to submit to all sorts of restrictions and precautions. It had been a thousand times more amusing and cheerful in the shop than in the lonely, isolated antique department, where she often sat alone for hours, a prey to strange imaginings. Strange imaginings indeed—of a sort that she had never known before. Sometimes, in the midst of her dearest dreams of the future, she would find that her thoughts had suddenly wandered quite elsewhere. . . For it was really her only amusement to figure to herself how delightful it would be when, as real "Chieftainess," she should rustle through the new house, and people would call each other's attention to her: "Look there! That's the beautiful Frau Müllenmeister!"

She seldom got further than that. In those lonely hours of silent brooding, her blood ran like fire in her veins; and it was, as it had been before her engagement, a vague longing, an avid sense of something lacking, that tortured her nerves, and racked her to pieces —and yet she could not help herself, nor give it a name. For it was like, and yet unlike, the former feeling; such bodily unrest, such consuming fever, she had never felt before. At first she told herself that it was longing for Friedrich, but this soon proved idle. For she was honest enough with herself to admit that he meant little

more to her than a means to her dazzling end. When she shut her eyes and tried to bring his face before her, she was often alarmed at her powerlessness to do so; there came hours in which she had to look at his photograph ere she could recall him at all. . . And he had been only eight months gone!

She no longer felt any exultant joy in her engagement. The more she learnt of her own nature, the less did he and all he offered seem to signify. Who was after all the giver, and who the taker? Was Friedrich the fairy prince, because he gave her his money; or was *she* the fairy princess, who endowed the poor human with the treasures of her wonderful beauty and her many lovable traits?

She rose languidly, stretched herself, and looked at her slim figure, in its graceful black gown, in the oval, gold-framed antique mirror. The little head swayed like a flower on the almost transparently white neck; with her hair done low over her ears—her latest *coiffure*—her waxen pallor, and the clear, pure line of her profile, she really did resemble a Botticelli Madonna, as Cornelius Arfst had said. . .

"Herr Schulz!" she called, as the salesman entered. "Stay here; I have to take a frame to the repairing-room."

She put an old oil-painting in a broken Gothic frame under her arm, and went through the connecting door into the shop.

Despite the stifling heat—the thermometer outside was at something monstrous in the shade—she drew a deep breath of satisfaction. The hot human exhalations were the atmosphere of *her* world, whether she toiled or reigned therein. . .

One of the lifts near by went to the top storey, where lay the storerooms, the postal-circular office, and the

repairing workshops. At the first floor Karen, who had been at Müllenmeister's since April, got in. She had been sent on a message to the blouse wareroom. Agnes nodded kindly.

"Well, little one, how goes it?"

A rather troubled smile dawned on the sweet, delicate face. "Thank *you*; it *must* go, and so—it goes."

"Yes, yes; the apprentice years are no fun," said Agnes with a sigh. Upstairs they went in opposite directions.

Agnes had soon done her business in the repairing-room; but though the heat here was even more terrible than downstairs, she lingered a while, strolling down the long, narrow corridor with slow, dragging footsteps, and turning into an alcove where a window looked out on the Alexander-platz.

Just as she was leaving this, the door on the other side of the corridor was opened. Agnes looked up curiously, and flushed crimson when she saw Elias Bielefeldt. He, too, seemed agitated; he tried to pass with a swift greeting, but her strangely insistent, almost pleading look held him back against his will.

"Ah, Fräulein Matrei! I haven't seen you for a long time. I thought you were somewhere in Tyrol or Switzerland or by the sea, long ago."

"I?" said she slowly. "I'm in harness, like the rest of you. At the end of July I get six weeks—not a day till then. I'm not very keen about it either. Have you ever looked out of this window? It has a view of the Square, just imagine! Look here!" She opened the window and pointed downwards. "There, at the corner, you gave me a bunch of violets last year, about this time—do you remember? After the shop was shut you came after me, and asked me to go for a walk."

"And you refused. As if I had forgotten! I had all sorts of mad ideas in those days. I thought the

beautiful Fräulein Matrei was within the reach of us poor mortals. . . That was mad, wasn't it?"

Agnes opened her lips to reply, but could produce nothing but an incomprehensible murmur. Her face was close to his at the window. Elias Bielefeldt panted. . . He had thought the whole affair done with, and had accepted the beauty's coquetry with smiling equanimity and a little curiosity, as a charming gift from the gods. For that she *did* coquet with him and seek to attract his attention was not remarked by him alone; but he had not taken it seriously. At this moment, however, her beauty was enthralling him—she was *too* lovely. Her skin was like glass lit up by a faint, wonderful rose-colour; her breath was sweet as narcissus flowers. . .

"Why shouldn't I have been within your reach?" she said, and put her hand over her eyes. "You never thought really seriously about me."

"Fräulein Agnes! You would have refused me—admit it! People are so differently constituted. One will have only champagne and oysters, another longs for clear water and black bread. . . I, for my part, take the middle way: a fine beefsteak and Schorle Morle to drink with it—that's wine and seltzer! But you—you belong to the champagne drinkers of life."

"Yes," said Agnes. "I have always longed madly for the champagne. . . and pushed everything aside that did not look like it; and when I had it. . ." She began to stammer. "When I tried to drink it. . . that champagne. . . I didn't like it. . . it was as insipid as soda-water. . . and I think there's another sort of champagne. . . and that *that* is. . . Oh, Herr Bielefeldt!"

She sobbed aloud, for he had suddenly caught her, and kissed her quickly and hotly on the mouth. And as if that kiss had awakened some slumbering force in

her, she embraced him with such passion that it seemed as if she would never let him go, and returned his kiss.

Neither of them noticed a figure hurrying past down the corridor; but gradually Elias found the glowing embrace to be more than he could bear. With gentle force he sought to free himself.

"Agnes, dear Fräulein Agnes, you must not—think! Somebody might go by at any moment. . . For Heaven's sake. . . Forgive me! I can't help loving you, but to bring you into a fatal difficulty by my—er —want of self-control—you, the fiancée of the—"

"I don't care. I love you, I want you. I ask nothing more—"

"We will speak of it another time. I really must go down now."

"But we really *will* speak of it—yes? You will write to me? Or shall I write to you?"

"No. I will write. . . I *must* go, Agnes."

Only then did she free him; but she stood for a quarter of an hour, as if rapt away, on the spot and stared after him; and when at last, with tottering feet, she went down the long corridor, there was a singing and ringing in her ears like enchanting music. All her discontent and unrest were swept away; she felt instinctively that she had been through a crisis in her life. The Real, the Only, Agnes, for whom Friedrich Müllenmeister vainly sought, was liberated—the Very Woman, of an almost overwhelming capacity for sensual delight. That capacity dominated all else, reduced to nothingness the whole meaning of her former life—even her ambitious dreams for the future.

CHAPTER XX

In passing by, Karen had glanced into the window recess, and had fled without looking again. She told herself that she must have seen wrong—*that* was quite impossible! Agnes Matrei, the fiancée of Friedrich Müllenmeister, in another man's arms. . . no! It was surely a mistake—it was unthinkable.

A burning blush glowed in the soft little face—her fright had really taken her by the throat. To the superintendent's questions about her message she gave an incoherent answer, which drew down upon her a loud, vehement rebuke.

Karen's post in the blouse department was not a very pleasant one. That Mieze, when she was trying to find a place for her in the shop, should have applied directly to Feldbergen, the head of all the heads of staff, had been a mistake in etiquette, which arose from her ignorance of the mode of procedure. For the only department that had a vacancy for an apprentice at the time was the blouse department, and that was under the superintendence of a woman who had been twenty years in the house, was a *persona grata* with the chiefs, and ruled despotically over her kingdom. For years she had found her own subordinates, and for this very vacancy had had a relative of her own in her eye. If Mieze had gone to Frau Ludwig and asked for her influence, she would have inquired about, and possibly found, another place for Karen, for she was not in general disobliging, and was very powerful; but that she should have been undermined, and an apprentice foisted

upon her without her approval, was a circumstance for which she could not forgive the girl.

From the earliest hours of her initiation, Karen had had to suffer the sorrows of the unwelcome. She bore the most varied persecutions and unpleasantnesses with a stubborn composure which seemed almost disdainful, and was calculated neither to propitiate Frau Ludwig, nor to gain the sympathy of the other girls, who were of course sage enough to be on the side of authority. But Karen never complained, even to Mieze; she had made up her mind to go through with it, and often her tranquil endurance, and the silent, exact obedience with which she carried out all behests and even bore unjust reprimands, enforced a certain respect from the superintendent.

She kept absolute silence, too, about her acute misery in the new surroundings. She knew that it was her own affair only; nobody could help her; therefore nobody should know that the tone among the girls absolutely got on her nerves, that the hubbub, and above all the atmosphere of the noisy place was abhorrent to her, and that at night she was weary and exhausted almost to breaking-point. In this, she was a lively contrast to Trude Schiller, who was almost too happy at Müllenmeister's.

Trude was the born shop-girl. Like a gay little lizard, she would slip to and fro on her various jobs, chattering in her clear bird-like voice, laughing when Herr Hermann pulled her auburn plait in passing and said something funny—and her laugh was so insubordinately gay and infectious that all around were soon chuckling, too. "Little Trude," as they called her, was the pet of the house. When her father happened to call in one day, he heard his daughter's praises on every side, and his paternal vanity was so flattered that he grew more indulgent than ever, and when Trudchen's

monthly salary, instead of swelling the household budget (which grew ever more meagre), went in all sorts of girlish extravagances, he never turned a hair. "Youth is youth," said Papa, smilingly. "And thank God I am happy in my children." No one could dispute it, for Felix, too, was praised by the authorities; since February he had been a salesman with a hundred-and-thirty marks' salary, and it seemed quite likely that the nice-looking, intelligent youth would "make a good career" in the house.

"I shouldn't like to be anywhere but at Müllenmeister's," declared the radiant Trude, when she and Karen exchanged views. Karen said nothing to that. She could easily think of something better, but she had chosen her lot, and was resolved to bear it.

At the end of May, something happened to embitter it further. One afternoon, about six, Tom Ribbeck came to the shop and begged Karen to get off. His mother had been very ill for some weeks; that day she had had another of the dreaded heart-failures, and seemed to be dying. She was asking incessantly for Karen. . . by eight o'clock it might be too late.

They were very busy in the blouse department that afternoon, but Karen ventured to ask Frau Ludwig for permission to go. It put her beside herself. "*Go*—when the girls might have had a hundred hands and still been busy, and the apprentice was needed every second for messages and orders!" In her ire at the suggestion she raised her voice to a shrill scolding tone. "How dare you? Your foster-mother? I thought Meier was your foster-mother—how many have you? Dying? We all know that story. . ."

The ladies at the counters pricked up their ears. Most of them pitied the deathly pale young creature, struggling with her tears—some looked as if about to intervene. . . At this moment, Rosen passed by.

When he heard the loud, angry voice, he stopped and made Ludwig explain matters to him.

He had often already noticed the slim, pale, lovely child. A connoisseur in female beauty, he perceived that the young and charming creature would develop ere long into a delicate, rare beauty of the most exquisite type—his special type!. . . Now, with a kindly smile on his lips, he listened to Frau Ludwig's much softer-toned report of the proceedings.

"Oh, we must not be too strict, dear madam! A dying foster-mother is a good reason for a two-hours' dispensation." He nodded to Karen. "Frau Ludwig grants you permission to go."

Rosen knew that it was good policy to make some concessions to the feelings of the customers who had witnessed this "drama of the interior," and moreover, he had already taken Karen's part on an occasion of this kind, for she genuinely interested him.

When they got outside, Tom asked Karen who the dark man was. She told him.

"They call him 'the Almighty.' He is very nice to me. They're all afraid of him, except Frau Ludwig, but I quite like him."

"Do you know, Karen, I had rather old Ludwig scolded you than that Rosen championed you," said Tom thoughtfully. "I don't like the look of the man. I should say he was one of those who would take the Host from the Altar if he happened to be hungry. Be on your guard against him."

Tina Ribbeck had got well over her attack when they reached home, and was delighted to have her beloved foster-daughter for the evening. But from that day forward, Karen suffered even more than hitherto under Frau Ludwig's despotism. . .

And to-day the very devil was loose in the blouse room. On various extra tables there was a sale going

on of fine Viennese and lace blouses—only one of each, and for the most part costly things.

A customer had just asked for an Irish lace blouse. A particularly-good one had been among those displayed, and—as was quickly ascertained at the cash-desk, where the numbers were registered—was not yet sold. But where was it? Karen, whose duty it was to look after the table in question, could give no explanation. Nor could the blouse be traced to the ware-room, whither it might have possibly been returned.

Beyond doubt the valuable thing had been stolen, and Ludwig fell upon Karen like a fury.

"Where were your eyes? What are you put at the table for? Not even for that are you any good! You shall be made responsible for the loss. . . Do you hear? You are evidently thinking of something else—goodness knows what!. . . Think whether you saw the blouse, and where? Irish crochet pattern—big roses; no one could help noticing it. . . Well, have you thought?"

Karen had been so upset by what she had seen upstairs that she could scarcely think; but the harsh voice woke her from her apathy.

"Yes; I remember now," she said thoughtfully. "Fräulein Wolff sold that blouse. I saw her showing it to a customer, a stout lady in a black taffeta paletot; and then she took it to the packing-desk herself."

"Who did? The lady?" sneered Ludwig. "You must have made a mistake. Fräulein Wolff herself has just asked about the Irish lace blouse. Fräulein Wolff?"

The assistant, a meagre, faded-looking girl, hurried up. A dark flush was in her hollow cheeks; but when the superintendent told her what Karen had said, she turned pale and began to sob hysterically.

"It's not true, it's a horrid lie!" she cried. "What

does the stupid creature mean? I never even saw the blouse. Ask at the packing-desk if it's true that I took it there!"

"Yes, Fräulein Wolff, you did," said Karen, decidedly. "I knew I am not mistaken; I should recognise the lady. You have often served her."

"What do you mean by that?" cried the girl again. "Perhaps you think *I* stole the blouse?"

"I don't say that; I only say what I saw and know."

"You know nothing! Frau Ludwig, this is simply a mean trick of that girl's, telling lies to my face. I won't stand such accusations from a stupid fool like that. . . If you don't eat your lying words on the spot, I'll complain of slander."

"You needn't make such a fuss," said the superintendent; then, turning to Karen, "You hear! You are mistaken. Fräulein Wolff has been here six years, and her word will be taken against yours. What obstinacy you show with your assertion, which is evidently invented; it amazes me. . . Hold your tongue. If you had been careful, it wouldn't have happened."

Half-an-hour later, Frau Ludwig was seated in the office of the staff manageress, laying an urgent case before her. "She must get rid of Nickelsen in the blouse department. There was a regular revolt among the assistants. Wolff, who was a first-rate saleswoman, bitterly resented the stubbornness with which Nickelsen maintained an untrue assertion concerning her, an assertion which sounded more like an accusation—and the other girls were on Wolff's side." Frau Ludwig let it be perceived that she was by no means convinced that Nickelsen did not know more about the blouse than she allowed to appear. "The girl came from obscure surroundings, and was often visited by undesirable looking persons—but, however that might be, her con-

ceited, disagreeable ways made her generally disliked, and she must go as soon as possible."

Fräulein Schleich, the staff manageress, took it all down. She was not empowered to make any arbitrary dismissals; but she promised to do what she could, and as there was nothing particular to be seen to just then, she went hot-foot to Rosen, who (in Feldbergen's absence) was in charge of the staff business. Fräulein Schleich was a good friend of Ludwig's who obliged her in many little ways; and she was truly desirous of doing her this good turn. Her report of the occurrences in the blouse department was a degree more prejudiced even than her friend's had been.

Rosen listened attentively. "But I must point out, Fräulein Schleich, that there is really no ground whatever for a dismissal. The girl simply did her duty when she said what she had seen. It's all the good Ludwig's imagination. She has a grudge against the girl, because she had no word in engaging her. Do you happen to know how long Ludwig has been in the house?"

"Twenty years at least. She is one of the oldest employees."

"Yes—she's getting old. I've been noticing for some time that she is altogether too strict and shrewish with the younger women. Nerves, no doubt, and little wonder after so long a time in a warehouse. But the business must not suffer for her. We must protect the younger employees against encroachments and bad treatment. Ludwig has earned a rest. You may mark her for dismissal on the first of October."

Fräulein Schleich turned pale. "Herr Rosen. . . forgive me, but the dismissal of Ludwig will make very bad blood in the house."

"We are masters in the house, Fräulein Schleich."

"Certainly. But Ludwig, having grown up with the firm, has a rather more assured position than anyone

else. And lately there has been so much discontent among the staff—''

''You don't say so! I thought Joshua Müllenmeister was renowned for his solicitude for his employees.''

''Yes, but people say that things have changed. You know there's always some discontent at the hot season of the year; indeed, the rooms do leave much to be desired in the direction of hygiene. And there are underground influences. . .''

''Those we shall know how to circumvent, believe me. . . I have, as it happens, a successor to Ludwig ready. The dressmaking department is not doing so well that we can afford to keep an expensive hand like Meier there; any pretty, experienced, smart girl with ninety marks would do perfectly well. Meier gets a hundred-and-fifty. If we give her the blouse department with two hundred—Ludwig gets two-hundred-and-fifty—we shall save a whole hundred marks a month.''

''It will come on Ludwig as a bolt from the blue.''

Rosen shrugged. ''She must have long been prepared for it. And she shall have her way: we'll rid her of little Nickelsen. Let the girl be sent down to me at once.''

Ten minutes later, the telephone rang in the blouse department, and summoned Karen to Rosen's private office.

Ludwig smiled, well pleased. That meant dismissal. Thank goodness, they were getting rid of the brat! Karen changed colour. Everyone knew what such a telephonic summons meant.

Her knees shook, as, followed by the partly malicious, partly compassionate looks of the others, she went to the dreaded ''Almighty.'' She had to stop for a moment on the stairs; her heart was beating as if it would burst. Her hands were icy cold. For an instant she felt that she could not survive the shame of

dismissal. Where was she to go afterwards? What would Aunt Mieze, what Aunt and Uncle Ribbeck, and Tom and the Matreis, say? A dismissed shop-girl would not be taken in by any other house. . .

Rosen did not turn round at once, as she entered. Without looking up, he went on working; after about five minutes, he laid his pen aside and called Karen forward.

"You have been with us since the first of May?" he said kindly. "Have you any particular ambition to spend your whole life long in selling blouses?"

"There was no other vacancy," said Karen timidly. "Now he is giving me a hint of the 'push,'" she thought, and involuntarily drew herself up, for she had suddenly resolved not to take it quietly. In the contract, only gross errors were ground for dismissal, and she was conscious of no dereliction of duty.

Rosen was looking over a document. "Your father was a painter, your mother an Italian and no doubt artistic also. Have you inherited any tendency in that direction?"

Karen shrugged. She could not imagine what he could be at, and suspected a trap in the question. "Artistic? Yes, indeed; but I have no talent."

Rosen's eyes dwelt with more and more grave kindliness on the youthful, flushed face.

"I was thinking of making a suggestion to you," he said slowly. "Our Chief desires to make things a little easier for his daughter-in-law elect; we are about to put another hand in the antique department. We desire to educate Fräulein Matrei's successor ourselves, and of course we cannot use just anybody—the post demands an excellent school-training, then, intelligence, and, above all, a love of art. The young lady must have her heart in it; this department needs the personal touch. You would have to spend your leisure hours in

studying the history of art; an exact knowledge of technical terms relating to style and form is indispensable. On the other hand, the advantages are great. We think that you would shape well for this, as yet, honorary post. The three-months' apprenticeship in the blouses will be reckoned in your favour. . . Are you satisfied with the change?"

"Satisfied? Oh, yes, yes! How often I've envied Fräulein Matrei!"

"As I guessed! And now you will probably be her successor. You may begin to-morrow. . . And then," (Rosen's voice took a remarkably insinuating tone) "if anything goes amiss—I mean, if you have any reason for dissatisfaction, come straight to us. We desire that our employees should be happy in our service; and above all that the younger girls, who make their début in the house, should feel as if it were a second home. No unpleasant impressions shall endure, if we can help it. Even our very youngest have a right to fair play. Remember that. Always come to me if you have anything to complain of; we want to be trusted."

He held out his hand, and as if hypnotised Karen drew near. With a childlike curtsey, she laid her right hand in his; he drew her nearer still, and paternally stroked her brow and hair.

"That must be a legacy from your mother?" he said. "Such beautiful blue-black hair is seldom found in German girls. . . Then to-morrow you will begin with Fräulein Matrei?"

"With Fräulein Matrei. . ." It was almost a cry. . . But Rosen made a gesture of dismissal, and in a second she was outside.

"With Fräulein Matrei," she repeated. And the scene of the afternoon which had so terrified her, rose before her mind again. The two beings, in that close embrace, that mad kiss—and the significance of her

unwilling vision. . . It fell like lead upon her spirit. With that secret between them, how could she be with Agnes Matrei daily and hourly? For a moment she thought of turning back and refusing the tempting offer. . . Soon she cast that notion aside; but as she re-entered the blouse department, she walked as slowly as if there were no chains on her feet, and anything but happiness was to be read in her face.

Frau Ludwig exulted.

CHAPTER XXI

At the beginning of November, Hans Matrei one evening fetched Mieze Meier just before closing-time to his sister, who lay dying, and asking continually to see her.

Lotte had come back, quite recovered, from Görbersdorf at the end of September, and soon afterwards, despite the doctor's warning, had taken up her work again. In less than a fortnight, a cold laid her on her back, and thenceforward she failed rapidly. Hemorrhage followed hemorrhage; some days ago, the doctor had told her relatives to prepare for the end. And now she could not die until she had seen Mieze and begged her to look after her dear ones: Irmgard above all, and then Hans, who was like a child in the practical affairs of life, and needed a sisterly friend as much as Irmgard needed a motherly one.

". . .And Agnes—Agnes!" Where *was* Agnes? She had not come home from the shop, nor was she at Halensee, for Hans had telephoned there. She often did not come home lately, but always said, when they asked her, that Joshua had taken her to Halensee with him.

About one o'clock she did arrive—flushed, hot, visibly excited, and somewhat weary. She had been to the theatre with some of the girls, she said. At the sight of Lotte, she turned pale, a momentary faintness seemed to come over her; silently she sat down by the bed, and took the dying woman's chill, weak hand in hers.

Lotte made a great effort to speak to her, but only a few incoherent words would come. She seemed to

want to say something of Friedrich Müllenmeister, and Agnes evidently interpreted the look in the great, pleading eyes; she cast her own down and put both hands over her suddenly crimsoned face. Lotte signed to Mieze, and for the second time, Mieze took an orphaned child from the dying hand of another woman; for the second time, promised to fill a mother's place, and, for the second time, was thanked by a look from failing eyes. Immediately afterwards the death-agony began; and Lotte died at dawn.

Three weeks later, Mieze closed the eyes of Tina Ribbeck. Lisa, Tina's sister, was not at home, so Tom Ribbeck fetched Mieze from the shop, and she was just in time to do the last services of love, and then close the eyes forever. It seemed to be her destiny that all those who were in any way near to her should summon her in hours of trouble and anxiety for help and comfort. Just as frozen men seek the warmth of a fire, did the lonely, the forsaken, and the despairing seek her inspiring, radiant presence.

On a gloomy day in December, Tina Ribbeck was carried to the grave. It poured with rain, the road to the church was half flooded, and the clouds hung in dark masses from the sky. Among the few mourners was Joshua Müllenmeister. Though he was up to his neck in work just then, he had laid it all aside to do the last honours to the wife of his old friend.

The ceremony did not take long. The clergyman gabbled through the obligatory five-shilling address; he did not know the people, but he saw what he saw—a poverty-stricken funeral, and a wretched wet day. . . so brevity was the word. "For ever and ever. . . Amen." And the earth fell on Tina's coffin.

Joshua pressed Tobias Ribbeck's hand, and remained by his side. They spoke together half-aloud; at the

entrance, where Joshua's coupé stood, they again shook hands. Tobias declined the offer of a lift.

The others were awaiting him. "Now you must come to me, Master Ribbeck," said Mieze. "On New Year's Day I am taking a large flat. Herr Matrei and Irmgard, and Fräulein Matrei are coming, too—so we'll be a big family."

"Yes; I gratefully accept, Fräulein Mieze." Tobias Ribbeck's voice shook a little. "I can afford a comfortable home now, for I have just taken a place as clerk of the works in Müllenmeister's factory. He proposed it, and I accepted at once. Three hundred marks a month. At home, in the solitude with the cobbling. . . . I should have had queer thoughts, I dare say."

Mieze nodded; nor did any of the others speak. They all knew how vehemently he had, for years and years, declined any connection with the emporium, and the sudden abandonment of his convictions at such a moment was almost overwhelming.

He sighed. "Yes, yes. . . That's how it is." In reality the House of Müllenmeister had long "had" him—had had him from the moment in which he accepted the poorly paid home work. Why then should he continue the quixotic combat? His spirit was broken. The little that remained of the original Tobias Ribbeck belonged to Tom, lived in and with Tom; and if Tobias earned any money, it was for Tom's sake.

Meanwhile it had grown dark, and the rain had stopped. Across the Alexander-platz shone the hundred eyes of the Müllenmeister house. Tobias turned his head away as he passed; for it seemed to him that in the façade he saw the huge open mouth of a revengeful monster, and himself under the fierce wicked teeth which were mangling him as they had mangled hundreds like him.

The image haunted him all the evening. For the first time in many years he sat idle in the corner of the old sofa. Opposite, Tom was bent over a drawing-board, working at a design for a portico for the new Elmas building, the execution of which had been entrusted to him by the firm of Markus and Hennigs, where he was employed. Tom had become intimate with Cornelius Arfst, after the latter had repeatedly shown an interest in the doings of the talented and energetic young man.

"All for Müllenmeister!" said Tobias thoughtfully. "The whole of Berlin is subject to Müllenmeister. If he raises a finger, the city comes in an interminable procession to him, bringing its money; rich and poor open their purses and pour the contents at his feet. He is like a king who gives the laws, to whom Berlin pays tax, who reigns over his people. . . And when I think that his own father thought him a dunce, and his schoolmaster said he was 'obviously ungifted'. . . But what has he done, after all? He's no such uncommon man!"

"He has understood the spirit of his age, and that is the secret of all success," said Tom, laying down his pencil. "No superhuman intellect is needed for that. Only courage to break with the customary, to understand the demands of the present moment. That apparently simple capacity is alone the reason for Müllenmeister's eminence."

"While he who rebels against the 'sacred spirit of the age' is a social antichrist, a temple- and Sabbath-breaker, I suppose?"

"Not precisely. He is merely a fool, Father. If a man throws himself down on the railroad, the train goes over him: it's not the train's fault. Or ought we to blame the age which gives us the locomotive instead of the mail-coach?"

"I am just such a fool. I have always contended against the rampant power of the emporiums. Now I have been run over, and I suppose I ought to thank God that they are humane enough to let me prop up my shattered body on crutches, and get into the train."

"You must not torment yourself with such fancies, Father. You are not the only one that can't keep pace with the great changes. Such opposition to the victorious march of modern ideas is to be seen in all circles, unfortunately, of our good German nation. They want to stop progress; they build barricades against it, tear up railroads—and achieve only a momentary slackening of the pace. It *cannot* be stopped. And it is well that it cannot. Wherever a new railway line is laid, the whole neighbourhood improves. And, in the same way, when Müllenmeister builds a splendid emporium on the most modern principles, the architects, for instance, get a chance to realise their own ideas. Look at Arfst. He is an artist by the grace of God. And how long might he not have languished in the shade, if the Elmas house hadn't given him an opportunity of working out his ideas,—those wholly original ideas, which will in future be 'felt' by countless architects? It's the egg of Columbus all over again."

Tobias lifted himself a little, and bent forward to see the details of the design. Even a layman such as he could see that there was something in the manner of the composition which raised it far above the average. . . The keen, [illegible]-featured profile of his son was clearly defined beneath the green-shaded lamp; in the dark, deep-set eyes there glowed a strange fire which, with the energetic modelling of the lower part of the face, gave an impression of extraordinary intelligence and will-power. Tobias Ribbeck sighed deeply, as he looked round the bare room, with its empty cupboards.

The gold-rimmed china, the silver spoons, the fine napery—all the treasures from the old days had of late years followed one another to the dealers, "had not been able to go the distance," so to speak—like Tina, who perhaps would have lived some years longer, if she could have had the proper care and attention

But he, the boy—*he* did not look as if he were going to let himself be run over! His place was *on* the engine. . . And, strangely enough to-day that thought did not irritate Tobias, but seemed to soothe his tortured sensibility.

CHAPTER XXII

DIRECTLY after Lotte's death, the Müllenmeisters had asked Agnes to come to them at Halensee, and suggested that Irmgard should be sent to boarding-school. Agnes had refused, saying that she did not like to leave her brother, and as her reason seemed an excellent one, they had not pressed her. Indeed Joshua had evidently been favourably struck with her attitude; such sisterly affection and self-sacrificing sense of duty made up for a great deal that he had found lacking in his future daughter-in-law. Till now he had not been entirely convinced that he had done right in consenting to the engagement; he had been closely observing Agnes, and had found her wanting in many things both trifling and important.

As Lotte had desired, the brother and sister, with Irmgard, had gone with Mieze Meier to her five-room flat in the ...auer-strasse. Hans Matrei, Agnes, and Ribbeck had a room each; and Mieze had packed herself and the two little girls into one, while the big living room served as the general rendezvous after the day's work. And when at nine o'clock sharp, Mieze—like a good, motherly hen with her chickens—saw her brood assembled round her, she was in her element: the little bothers of the day were forgotten in the twinkling of an eye, and her sweet gaiety was infectious—even Tobias gradually learned to laugh again. They really felt like one family—Agnes alone stood somewhat aloof, and broke the little circuit. Mieze's efforts to win her liking were courteously but resolutely repelled.

In truth, Agnes's reasons for refusing to take up her abode at Halensee had very little to do with piety and sisterly affection. Out there, in the house of her future parents-in-law, her freedom and independence would have been curtailed. She must have fallen in with their ways, and if she had gone out in the evenings and returned late at night, have been in the end discovered and reprimanded. And that would have been more than she could stand, now that she was drinking the joy of her first real love in great thirsty draughts. Evening after evening, she and Elias Bielefeldt met at a certain street corner; evening after evening they sat in a little beer-house in the Keibel-strasse—alone in the living-room of the young proprietress, who, with her feminine "flair" for the illicit, forbidden, and therefore romantic, quality in a love-affair, had found this one out on the second evening that they sat, shy and scared, in the corner of the small public room, starting at every fresh entrance—and had offered them the use of her private quarters.

Agnes lived in a perpetual fever. Often she felt that it was only in the short evening hours that she existed at all, and that those which lay between were merely a kind of stupefied vegetating. She would lie for hours at night in a heavy semi-slumber, like a nightmare, groaning and sighing with apprehension and distress of mind. She never dwelt on Friedrich's return and the future; every looking forward, every questioning of the unknown, caused her incalculable torture of divided feelings. She did not believe that she could let Elias go; on the other hand, it was inconceivable that she should give up her future as Frau Müllenmeister. Deeply as her passion coloured all her dreaming, she still preserved sufficient lucidity to be perfectly aware that marriage with her beloved on his monthly salary of two hundred and fifty marks would

represent in Berlin, to a woman like her, sheer penury. When they paused, exhausted, in their passionate outpourings at the little inn, Elias would often speak of the unfairness of the existing order of society: how the Jewish wealth, once combined and set in motion, was growing as an avalanche grows, annihilating whole classes, demolishing life upon life, sweeping all before it into nothingness. . . And where such an avalanche of gold has passed, no flower can grow, no pasture thrive —all is snow, snow, snow, icy cold and lifeless, stifling organic growth and dragging men down to intellectual death.

"We, the employees, the 'hands' of the emporiums, are among the buried victims of the great avalanche of gold. All independent activity on our part is paralysed, is frozen.

"In former days, any intelligent young tradesman might hope to earn himself an independence, but that is out of the question now. The emporiums have so fastened on the retail trade that unless a private business has command of great resources it can make no attempt at competition. And how long will it be before the emporiums combine into one enormous trust which will suffer no private business to exist at all?. . . Our intelligence, our energy, has become a mere ingredient of the avalanche's snow! We serve to manure the ground for the capitalists, in short. And anyone who has once been in the machine will never know real independence again. We are the sausage meat, and the emporiums are the skin!"

And Agnes, in her fever, drank in her lover's speeches as if they were apocalyptic. She did not understand more than half, and enjoyed it as one enjoys a rare, highly spiced dish which will lie like a stone in one's inside and give one headaches and vapours. . . Yes, indeed! It *was* immeasurably unfair that an Elias

should toil like a slave for Müllenmeister's at a miserly pittance, while a Friedrich who, as he himself confessed, was quite inefficient, should pocket the millions that others earned for him by their labour and intelligence.

Her feelings towards the Müllenmeisters grew ever more inimical. She never went to Halensee if she could possibly avoid it, refused even Sundays on the most trivial pretexts, and when she *was* there, did not take the trouble to affect any special amiability.

She was looking very ill—so ill that it struck even Joshua, and she was suddenly, without having asked for it, accorded a six weeks' holiday. . . But Mieze saw that the pale, harassed, sleepless look was not the result of physical suffering. Oddly enough, though she made a shrewd guess at the truth, she felt a greater sympathy and liking for the girl than heretofore, and longed that Agnes might find courage to unburden herself. Her maternal instinct was stirred by the sight of anyone in trouble. Once she gave Hans Matrei a hint; but he had never got on with Agnes, and resented the anxiety with which his dear Lotte had been burdened on her account. Formerly he had often been worried as to her future, but now that she was so brilliantly provided for, he thought himself absolved from any further bother about her weal or woe—or tempers! Since Lotte's death, his whole capacity for love had concentrated itself on Irmgard. Müllenmeister's offer to send her to boarding-school he had politely but firmly declined. His niece should be indebted to no one but him. For the present, she helped Mieze's old servant in the mornings, and in the afternoons, went to a business school.

The new Müllenmeister building was now rising bravely from its foundations. The severity of the past

winter had greatly delayed the work, and the highly complicated basement arrangements had got on very slowly. Moreover two of the recalcitrant landowners, seeing that they were being dispensed with, had come and declared themselves ready to sell their sites to the Elmas company; and this had necessitated alterations in the ground-plan—whence yet another delay. Only at the end of December, when the unusually mild weather favoured the operations, did the work really begin to take shape.

Joshua now spent only a few morning hours at the shop, to clear off the most pressing jobs. In the afternoons he worked out at the Villa, whither the Elmas correspondence was sent until the temporary office of the new building should be opened at the beginning of April. Any other man would have been swamped in the flood of work that poured in from every side, would have lost his head amid the manifold difficulties and vexations produced by the chaos of conflicting claims, and the attempts of each member of the board to make his own influence the prevailing one. Breuer, for example, was untiring in suggestions for innovations and "improvements" in the management of the new establishment, and it demanded a considerable expenditure of time and trouble to convince him of the impracticability of his ideas. There was endless matter for consideration. Every innovation had to be weighed and regarded from a purely practical standpoint. For example, no expert would believe in the paying power of a large export trade carried on by the emporiums. Export trade, they said, demanded an extent of resources which was outside the range of the warehouses. Between the despatch of samples and the reception of orders, there lay a considerable interval of time, and the leading principles of the emporiums is and must remain, "a quick turnover," the rapid pulsation of cap-

ital. An article which remains on hand for more than two months is regarded as "dead stock." And an export line would have to reckon with a much longer "life" than that. . . Joshua had to acknowledge the justice of all these arguments. But for the export line there might be special warerooms which could be supplemented at need from the other part of the house, and in this way the "dead stock," for which the salesman now obtained disproportionately high premiums when he "got it off," or which had to be offered at reduced prices during the sales, could be disposed of at normal rates.

And then arose the question of the progressive participation of the employees in the net profits, which had been among the earliest conceptions, but was now to be long and eagerly debated. There were as many different opinions as there were members of the board. Herr Markus thought the proposal sheer tomfoolery. No other house did such things. Let the people be well-paid, as they were in other places, and let that be the end of it. Who was to take the risks of such an arrangement? The employees, perhaps! What put it into the fellows' heads to demand a share in the profits? And they didn't really want it either. If they were properly treated. . . "Money makes not happiness," in short. Town Councillor Wewermann, who employed five hundred men himself, feared that such an innovation would induce similar demands from the staff of all large establishments, and Herr Liebsohn seconded this view. "In the end they'll all want to be sharing profits". . . Only Breuer was whole-heartedly on Joshua's side. The preliminaries were already roughly sketched out; for the premium system in the old Müllenmeister establishment had had its dark side. According to its saleability, the normal, so-called "E," stock was endowed with a premium of fifteen, twenty.

and thirty *pfennige,* by piece or by yard, for the salesman. There were, in general, no premiums for quite new modern articles, while the "U"—that is, the "unsaleable"—stock often carried still higher ones. The consequence was that the sellers devoted their attention exclusively to the things that were profitable to themselves. In the new house, instead of the general premium, there was to be an arrangement whereby only the very "unsaleable" articles carried any at all. This was to be reckoned monthly, as before, and in such a way that a certain percentage was retained as a nest-egg towards the old-age pensions fund. If a certain minimum were not covered by the premiums, the employee had to make up the deficit. Anyone who had been employed in the house for twelve years, had, at sixty (and, possibly, somewhat sooner), a claim to this old-age pension; those who left before that time of service was completed, had the gathered sums from their premiums, without deduction of interest, paid back into their hands. Further, from ten to fifteen per cent. of the whole net profit was to come to the employees, of course progressively by age and standing in the house, and the idea was that the distribution should be so dealt with that each could choose either the actual money or bonds proportionate to his share. At the new allotment of shares, which was to be anticipated as the business developed, the employees would come first in consideration; and till then the bonds would yield interest at four per cent.

At this time, Joshua often spent sleepless nights, and yet he had not felt so well for many a long day. A second youth seemed to have come to him; the tired lines about his mouth had disappeared, he held himself more erect, and some of the old bright daring of past years gleamed in his eyes.

The clear, watery sunshine of an afternoon in early March was flooding the big study, furnished in old oak. Two typewriters were clattering away in the next room. He was sitting at the writing-table. Henny had just left him, and the sweet, strong scent she used filled the grave, austere room with a breath as of joyous life and glee, a protest against its stern practicality. . . Joshua got up and opened the window. The cool, damp air that rushed in restored him to a sort of tranquillity; nevertheless, he shook his head, and moved a little restlessly about the room. And yet, what Henny had just imparted, in her usual light, indifferent tone, ought to have been anything but disquieting. Only —it was such a surprise. . . He had quite ceased to think that his marriage with her would prove fruitful. . . and if he were to be wholly honest with himself, he had to admit that the prospect gave him little pleasure. Another son—now that he was getting old, and could not "see him through" his life. . . It would be better if it were a daughter. A daughter is grown up at sixteen, when a son's education is only just beginning. . . but that was not his only trouble. The idea in itself. . . An odd deadness in his brain impeded his thinking. . . Suddenly his face flushed crimson. The hateful thought which had crept like a vile reptile across his emotion, was unworthy of him, abhorrent to him—he flung it aside, and yet could not wholly forget it. He tried to work, but found it useless, so rang and ordered the motor, which he had got some weeks ago to save time in going to and fro.

He arrived at the shop about four o'clock. It was long since he had made a round of the house, and now he meant to catch up with lost time. It would take his thoughts off other things.

First he visited the silk department on the ground floor, where there was much activity, though no sale was

going on. He observed with satisfaction the cleverness of young Schiller, who, with no show of eagerness and yet with amazing dexterity, had managed to "plant on" a customer a *chiné* silk of rather demoded pattern. In passing, Joshua cast a glance at the brown wrapping-paper, which bore the price per yard in black ink, and in blue pencil, the legend "M 30." Hm. . . thirty *pfennige* premium per yard. It certainly was worth the trouble!

Close by, in the "woollens," his attention was attracted by a colloquy at the packing-counter.

"You're only sniffing about again for something that will curry favour with the chiefs," said one girl, half-crying. "I did my packing all right. There has not been a blue striped Etolian anywhere here to-day. Ask the girl at the cash-desk. Somebody must have consigned it—"

"I brought it here myself, and laid it down."

"But not while *I* was here."

"What do you mean?"

Joshua went on, without awaiting the end of the skirmish. Neither of the combatants had seen him. Up in the fancy department, at the aluminum counter, two more girls were squabbling.

"I've been waiting five minutes for you. I've only one pair of hands. I thought you must be taking the holiday in advance."

"Well, I'm blest! One half-minute over the three-quarters, you complaint grabber! You. . ."

"Oh—so that's what you call me? *Now* I'll show you! I meant to let you off. You're *six minutes* late."

"Make a good lie of it, and say half-an hour: I don't mind. But you wait! It'll be my turn next."

At this moment, the girls saw Joshua and stopped dumbfounded. He shook his head, but said nothing.

In such a progress through the house, he saw every-

thing: not a detail escaped him. He saw that, as ever, a perfect orderliness reigned in each department, that certain innovations which he had authorised, but had not yet seen in operation, were in full swing and plainly had been well-advised. But he noticed also that a strange alteration had taken place in the tone of the staff. There was a harsh aloofness, as though solidarity had ceased to exist, and each regarded himself as standing alone, and defending his position with bitter hostility against attacks from outside.

In the "ready-made" department alone was there a more cheerful atmosphere. There, in a corner, a red-haired lively little creature was executing a dance, and singing, as she did so, in a half-audible murmur some low street ditty. Two of her colleagues were laughingly watching her; even the customers were listening with visible amusement to this little private entertainment.

But one of the girls recognised the Chief and signed to Trude to be quiet. She stopped at once, but looked with gay audacity into his face, as he passed with closely observant eyes upon her. Between his brows there was a threatening frown.

"Oh, dear, Trude! It's all up with you," whispered the girl who stood nearest.

"Well, he won't kill me," she said—but she did not feel quite happy. In the rules of the house, which were often read aloud in the intervals for rest and on the eve of a holiday, loud laughter, speech, or singing were absolutely prohibited as "unsuitable behaviour" and likely to be punished by instant dismissal.

Joshua went onwards. In the lingerie department he was again pleased by the efficiency of a saleswoman who was serving three customers at once. The first asked for inexpensive d'oyleys to match the pattern of a table-cloth; she laid before her a box containing single

specimens to choose from. Then came a second lady, who wanted a handsome afternoon tea-cloth, and was instantly shown some, while the saleswoman kept a third client, who was buying a trousseau, well in hand until another girl came back from her rest, and then transferred the d'oyley chooser to her. Joshua knew his servants. The saleswoman who had sharp eyes, who could multiply herself cleverly and satisfy several demands at once, was a first-rate asset; yet there was something in this one's dexterity that displeased him —something pushing, officious, ugly, detestable! . . . He had seldom been in a worse humour when he entered his office. The servant was ordered to summon Rosen.

"The Elmas business has prevented me for some weeks from seeing to things here," he began. "I have left the entire control to you and Feldbergen and my son Hermann. I don't know if it's my mere fancy, or what it is—but I scarcely recognise my own house. Instead of the united staff that we once had here, I suddenly find a pack of snapping, greedy curs. What's up with them all? It's a positive baiting in every department; there's not a decent soul in 'em—quarrelling, tale bearing, jealousy, premium grabbing. . . How has it come about?"

Rosen shrugged. "Some weeks ago I spoke to you of a new system of mutual 'control,' begged you to give it a trial, and received your permission to do so."

"I know nothing about it. What's the idea of this 'mutual control'?"

"Anyone who brings to our knowledge a demonstrable misdemeanour, dereliction of duty, or negligence on the part of another employee, receives a small premium. After five premiums, the holder may look for promotion on the next opportunity. So far it has worked well. The members of the staff have pulled themselves together, and got into the way of keeping their eyes

open. The system, indeed, might be called edifying in its effect—for in observing the little errors of their fellows, they become more guarded themselves, and regulate their behaviour accordingly."

Joshua shook his head. "I certainly do not remember giving my consent to any such experiment. It is a most objectionable system—this of training people to espionage and tale bearing. As long as I am in command, such unfair innovations shall not be set up; so from to-morrow onwards, let this be put a stop to."

Rosen seemed to be about to protest, but he controlled himself, and bowed acquiescently.

"Another thing. How long has the little Schiller girl been here?"

"One year, if I am not mistaken."

"Then she will soon be transferred to the office?"

"We had her there, but her extreme liveliness made the young men lose their heads, and as that was undesirable, we sent her down to the shop again for the present."

"Strange that a child of that age could not be controlled!"

"Pardon me—we could not be too severe with the little girl, for Herr Hermann is to a certain extent interested in her. Her brother served with him in the army—is still a sergeant; I think the cloth contract was put through by his indirect influence."

"Even so, we can permit of no unsuitable behaviour from the sister. Let the girl be severely reprimanded for her conduct in the shop to-day—I found her singing and dancing in the ready-made department—and let her be transferred from to-morrow to the office, for typewriting. If she doesn't sober down, she must go."

"I shall keep an eye on her."

"Good. . . I noticed just now, in the shoe department, that a customer was complaining about an article

of our own make. Possibly he had no real reason to do so; our things are sound and good; but I intend, on the first favourable opportunity, to get rid of the factory."

Rosen started.

"Yes," continued Joshua. "I see more and more clearly that production does not suit with the rightful methods for an emporium. We get one-sided. The cloth factory has certainly been a brilliant success, but only because we got it for half nothing, and because the patent caught on. Otherwise, it is by far the best way to work with several manufacturers."

"If you do not mean to keep the Bergheim business, Herr Müllenmeister, I should not be disinclined to run it on my own account."

"You can do so." Joshua got up. "We'll speak of that another time." He nodded casually, and left the office in as uncomfortable a mood as he had entered it.

Suddenly it occurred to him to fetch Agnes, and take her home with him. Mimi was going out, and Henny had said that she had a headache and was going to stay at home. In his depressed mood he almost dreaded to be alone with his wife, lest he should weary or even wound her.

Karen met him in the antique department. Fräulein Matrei, she said, had been gone a quarter of an hour, but only into the shop—Karen knew not on what errand.

Joshua waited, nervously moving to and fro, sitting down, looking at the clock, mechanically fluttering the leaves of an old book of engravings on the table. Pushing it aside, he took up, as mechanically, an unopened letter which lay there, turned it about in his fingers—and happened to glance at the address—"Fräulein Agnes Matrei," from Chicago, in Friedrich's writing.

"Has the letter only just come?"

"The letter? Oh, no. Fräulein Matrei brought it with her, and laid it down to attend to a customer."

Joshua said no more. A letter from an absent lover, flung carelessly aside, without being opened. . . Odd —inexplicable! She came back at two from the mid-day interval, and now it was half-past six. She had not been very eager to read her letter!. . . He put it in his pocket.

His attention was momentarily attracted by the sweetness and grace of the young girl, moving around with light, gentle footfall, and carefully, almost lovingly, dusting and arranging various pieces.

"You are interested in antiques?" he asked, kindly.

"Not only interested—I love them," said Karen. "I feel happy every morning when I come in here, and nothing would induce me to change from this department, if I could possibly help it."

"That's as it should be," said Joshua. "One must love one's work for its own sake, really to enjoy it. You are not yet a saleswoman?"

"Not properly. But Fräulein Matrei often lets me try. I know every piece in the room; and once or twice, when she hasn't been here, I've made some quite good sales. She was always very much pleased with me."

Joshua made no reply. The girl had better not be shown how vexed and agitated he was, and if he had spoken then, his voice would have betrayed him. . . In her childish, innocent pride of her achievements she had, all unaware, betrayed to the Chief that Agnes often left her post, and entrusted this costly department to the young learner. That was a gross dereliction of duty, and in his eyes unpardonable. While she was in the shop, she must fulfil her duties like any other employee

—indeed, as the future "Chieftainess" she ought to set a good example to the others.

The loud ticking of a beautiful old Empire clock was the only sound they heard. Slowly the hands crept onwards—five minutes, ten, a quarter of an hour. . .

"Have you any idea what Fräulein Matrei has to do in the house, so that I might look for her?"

A dark flush overspread Karen's face. Any idea? Yes; beyond doubt she was upstairs again with Bielefeldt. The whole shop was murmurous with gossip, though no one dared make any definite assertion. That Bielefeldt had vainly wooed her before her engagement was an open secret, and at first no one had thought seriously about her frequent visits to his department; but soon they began to talk—Karen had learnt, through Trude Schiller, that the friendship was a public jest, and that all sorts of constructions were put upon it. Whenever she heard such allusions, her breath almost stopped with terror. She always felt as if she were the guilty one—she who knew what others could only conjecture. The secret oppressed her, like the knowledge of a crime in which she became an accomplice, by allowing it to go on with no attempt at hindrance. Several times she had tried to tell Agnes what she had seen that day, but the words had always stuck in her throat.

Joshua was too keen an observer for her confusion to escape him. Beyond doubt she knew where Agnes was, but did not want to betray her. There *was* something wrong.

"I'll go and see if I can find her," he said, taking his hat, and passing into the shop.

The first person he met was Herr Tük.

"I am looking for my future daughter-in-law," said Joshua. "Do you happen to have seen Fräulein Matrei?"

"I? No. But perhaps she is up in the 'gentlemen's

outfitting'—" Tük broke off suddenly, as if aware of having made a slip. "I mean, that is, that I believe I have seen Fräulein Matrei there."

Joshua knew not what to make of the man's manner. Three minutes later he was upstairs.

There stood Agnes, a picture of happiness, in a window recess, talking with the superintendent. She had had to wait a whole quarter of an hour, for Bielefeldt had been busy, but now it seemed to her well worth while.

Joshua started. The same vague, uncomfortable, almost eerie feeling came over him that had driven him from home a few hours before. . . But Agnes saw him, and came forward.

"I had something to take to the repairing-room," she said, before Joshua had opened his lips. "But I must hurry back now, for the little girl is all alone."

"I want to take you home for the evening. Where is Herr Schulz?"

"He is seeing some pieces somewhere, but may be back at any moment."

She was free that evening, for Elias Bielefeldt had to go to a meeting, and the invitation was quite opportune.

Joshua merely nodded. Here, amid a hundred vigilant eyes and attentive ears, he did not desire to reprove his son's fiancée.

The second assistant in the antique department had just returned as they entered it, so Agnes was able to go at once.

"I waited five-and-twenty minutes in the department for you," said Joshua when they were seated in the motor. "All that time the little girl was in sole charge. You know as well as I do, Agnes, that such neglect of duty on the part of an employee of the firm may lead to instant dismissal. And I fear that it has often hap-

pened before. Take care, however, that it never happens again."

She murmured something unintelligible.

After a moment Joshua resumed.

"We had a letter from Friedrich this morning. Had you?"

"Yes. . . I had."

"What does he say?"

"Oh, just the usual things. He is happy; he likes being out there". . .

She had turned away her face a little, but now, as if hypnotised by the stern, penetrating eyes, she looked at Joshua again.

"You know me very little, dear Agnes," he said coldly. "Else you would be more circumspect. There are two things with which I accept no trifling—duty and truth. Even the tiniest conscious departure from truth is so repugnant to me that anyone in whom I detect it can no longer retain my confidence. And when confidence goes, liking usually goes with it. Why do you not say simply that you have not read to-day's letter from Friedrich? I found it under the old engravings in the department. Here it is."

He took it from his pocket and threw it into her lap. "You had evidently forgotten your betrothed's letter, for I did not notice that you looked for it when we were going. To leave letters lying about is always careless; and most young girls are less negligent of one like that."

Her fingers trembled as she put the missive in her hand-bag. She tried to find some pretext or exculpation, but the clear, shrewd eyes seemed to guess her thoughts—she dared not tell then another lie. She had really meant to read Friedrich's letter in the shop, but had been prevented by an unusual press of business, and in the end had actually quite forgotten it. . . She began to cry—so angry was she at the reproof, so per-

plexed, so humiliated. But tears always failed with Joshua. At the sound of her sobs he grew impatient.

"Control yourself, Agnes," he said coldly. "Outbursts of feeling ought to take place indoors. I do not desire that your aspect should give rise to comment, and we are close to the house."

His tone was imperious, not to be gainsaid. Obediently she dried her tears. After a while, Joshua began to talk in an ordinary voice of ordinary things. But the little episode haunted Agnes; she felt the ground shake beneath her, and became the prey of a new, troublous uncertainty.

CHAPTER XXIII

On April 21, Mimi Müllenmeister celebrated her eighteenth birthday. She had grown very nice-looking of recent years, though she was not really pretty. Her complexion was too pale, her hair too light and dead, her forehead too high. She was easily overlooked for other girls, though her sweet expression really made up for many little defects in her personal appearance. Mimi had been called "insignificant" from childhood, and the epithet stuck to her, though in the matter of knowledge and ability she could not only compete with her contemporaries, but surpass them. If Joshua had had time to study his daughter, he would have found that her character and capacities possessed that mixture of idealism and practical good sense which he desired in his sons. Her dreamy and fanciful nature was combined with a very vivid and definite feeling for realities.

Under her own mother's guidance and observation the little, insignificant girl would probably have become a splendid, warm-hearted, sure-souled woman; Mimi had lost more than the others in losing her mother. Since that loss, she had been inwardly alone; the best of her had languished in part, and in part had rushed into various unfruitful outgrowths which complicated, without furthering, her development.

The pleasant amiability of the second wife had created a happy superficial relation with the young stepdaughter—but that was all. Mimi had nothing to complain of. Henny did her duty: under her supervision, the girl's education was completed by a "finishing-gov-

erness,'' nor did Mimi ever hear a cross word from her stepmother. Henny was, moreover, indefatigable in the social training, and, as far as outward development went, had achieved a quite brilliant success; she was solicitous also that the wishes of the daughter of the house should be readily and thoroughly carried out; and, in conclusion, she displayed the somewhat meagre charms of the maiden to the best advantage by means of tasteful clothes and many other little refinements. She was always most sweetly at Mimi's disposal—and yet the girl was aware of some hunger of heart and spirit. This stepmother was a charming, graceful, stimulating companion, a sure guide in all social matters, but she did not fill a mother's place—and Mimi was keenly conscious of it. She was desirous of some genuine interest, some object with which to fill and satisfy her life. First, she took lessons in the history of art from a renowned professor, and learnt in the studio of a fashionable artist to paint trees *à la* Leistikow, mystic landscapes *à la* Bocklin, and portraits in the Lenbach manner. She tried plastic art, too, and thought she had detected in herself a germ of dramatic talent. . . But one day there broke through all this the robust and sane practicality which was in reality her most strongly marked characteristic, and the illusions of art were promptly dispelled. On one and the same day, she said farewell to her professor and her painter, and the modish ''Amore'' and Venuses died a violent death at the hands of their creator.

Thenceforth she turned her attention to sociological matters—went to lectures on the care of children, the nourishment of infants, the treatment of expectant mothers; visited prisons, common lodging-houses, and *crèches,* and did cooking for the indigent sick twice a week with her own hands. In her scanty hours of leisure she worked at a discourse—she was of course a

feminist!—on the "Rights of the New Woman," which she hoped to deliver one day in the top room at the Philharmonic.

But this phase too went by, and with startling rapidity. Then came an empty period which she vainly sought to fill. Sometimes, but not very often, she pondered on her future. It was quite settled that she was to marry Rosen, some day. *Who* had settled it she never could make out, but Hermann always spoke of it as an accomplished fact, and it was a fact that ever since her thirteenth year she had regarded her father's manager as her future husband, though it was only in the most decorous and apparently uninvidious way that he had ever approached her. He always took her in to dinner at their own house; the attentions of so handsome a man flattered her, and it was a wonderful thing to think that she was almost "arranged for," at an age when her school-fellows were still speculating about the One and Only.

Yesterday, on the eve of her eighteenth birthday, Rosen had at last, in a long letter, made her a formal declaration of love, and at the same time an official offer of marriage. That day at noon, he hoped to have an interview with her father, so that the betrothal might be proclaimed at the birthday dinner in the evening. She had slept little last night. The moment of definite decision filled her with misgivings. She longed to be able to express herself to somebody, for all that had seemed for years a matter of course turned, in the night-watches, into a grotesque distortion of its former self.

Ella von Reeren came with birthday congratulations at about eleven o'clock. Her father was at work in his own room; Henny was still asleep. Ella and Mimi had always got on well together, but this last year had produced a slight estrangement between them. Mimi knew of Ella's relations with Felix Schiller. In the early

days of the affair, she had thought the adventure romantic and quite comprehensible; but she did not, as the flirtation went on, at all understand the state of things, for schoolgirl days were now over, and Ella ought to be turning into a more sensible person. This silly business might compromise her, and lose her a good *parti*. And this was not because of the young man's subordinate position; Mimi was too much her father's child for that, had too great a respect for their business, and the calling of a merchant; she knew that an intelligent youth, in that calling, had his marshal's baton in his knapsack, so to speak. But Felix Schiller was too young for Ella. When would *he* be able to think of marriage? And Ella was so exacting, and so spoilt. . .

Ella looked at the richly covered "birthday table" of her friend, whereof the central point was a huge basket of dark crimson roses.

"Roses from Rosen, eh?" she said smilingly.

Mimi nodded. "And an offer of marriage. He's going to talk to father about me to-day!"

"I congratulate you. Then I suppose we'll celebrate the engagement to-night?"

"I don't know yet, Ella."

"How do you mean?"

Mimi sighed. "I'd never have thought I should find it so difficult to say yes. But I had a big think last night. . ." She leant back in her chair and clasped her hands, which had suddenly got very cold. "When one reflects that one will belong to a man for all the rest of one's life, and really knows him so little. . ."

"Oh, my dear, you ought to know your Rosen pretty well by now."

"Know—what do I know? He's always very nice, but it would be strange if he were anything else to the daughter of his Chief. I like him—yes. But. . .

Oh, I assure you, Ella, I'm frightened at the idea of marriage. Did you know that his parents had a pawnshop?"

"What does that signify to you?"

"Don't you think it does? You know, they dined with us once—awful people, I can tell you. And they were never asked again. I don't believe father could stand them either. The mother was as fat as a pig and had a common face, though she might have been pretty when she was young. Mamma, too, said at the time: 'I shouldn't like to have a falling-out with *that* woman!' When she spoke, one felt at once that she might at any moment say something utterly abominable. And then, the pawnshop. . . can you imagine any decent person having a pawnshop? I can't. Just think—poor people putting in their little things, and having to pay enormous interest before they can get them out! That's not fair dealing, Ella."

"My goodness, I dare say most things in business life would seem to us unfair. You, as the daughter of a great Berlin merchant, ought not to take a sentimental view of such matters. Besides, you're not marrying the parents. Rosen is a smart, handsome man, and they say he's frightfully efficient at his business."

"Last night, I could think of nothing but that his mother might have looked like him when she was young, and that he might look like her when he was old. . . Tell me quite truthfully, Ella, quite frankly: Do you think that Rosen would marry me if I were a poor girl?"

Ella was on the sofa. Bending a little forward, she gazed for some minutes at the tips of her silver-grey patent-leather boots. She was very white, but the dead pallor was highly becoming to her. . . Slowly she lifted her long black lashes, and looked full at Mimi.

"No, Mimi," she said, and there was such unusual

warmth in her tone that any brusquerie in her answer was atoned for. "I do not think so. I think that Rosen's personal taste inclines to another type of woman. But what does that signify? Every child knows to-day that marriage is nothing but a convention. The principal thing is to get on decently together. Even at the best, what people call 'love' lasts a very short time, and then it's just the same as if they had started without it. If a woman can manage to hold her husband so far that he abstains from actual infidelity, she's done wonders. But in thought, desire, the 'desire of the eye'. . . every man is unfaithful to his wife—*every* man, believe me."

"You talk as if you'd been married half-a-dozen times yourself! How do you know that so well?"

"Because I can *see*," said Ella. "When a man looks at a woman, I can see what he's thinking."

"Do you think that Rosen would be faithful to me? Tell me quite frankly. . . He doesn't seem to me much of a ladies' man."

Ella was silent.

"Do tell me, Ella. If you only knew what a relief it is to me to talk to you like this!. . . I believe I should die of misery if my husband were to betray me."

"Then do not marry, Mimi, for you can depend upon this: They all betray their wives—*all*. And Rosen. . . Look at his eyes and mouth. I don't want to hurt you, but if you wish to know the truth: He is one of those men who *cannot* be faithful, even if they want to. He once took me home in the motor from here, last autumn; and when he helped me out of the car. . . and before that. . . well, I can only say that if I had *chosen*. . . And lately, in the shop, I noticed how he looked at Karen Nickelsen, Lynegaard's ward, you know—his eyes! I assure you, if *I* took a personal interest in Rosen, the girl would be sent packing, even though she probably can't prevent it. . ." Ella paused. "All the

same, if I were in your place, that would not prevent me from marrying Rosen. I should simply give him to understand that he could not make a fool of me, that I was aware of his tendencies, and that if I were broad-minded and considerate enough to overlook his weaknesses and passions, I demanded for myself as absolute a freedom for my own arrangements. When there's a clear understanding of that sort, a marriage may be quite ideal."

"I don't think much of that sort of 'ideal' marriage!"

"Forgive me, Mimi, but you *are* a little childish. All modern people regard marriage in that light. By far the best way is that each should know the other is not to be taken in. And if we girls are honest with ourselves, we must admit that we are really only curious. We marry because, in general, we find no other means of satisfying our desire to *know;* and because marriage gives us a more assured position in society. Otherwise—good Heavens!" She leant her elbows on the table, and put her head in her hands. "I have never seen an ideal marriage. Of my parents' union I know nothing; I was too little; but as far as I can gather, it was fairly tempestuous. My mother's second attempt was disastrous; if Lynegaard had not died, they would have definitely separated. The third, the illicit relationship, is quite harmonious, because there's no bond; but yesterday evening, all the same, there was a little 'explanation,' because Mamma had bought a thirty-thousand mark silver-fox set without consulting him."

"Ella!" cried Mimi, beside herself. "Of whom are you speaking?"

"Of my mother and Director Van Hoolten," said Ella, coolly. "I am neither blind nor deaf."

"For God's sake, Ella—do not say such things! If Mamma were to hear!"

"Your Mamma would certainly not look such a picture of horror as her innocent baby does! That sort of thing happens in the best families. If people save appearances, nobody bothers."

"But, Ella—they needn't do it at all; they could quite well marry."

Ella shrugged. "They *could*—but suppose the other way suits them better? Suppose they've both had enough of marriage? And they're right! If I could do what I liked, I should be a great *cocotte*. That's by far the best arrangement. One loves for love's sake, for sheer delight, with no legal bond, just as long as love lasts—and then builds one's love-happiness on new ground, unhindered by those conventional barriers which, in ordinary life, can only be set aside by all sorts of wretched law proceedings. Oh, if I could shuffle off all that, and live as I liked. . . A fig for marriage!"

She rose slowly, stretched herself, and walked up and down with her long, floating movements. For all its slenderness, her figure had a womanly roundness of form, which made her seem older than she was.

"Good Heavens, Ella. . ." Mimi put her hand to her forehead, behind which many new thoughts were whirling. She was so agitated that she found speech difficult. "If anyone were to hear you!" And then: "All men are not as you think. My father would not betray his wife, never! Neither in thought nor look nor wish, of that I am convinced."

Ella took a cigarette from the little box on the table, and lit it.

"Your father, my dear, has a beloved who is much more dangerous to his wife than any little girl of the class from which married men usually recruit their mistresses. A clever woman can make short work of a living mistress, but your father worships his shop; no

wife can get the better of *that* love-affair. I wouldn't thank anyone for such a husband."

"*I* would, Ella! I would gladly share my husband's love with such a mistress."

"There you are! I advise you to take Rosen; you might be much worse off. And for a girl like you, marriage is the only way out."

"A girl like me? And for one like you?"

Ella broke into a teasing laugh; and at the same moment a servant came to summon Mimi to go down to her father's room.

"Well, good luck, little one! Don't be silly. Rosen could marry ten heiresses, if he held up his finger." Ella smiled at Mimi, until the door had closed upon her; then she went slowly to the window and looked down into the garden before the house, where stood a closed coupé. . . She knew Rosen better than anyone else did. While she was still in short frocks with her hair down her back, he had pursued her with his desirous glances, and whenever she showed herself in the shop, he was instantly at her side, eager to ingratiate himself. A malicious little smile crept round her mouth. If, despite her warning just now, Mimi were such a goose as to build in any way on Rosen's fidelity, to believe that *she* could keep him for herself alone, it might be almost worth the trouble to encourage him a little. And then good-bye to Felix Schiller! The nice boy! Some day, of course, he would be thrown over, but so far they were still as dear friends as ever. It was certainly odd, for she had greatly developed within these last two years. But Felix, too, seemed much older; and as he now earned enough to make quite a good show, and she still had a great fancy for him, she saw no reason at all to break off their relations.

The long lashes fell over her eyes again, and her lips twitched as she thought of the secret hours of love in the

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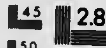

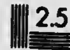

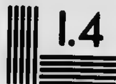

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house of his old friend, the complaisant Frau Klebel, with all her quiet little rooms. Good Frau Klebel knew her place: she greeted her guests, begged them to make themselves at home—"*quite* at home"—and vanished amid apologies. . . Sweet little Felix! She really loved him quite a lot, and he was so attentive! He had actually brought her a lovely diamond ring on her birthday. And whenever they supped anywhere together, he threw money about like any Great Mogul of the Burgstrasse.

Mimi stood at the top of the stairs, and strove for breath. She did not know what to do. The interview with Ella had completely upset her. Supposing the girl were right? Supposing Rosen were that kind of man. . . But why should not Ella be wrong? Oh, it was frightful. How on earth had she learnt such things?

Mimi was so agitated that she could not go on, and her distracted eyes fell upon a row of simply-framed photographs which ran like a frieze along the wide wall of the staircase. The first was of Joshua's birthplace; the next showed the shop after the first structural changes. Then came the first extension of the premises; and thenceforth each picture showed the house at a fresh stage. On the other side hung the interiors of the bygone years; these collected views were indeed a kind of pictured chronicle. Mimi had passed them a thousand times without looking at them, but now they hypnotised her, and suggested a new course to her thoughts. All that was her father's work. *His* spirit, *his* will, *his* diligence, *his* efficiency had widened those walls; under *his* inspiration had the insignificant pigmy grown to a giant, and gone on growing to immeasurable hugeness. . . In that moment, Mimi Müllenmeister first became conscious of her love for her father's business, from which she had hitherto stood personally aloof.

Very thoughtfully she now went downstairs. The servant, who was at the master's door, opened it for her.

"Herr Rosen has just proposed for your hand, Mimi," said Joshua, and his voice sounded rather weary. "You are of course entirely free to make your own decision. On the other hand, I have nothing whatever to urge against Herr Rosen as a possible future son-in-law."

Mimi turned to Rosen, who smilingly, and with evident confidence, approached her with outstretched hands. She drew back a step or two, and scrutinised her handsome suitor. He looked brilliantly well, with his clear colour, rich, black, pointed beard, behind which the white teeth literally sparkled. . . and yet! She looked down for several seconds. Swiftly, like cinematographic pictures, a succession of visions of the future rushed through her mind. The man there her husband—she the mother of his children. . . daughters, with the coarse, common faces of the one-time pawnbrokeress; sons who would look at her with the hard eyes of their father. . . A cold, sick feeling swept through her, a sense of absolute nausea, at the sight of the handsome, smiling man. She had always imagined that she liked Rosen; now, all at once, as if someone had forced her eyes open, she was aware of a definite aversion for him.

"I am sorry to be obliged to decline your proposal, Herr Rosen," she said mechanically. "I know how father prizes you; indeed we all do; and your offer is an honour to me. But I do not wish to marry as yet, nor do I wish to bind myself. I am of opinion that a feeling of high esteem, and even some genuine liking, is yet not sufficient for an auspicious marriage."

Joshua turned round in his chair. Apparently this development amazed him as much as Rosen, who, deadly pale, started backward as if from an unseen blow.

There was a second or two of oppressive silence wherein the eyes of the three encountered. In Joshua's

there gleamed an exultant light, and Rosen seemed to perceive the involuntary expression of joy; his colour faded to a mere tinge of dusky red, and in his eyes there lay a gloom that brooded like a thunder-cloud.

In that moment the two men knew what each had long suspected: that they had for some time been opponents, and would possibly from to-day be open enemies.

"I must confess that your answer finds me wholly unprepared, *gnädiges Fräulein,*" said Rosen, and his insinuating voice shook with inward agitation. "I flattered myself that you had a more kindly feeling for me. This is a terrible disappointment. I must try to bear, and overcome, it, unless you will at least let me hope that your views may some day alter."

Mimi shook her head. "I can give you no hope in which I do not myself believe, Herr Rosen."

Rosen bowed in silence. Two minutes later, father and daughter were alone.

Mimi went behind her father's chair, and put her arms round his neck. "Don't be angry, Father! It would certainly have been good for the business that Rosen should have had a close family connection with us; and I used always to think I quite liked him—but I cannot, I really cannot."

"Why, my darling, how did you come by the idea of marrying a man you don't love for the sake of the business! And how do you know that I wasn't more pleased than disappointed by your answer? I had no reason to reject Rosen, but neither have I any for desiring such a marriage. The only question is whether you ever gave him to understand that he would be a welcome suitor. If I know Rosen, it will take him a long time to forget the answer he got to-day. He'll bear us a grudge—but that doesn't matter just now."

Mimi was silent. The reaction from the emotions of the last few hours now came over her; a sob rose in her

throat, tears in her eyes. "I don't want to marry, Father—*ever.*"

Joshua did not smile, but drew his daughter on to his knee. "We'll leave all that to time, Mimi; you are very young yet. I am glad that I am to keep you to myself for a long while."

Then Mimi dried her tears, and sat up straight. "It's only that life does often seem to me so dreadfully empty, Father. I wish I had a profession. When I was coming downstairs just now, I had an idea. . . Isn't it odd how something one's always seen becomes suddenly visible to one?"

"And what was the idea?"

"I thought if a business like ours can so completely absorb and fill a man's life, so that it is like a beloved woman to him, why shouldn't it add something to *my* life, too? I should like to marry our house, Father. Why shouldn't I do something in the business, like my brothers?"

Joshua did not answer directly. Looking into Mimi's face, he saw for the first time her likeness to her mother. Hitherto he had taken no very deep interest in the pale, silent, and somewhat peculiar girl; his sons had been nearer to his heart. At this moment he felt that he had much to atone for to his daughter, who now looked at him with the eyes and features of the beloved dead wife.

"Certainly you could, Mimi," he said. "But if you want to, you must quite clearly understand that employment in the business is no joke, no amusement, no fashionable mania—like the care of infants and expectant mothers—that you can hang up from one day to another. Everything to do with business demands serious, continuous, well-considered labour. One must begin at the beginning, if one wants to acquire any insight—and that is by no means all fun. First, you would have to learn shorthand and typewriting, so as to be my private secre-

tary if I should need you. And then I should not be your father, but your Chief, who has no indulgences, who pardons no negligence. . . It would be fine if you could put it through; your dear mother was my companion in the best sense of the word, in everything that pertained to my work, and I never enjoyed it so much as when she was by my side."

"I will try to be like her; you *shall* be pleased with me," said Mimi. "To-morrow morning I'll begin to learn shorthand. I know Remington and Hammond typewriting already. Father, our co-operation makes me very happy."

"And me, too, my darling."

Never had they exchanged such a long tender kiss as in that minute. Both felt that something new and precious had come to each, something that they had never hoped to find, and that this talk would be the first link in a firm entwinement of their two hearts.

CHAPTER XXIV

That evening there was a big party at the Müllenmeisters. They dined at little tables; Mimi, as the heroine of the day, had arranged the taking-in. Instead of Rosen, Cornelius Arfst was her partner; she greatly liked the charming young architect. With them sat Hermann and Agnes, Ella and Eddie Van Hoolten, a schoolfriend of Mimi's, and another young man.

The duties of hostess were consigned to Mimi; therefore she hardly noticed that her own partner was very taciturn, and that his eyes seemed glued on Agnes, who, for her part, looked rather worn-out, and said only a few mechanical words when anyone spoke to her. Beside all these, Ella seemed livelier than ever. She talked gaily to everyone, her clear laughter was as refreshing and stimulating as the sound of a fountain, and brought some life into the circle. She even succeeded in so enlivening her partner that he joined cheerily in her little jokes and coquetries, and that meant much from Eddie Van Hoolten.

He had meant to refuse the invitation, for Henny had lately become quite intolerable with her exactions and jealousies, and the lamentable scenes she made on any and every pretext. He had already thought of going abroad for a while. But to-night he was agreeably surprised by the arrangement of the table, which placed him with another woman, far away from Henny. In general, he did not care for young girls; they bored him for the most part, especially these "half-baked schoolgirls," and Ella von Reeren had always been a stupid piece of goods in his opinion. To-night he observed her atten-

tively for the first time, and was surprised by her development. He scrutinised, through his glittering eyeglass, her delicate, expressive face, and the velvety curve of her shoulders; over the youthful fragrant creature there hovered, for his perceptive senses, the aroma of womanly ripeness. . . And her dark eyes laughed into his, and her audacious crimson mouth was provocative with gay smiles and words. He smiled, too, to himself, a little sensual smile, while he cleverly parried her witty nonsense. The girl was openly coquetting with him, and had made up her mind that he should notice her. Well, why not? He was ready enough. The long-lost appetite for the sweet freshness of youth returned to Eddie Van Hoolten—for like seeks like, and father and son dance best with mother and daughter. . .

Somebody proclaimed the birthday toast, and they clinked glasses.

"Your health, my darling," said Henny Müllenmeister; but as her glass touched Mimi's, her hand shook a little, and perhaps the contact was harder than she had meant it to be. The bubble-like goblet smashed with a light, tinkling sound. Ella sprang up startled, for as Henny clinked with M[illegible] Ella's shoulder, some of the champagne was sp[illegible]er arm and dress.

Henny apologised. [illegible] so sorry. And a perfectly new frock—let me see, is it badly stained? Oh, dear!. . . Well, if the spots won't come out you must have a new bodice. The material comes from our house, doesn't it?"

"Yes, it does, Aunt; but don't make yourself unhappy about the frock; I'll soon make up for that."

Henny started. There was something that sounded like a proud, triumphant challenge in Ella's tone. Her eyes went from the girl to Eddie Van Hoolten. . . "Your health, Herr Van Hoolten. You appear to be unusually happy under the care of the junior detachment of the household."

"Yes, Herr Van Hoolten has confided to me, under the seal of strictest secrecy, that the air in the junior detachment's quarters suits him even better than the atmosphere of the senior staff. Moreover, in that region there are too many private preserves, near which he dare not stray. . ."

Henny shrugged, as if perplexed. "You are extraordinarily witty, dear Ella—so much so that my feeble capacity has not as yet seen the point. You must enlighten me some other time. . . Well, go on being happy, children."

She took another glass of champagne from the tray which the servant now held her, and drank it off at one draught. "See how heartily I wish you well, Mimi! And broken glass is lucky."

"And as some of the pieces fell in my lap, I shall share in the luck," cried Ella gaily. "Who knows if I may not put together a whole bit out of your fragments, Aunt Henny!"

This time Henny could not prevent herself from changing colour. Ella's impertinences were plainly intentional.

"Then I hope, for your best good fortune, Ella, that you may get no splinters in your flesh. Glass is dangerous stuff to play with: it can draw blood." She laughed as she spoke, and Ella laughed, too.

"You seem highly courageous, *gnädiges Fräulein,*" said Eddie with some vexation in his tone.

"Oh, I am," laughed Ella. "If necessary, I would fight with wild beasts for a really serious matter."

"Energy is a two-sided quality in young ladies. One admires it, but one keeps on one's guard."

"What are you talking about?" she cried. "You haven't the least idea what I mean!"

"Oh, yes, I have; I am something of a clairvoyant. . . I know, too, that despite all precautions on the other

side, you would win in your 'serious matter'. . . You *have* won, Fräulein Ella."

"You are very bold, my friend."

"Yes. I also have energy and courage in a combat for anything that is pretty as well as 'serious.' "

Ella coquettishly turned her head, and as a sign that she wished the subject to drop, began to talk with her right-hand neighbour. Mimi had at first followed the skirmish between Ella and her stepmother with moderate interest, but this soon deepened to a certain anxiety. What Ella was at, she did not know, for the two had got on excellently until now. She came to the conclusion that Ella's hints about the relations of her own mother and Director Van Hoolten were the solution of the enigma; and in her perplexity at the amazing revelation she could not understand such a demeanour towards the son. Ever since the morning, she had felt as if metamorphosed. . . Hermann, who sat opposite, occasionally cast upon her a bitterly resentful glance. He was in a most impossible temper. Never had he contemplated such a thing as that Rosen should be rejected, and in his view, Mimi's refusal was at least as great a piece of idiocy as Friedrich's betrothal to a poverty-stricken shop-girl. At lunch, where he had been told of Rosen's *fiasco,* he had been near making a scene, but Joshua had stopped his outburst with an authoritative word.

The news of Mimi's probable engagement, to be announced at her birthday party, had somehow got wind. Nobody had any doubt about who the bridegroom was to be: that was an old story. His Majesty, Joshua Müllenmeister, was giving his little princess to his Prime Minister. The match would in all probability lead to a Regency of the son-in-law and the son in the old house. . . Thus Rosen's absence and Hermann's cross face gave rise to much ingenious conjecture.

The guests wondered, and secretly gossiped a little. Would Rosen, the rejected suitor, remain on with Müllenmeister? His renown for infallibility in business had spread all over Berlin. If it should leak out that he were thinking of leaving Müllenmeister, he was certain of the most dazzling offers from other great emporiums.

Three of the Elmas bigwigs, Mühsam, Breuer, and Markus, had gathered in a quiet corner after dinner to exchange cautiously whispered opinions. The Elmas shares had, during the last few weeks, risen enormously in consequence of fresh advertisements in various financial papers. They stood now at a hundred-and-twenty and were likely to go even higher, unless something unforeseen should occur.

Breuer looked anxious. A few days ago, somebody had told him an interesting piece of news. A combination of owners of private businesses was said to be contemplating the idea of a co-operative emporium, which should compete closely with the Elmas house. There was also said to be much activity in connection with this project in the circles directly interested. Already there were rumours of the mysterious purchase of a huge building site in the Chaussee-strasse. There, as here, millions were at stake.

"And who is the leading spirit in the affair?" asked Herr Markus.

Breuer shrugged. "That's a secret as yet."

"And until it ceases to be one, there's no [illegible] get excited about the matter. A co-operation of [illegible] businesses. . . nonsense! I dare say they'd like [illegible] the question is if they *can.*"

"For my part, I should have liked to congratu[illegible] a pair of fiancés here to-night," said Mühsam.

"What can have happened to that affair? The litt[illegible] girl is said to have kicked up her heels. I can't be-

lieve that. . . I should have thought Müllenmeister was the very man to have his daughter well on the curb in such matters."

Breuer nodded. "Rosen represents, for Müllenmeister's business, an asset that unfortunately can only be described as priceless. *He* is said to be the one who took on the factory at Aix-la-Chapelle; it is he, they say, who has inspired every big transaction in the business for the last three years. It would be most regrettable if the house were to lose such a co-operator."

"Well, at present there's no talk of any such thing. And as to the Emporium in the Chaussee-strasse, I don't as yet believe in it. Even if it were a fact—do you think they could compete with *us?* An undertaking like that, with so many heads to it, is a monstrosity that will devour itself."

"I disagree with you. It all depends on the organiser."

Herr Markus stopped, for Agnes was going slowly past. Unnoticed by the men, she had been standing near them for a time, and had overheard some of the whispered talk. It interested her but scantly, however. She was on thorns, for if she could succeed in getting away before twelve she was to meet Elias Bielefeldt, who was attending a committee meeting of his club that evening. He had written to say that he had some important news to tell her, and she was longing to know what it was. A feverish unrest and impatience was seething in her soul; her feet were burning, her hands twitching, the blood rose to her head until it was like a red cloud about her face, dimming her vision so that she felt almost dizzy. Never had she so gallingly and sharply realised that she did not belong to this circle—that though she was Friedrich Müllenmeister's fiancée, she had never been really accepted

by his people. And *that* was what she was selling herself for!

A mocking smile was round her lips. Hermann had not said ten words to her at table; but she had been all the more observant for that. Nothing had escaped her eyes and ears—neither Ella's insistent flirtation with young Van Hoolten, nor Henny's furtive misery and the lurking anger in her eyes.

In the large drawing-room the music for the first waltz had struck up. The partners were finding one another. Agnes crossed the winter garden. She passed Hermann, who was eagerly talking with Feldbergen and another representative of the firm. As she went by, she heard them discussing the frequent, mysterious thefts which had long been taking place at the shop, in all departments.

Hermann saw Agnes, but he did not invite her to dance with him. She was rather glad that he should ignore her, and hastened to the corner where the hostess was carrying on a murmured and apparently exciting conversation with Eduard Van Hoolten. The girl hesitated a moment; then as Van Hoolten, with a shrug, left Henny, she drew near and begged to be allowed to take leave, saying that she had arrived with a bad headache, which had become unendurable in the course of supper.

Henny answered vaguely. "That was a great pity—to-day of all days. . . but certainly a headache at a dance. . ." And then she added impulsively: "I, too, feel anything but well; I wish I could follow your example."

"I'll go without saying good-bye to anyone, so as to make no fuss."

Henny nodded. "Have you read Friedrich's birthday letter to Mimi? No? But of course you knew

long before we did that he was coming home before his time?"

"Before his time? No; he has not said anything of it to me."

Henny was too much preoccupied with herself to be interested in her future stepdaughter's tone and manner, but the involuntary cry arrested her. "Why, yes—he's coming in July or the beginning of August instead of October. Well, my dear, that's a piece of news that ought to do your poor nerves more good than anti-pyrine and cold bandages!"

"Yes; it's a great surprise, but I'm afraid it will not take effect all at once," replied Agnes, who had regained her self-control. "So please excuse me to Mimi—I'll get away as soon as possible."

In the hall she sent one of the servants for an automobile, putting on her hat before the marble-topped stand; the door of the first reception-room stood open, and the wide, smooth, crystal surface of the glass reflected the bright room, like a picture on a glittering silver ground.

Agnes sighed. Since the little interlude with her future father-in-law she had felt very uncertain of her ground here. His manner towards her was entirely unaltered, but she believed that he was covertly observing her, and often fancied that she detected a piercing, distrustful glance from him. At such moments her heart stopped beating from fear—she imagined that all was known, and that she would be dismissed with ignominy from his house. But it should not come to that, sooner than it should, she would initiate the breach herself. . . As the door of her cab shut upon her, she drew a long breath of relief. They dashed down the Kurfürstendamm, and she was at the rendezvous at ten minutes to twelve. Bielefeldt was to ask for her at about twelve in the little restaurant where

they were wont to meet. She had scarcely entered before he appeared.

"Thank goodness I managed it;" and whisperingly she told him of all the torture she had undergone, and how, even when she was seated in the cab, she still feared some obstacle. "I hate the whole thing," she added gloomily. "I shan't stand it much longer. Friedrich is coming back in July. Do you know that, Elias? To-night is my last visit there. I'll write to Chicago to-morrow and send him back his ring. I *will* not go on with it. Frau Friedrich Müllenmeister is all very well, but Frau Elias Bielefeldt is much better. For you are the man I love, and I won't have any other. . . Do you hear? Why did you not ask me yourself to say all this? You are not so timid in other ways."

Bielefeldt stared before him in some perplexity. He had once thought of asking Agnes Matrei to marry him, but that was long ago, when she was free. He was far too sage and sober to cherish a hopeless passion. On the day that she literally flung herself at his head in the shop, he had been somewhat scandalised by so tempestuous a revelation, but had readily enough accepted the opportunity—he saw no reason for repulsing the spontaneous love of so beautiful a girl. But he had long since made up his mind that marriage —even if her engagement should be broken off—was out of the question. Her wild passion alarmed more than it rejoiced him. In his eyes, her behaviour was unwomanly, and moreover he was secretly convinced that she was not healthy. His children must above all things have a healthy mother. Hence her exaggerated ideas must be repressed.

"No, Agnes; you must not do that. I will not consent to it," he said with slow emphasis. "I love you, too, but for that very reason I must guard you against

any hasty step. You have had the most fabulous luck, and must not lightly cast it aside. To marry for love is certainly a very fine thing, but the necessary conditions for mutual happiness must be present. You are meant for the great, glittering ways of life. You could never submit—and you saw it clearly at the time of your engagement—to the poverty-stricken conditions which are all that I could offer you, and despite our mutual love, you would soon be wretchedly unhappy. Promise me that you will do nothing rash, Agnes."

"And then? Am I to go and marry Friedrich Müllenmeister? And you and I—what about us? Is it to be all over between us? Perhaps you mean to marry somebody else. Do you think I'd stand that? Why, I'd tear her eyes out, I'd throw vitriol at her, I'd ruin you and myself, too—remember. . ." She stopped, panting, her lips still half open; the veins on her temples showed in a maze of clearly defined, dark purple lines against her transparent skin, and in the usually pale face there glowed a dusky crimson flush, which rose to the roots of her hair. "Tell me!" she cried. "Is that what you intend? You love me no more, you love another, you want to get rid of me. Confess it—confess it—and I'll take poison, for I won't go on living. . ." She crouched, sobbing, and beat her head against the edge of the table.

Elias sat still. Such hysterical outbursts were now familiar to him; he loathed them unspeakably, and they had been his reason for coming to the conclusion that marriage with the morbidly erotic girl would be a monstrous piece of folly. But he had learnt, too, that in such moments the only thing to do was to be tranquil and tender, and thus restore her to reason.

"You're a silly little darling. What are you talking about? *I*, love another woman! You don't be-

lieve it yourself. I think of nobody and nothing but you. I'm the one that suffers most. And I shall love you always just as I do to-day, whether you are called Agnes Matrei or Agnes Müllenmeister."

His gentle voice and caress at last tranquillised her, and it became possible to talk of ordinary matters. He told her that Herr Tük was thinking of cutting himself free, and entering into open rivalry with the emporiums. He intended to open a house-decorating establishment. And an opportunity for independence had arrived for him—Bielefeldt—also. Tük had told him of a millinery business that was for sale. It was an extraordinarily favourable opportunity. The proprietress, who had had the place for years, had lately died of consumption, and her partner intended to return to Posen, which was her native town. The business was chiefly with provincial customers, and of a very flourishing kind. A relatively moderate purchase price of ten thousand marks was all that was asked. Unfortunately he had not that sum at his disposal just then; a man who liked to live decently could not save much out of two hundred and fifty marks a month. But he must scrape up the money somehow or other.

"Of course you must," said Agnes, eagerly. "You must and shall be independent somehow or other. . . Can that be the undertaking that the men were talking about out there?" And she related what she had caught of the conversation between Breuer, Markus, and Mühsam.

Bielefeldt nodded. "Yes; that was most probably it. . . Well then, the affair has got so far that already it is giving those gentlemen some anxiety. That will interest Tük. The realisation of this idea is the only chance the small businesses have of escaping from the clutch of the emporiums. Every member pays for his

own 'pitch' and takes his proportionate share in the general expense for light, heating, advertisement, and so forth. It's a sound idea. And yesterday we all agreed to summon a meeting of the emporium employees in May, for the discussion of various pertinent questions."

Agnes nodded vaguely. Bielefeldt's own plan so completely absorbed her that she had no attention to spare for other thoughts and interests. Her jealousy was already on the alert in self-tormenting fancies. As proprietor of a millinery business, he would be in perpetual and intimate touch with his employees; if he found a pretty, clever manageress, there would be serious danger of his being exposed to a "marriage campaign."

"Silly child!" said Elias, half-amused, half-vexed. "You are very odd to-night. I haven't the faintest intention of marrying. How *could* I? I should never find anyone fit to hold a candle to you. Exercise your fancy instead on a way of finding the money, and don't let your dear little head get filled with nonsensical ideas like that."

"Yes, I *will* think of a way to find you the money. If I were Frau Müllenmeister now, with lots of diamonds, I'd sell them and give you what I got."

"I couldn't take it, Agnes."

"Oh, nonsense! of course you could. I wish I *was* Frau Müllenmeister, for that reason. Could I get anything out of Frau Henny, do you suppose?"

"What are you talking about, Agnes? *Ten* thousand. . . But after all. . . Wouldn't she at once ask, though, what you wanted the money for?"

"I think she'd understand my need!" And Agnes laughed maliciously. "But that's only *one* idea! I dare say I'll find another way out."

"And of course I was only joking when I considered

it. I shall manage the little sum myself. A man of my qualifications ought surely to have enough credit for *that,* devil take it!"

"Yes—devil take it; and it's precisely to that gentleman one must turn, if one wants to succeed in anything. But tell me where the house is to be established, and what it's to be called?"

"That isn't settled yet. Probably in the northern part of the Friedrich-strasse, where a large group of buildings is to be had cheap. The name is still a secret; we think of calling it The Berolina Commercial Rooms. Of course that mustn't be allowed to leak out."

Agnes nodded; she had suddenly fallen quite silent and soon suggested their parting. It was past one o'clock. Outside it was pouring with rain. At the first corner the couple ran into a man who was hurrying towards them under an open umbrella, and the collision was so violent that the two umbrellas were actually locked together. Agnes uttered a little cry of terror, for the bright light of the street-lamps showed them that Herr Tük was their fellow-sufferer.

She stammered out an explanation, saying that she was coming from a friend's, and that Herr Bielefeldt, whom she had met on the way, had offered her his escort and umbrella. . . but she stopped in the middle of her sentence, suddenly perceiving the absurd incredibility of what she was propounding. Tük knew perfectly well that there was a big party at Halensee for Mimi's birthday . . She turned crimson, and heartily despised her

But Tük seemed to think this encounter the most natural thing in the world. "It's perfectly splendid, our having met, for I want very much to have a few words with you, Bielefeldt. Would you allow me to join you as far as your house, Fräulein Matrei?" he quite composedly asked.

"But of course," she said, reassured by his apparent density.

After the men had left Agnes at her door, they went into a cafe which was still open. Tük was crammed with news. Late that afternoon, he had had a long talk with his friend Rosen, who had asked him all sorts of questions about the new scheme, about which rumours were rife. Tük had at first been somewhat on his guard, but finally had given full details.

"Shall I confide something to you, Bielefeldt? There is something rotten in the state of Denmark. Why wasn't Rosen at Halensee to-night? There was an idea, wasn't there? that the betrothal was to be announced to-day. Well, and now?. . . He wanted most particularly to know what moneyed men we had behind us, how far the new undertaking was capitalised, what guarantees had been given, and on what sort of basis the whole thing was arranged. I gave him a general idea of it all. Have you decided to join us?"

"Certainly, if I can raise the funds."

"You must and shall raise them. Ten thousand. . . At the worst, you could go to a professional money lender. Hm—yes. . . Forgive me if I ask a question, Bielefeldt. You know how I feel towards you; I'm your friend. Tell me, what's up between you and a certain young lady? Aren't you a little incautious? Please don't think me forward and indiscreet! God knows, I wish you well. . . Frankly, I'm sorry for you."

"There's no cause to be that. The thing will come to a natural end as soon as Friedrich Müllenmeister returns. . . Girls sometimes have that kind of whim. . ."

"Rather a dangerous sort of whim!" Tük played with his coffee-spoon, and, leaning on his left elbow, looked steadily down. "Do you know there's any

amount of disgusting gossip in the house? I should be surprised if the Chief had not already had some anonymous letters. You are really very incautious. Just think, if anyone but I had met you just now, at this hour!. . . There'd have been some nice talk! If I were you, I wouldn't go in for such a risky sort of adventure."

"Is it *my* fault? Do you suppose *I've* enjoyed dancing on hot iron all this time? But what can I do?. . . Just imagine—this very evening again—"

"Why, is it a one-sided affair, then? Do speak out; it always relieves one. I have been observing you for some time; you don't satisfy me at all! But I hope you trust me."

Bielefeldt was silent for a while. At any other time, he would have thought twice about imparting to another a secret which was not his alone; nor would the peculiar tone of Tük's voice have escaped his cautious ear. But in his present mood he did not care. Agnes, with her passionate outburst, had again reminded him of the critical situation he was in. If the beautiful girl's love and vehement need of him flattered one side of his nature, the cardinal trait in him was nevertheless an ever-growing sobriety of thought, which was fast turning his earlier passion for her into something not far from aversion.

Nervous, uneasy, out of temper and spirits, as of late he almost always was after the time spent with Agnes, he was glad of an opportunity to speak freely to somebody on the subject.

"Two years ago I was quite smitten with the girl, it is true. . ."

Tük smiled. "You were not alone, my friend. The lovely Matrei had many victims."

"But that's over. I feel nothing at all for her now, I assure you—nothing. . . And goodness knows, I

wanted nothing from her either, but the girl is really diseased—quite off her head. She gives me no peace, I can tell you; I can't escape her, she positively hangs on to me; I don't know what I'm to do. Good God, *I* never had any idea of poaching on another man's preserves."

"Oh, as far as that goes, engaged is not married. You are not thinking of marrying Fräulein Matrei, then, even if she were free?"

"No. I tell you she doesn't even attract me now. But I can't be so brutal as just to cast her off—that doesn't do. I only wish Friedrich Müllenmeister was back."

"So that's the state of affairs. . . The young man *has* got himself into a hole." And Tük whistled softly. From his light-lashed, rather heavy eyes there gleamed a treacherous spark of exultant malice, and in the look there was something so utterly base and false that Bielefeldt suddenly realised his error. He had let out more, in his dejected mood, than he had intended.

"I of course rely on your discretion," he said rather confusedly. "One ought not to speak of such matters, I know. For the rest, my relations with Fräulein Matrei are entirely blameless from the moral standpoint; it is a wholly platonic friendship which would have no reason to shun publicity, if people did not always make a mountain out of a mole-hill and take the worst for granted."

"Of course, of course." Tük nodded. "You need not assure me of that. For that matter, I admire Fräulein Matrei more than ever for her courage; in the particular circumstances it takes a good deal of pluck to obey one's feelings. . . I'm afraid it's getting very late, eh?. . . Waiter, the bill!"

CHAPTER XXV

KAREN was visibly developing. Joy in her work had given to her whole aspect a look of radiant contentment which added a still sweeter note to her youthful charm. There was not a piece in the whole department whose style, origin, and history she did not know —and she loved them every one. For some, she had an almost passionate affection, and would tend and guard them with a sort of fervent devotion, genuinely mourning when they were sold.

Agnes, who was her instructor, took a real pride in her intelligent, eager pupil, and lavished praise on her at every opportunity. Over and over again she had assured Herr Feldbergen that if *she* were to leave to-morrow or next day, Karen could perfectly take her place. Nevertheless there was no genuine attachment between her and the young learner. "She is very sweet, but there's something so searching in her eyes," said Agnes to her intimates, when she spoke of Karen. She knew not why, but the quiet, grave, interrogative look of the beautiful blue eyes always made her feel slightly uneasy. "The silly little thing looks at me as if she were wishing for the Röntgen rays, so as to rake me through and through." And though she laughed at her own jest, she never got rid of the uncomfortable sensation.

The isolated position of the antique department was one of its peculiar charms for Karen. Unless she had something to do in the shop, she saw and heard nothing of the proceedings therein, except what she picked up from Mieze, Trude, or some other employee.

Trude Schiller was leaving in the autumn. She wished to prepare herself for the stage. Since she had visited the Winter Garden and the Apollo Theatre with Hermann Müllenmeister, she had had a violent attack of stage-fever; and Hermann, persuaded (he said) of her unusual talent, had promised to pay the expenses of her training.

Her eldest brother, Johannes, was the only one of her home people who disliked the idea. Papa Schiller took refuge in his old maxim—"Never stand in the way of your children's happiness"—from the fact that this arrangement of Trudchen's was directly opposed to his own dispositions and plans. Even Felix had approved. If Trude had any talent at all, she would assuredly make her fortune sooner on the stage than in the emporium. "To make a fortune" was Papa Schiller's first and foremost aim. He himself had failed to do so. The business was fallen upon such evil days that it barely brought in the necessaries of life, and if Johannes and Felix had not intervened, the family would have suffered from literal pangs of hunger. . . Felix was doing honour to the name. He, the youngest salesman in the silk department, obtained the highest commissions and premiums. His pockets were always full of money. He gave no definite details about the extent of his monthly gains, admitting merely that he earned a good deal; but he always had an open purse for the needs of the household. He lodged with an old friend, Frau Klebel, who let him have for very little money a large, well-furnished room.

But though Papa Schiller was very proud of his younger son, who was prospering beyond all expectation, he could not repress some slight anxiety about him. The big premiums did not seem particularly good for Felix. He was nervous, shaky—"gone to pieces," in fact, and his wretched looks were noticed even in the

shop. He maintained that he felt quite well, and anxious questions from his parents made him cross and impatient. "Couldn't they leave him alone?"

Papa made up his mind that Felix smoked too strong cigars and took too many "nips"; but he had never had any authority over his children, and was moreover too indolent to enter into discussion with a boy who was doing so splendidly. Since the rapid decline of his business, he had buoyed himself up with the notion of applying to Joshua for a suitable situation in the Elmas house. He was not as old as Ribbeck, who had got such an excellent post in the Bergheim factory, and who, in the autumn, when that passed into other hands, was to manage the repairing workroom in the shop at the same salary. What Ribbeck could do, *he* could do, any day in the week! Even the sharp prick of poverty, the burden of his whole precarious existence, had not been able to diminish his arrogant self-confidence—in his own opinion, he could easily have filled the post of superintendent or of any other important official in an emporium.

Trude had now been for some time at typewriting in the counting-house, and was far from enjoying her enforced tranquillity. But she had soon acquired friends and admirers in her new field of activity, a not seldom managed to slip downstairs and chatter fo half an hour with Karen.

Karen could not understand Trude's resolve to go on the stage. She had always loved the lively little creature, but now she felt estranged from her—they had ceased to understand one another. Trude's mockery of the "old rubbish" amid which Karen felt so happy, wounded and almost offended her—their paths were definitely parting.

This made Karen cling all the more closely to Irmgard, who often got away in the afternoons and would

come to see her. She, too, was interested in the beautiful, suggestive old things, and would listen and look reverently when Karen displayed the treasures of the department.

Another visitor of whom Karen was very fond, was old Herr Feldbergen, the actual Chief of the department, who for his part delighted in the enthusiastic young assistant. "Our little comrade" was his pet name for her, and once he had rejoiced her heart by taking her with him to view a famed collection which was up for sale at Lepke's. She came back radiant from this outing.

"You are a clever little person," the old man had told her. "We shall be able to depend on you, some day. And that's the highest praise one can give to a novice in business."

She was utterly happy in her present surroundings. On fine days, when the Alexander-platz gleamed in the spring sunshine, Agnes would sigh and long for the time when she should be "free," and could spend the lovely afternoons out of doors, complete mistress of her day. But Karen knew nothing of such yearnings. When *she* looked through the glass door at the shimmering Square, that light-hearted spirit of Spring which hovered so indefinitely, and yet so unmistakably, over the eager passers-by, would come to her, too, and make her feel such an overflowing happiness that, if no customers were present, she would unconsciously begin to twitter and trill like a bird.

For the first time in her life, she was aware of her youth, and her claim to happiness and mirth. Hitherto there had always been something to impede the development of her young joy in life. Full of love as her childhood had been, it had lain in the shadow of the Ribbecks' anxious existence, and then came the grim episode in the Lynegaard household, the death

of her guardian, the destitution of her beloved foster-parents, and Tina Ribbeck's long dying. Karen had inherited the moody Northern blood of her father; the sunny temper, the "happy nature" of her mother, might dance like flowers and sunbeams over the dark slow stream of the other tendencies, but in hours of mourning and dire anxiety, those gloomy waves rose so high that all the maternal bestowal had seemed near sinking forever beneath them. Karen took everything seriously and did not lightly forget. But once the spell of sorrow was broken, she could grasp her inheritance from that lyric, laughing, blooming South whence her mother had come.

Just now that inheritance had the upper hand. Her whole being was one happiness. When she got up in the morning, she rejoiced at the thought of her day in the shop—the people she would see, her work. . . and all through that happy day, she looked forward, nevertheless, to the evening at home or the stroll arm in arm with Aunt Mieze or Irmgard; while in between lay a host of minor delights—some new purchase in the department, an interesting private view, an evening concert, and so forth. Yes, life was very fair. She loved everyone; even the girls in the shop, who had not yet forgiven her or Mieze for what they looked upon as "unfair" promotion. . . even the girls in the shop were regarded with understanding and pardon.

From time to time Rosen looked into the antique department to see that all went well. His was one of the few visits Karen did not enjoy. She blamed herself secretly for this, for had not Herr Rosen got her the wondrous post? and moreover, his manner to her was always so exceedingly kind and cordial that she was surprised at her own repugnance. Yet she could not overcome the oppressive shyness and embarrassment that his presence always caused her. . . At the be-

ginning of May, a consignment of furniture arrived which, heaped up anyhow, filled the space at all times limited, and made the room look like a mere second-hand shop. The pieces were not yet known to be there, however, and as no great influx of customers was anticipated, Agnes had, on the plea of a bad headache, been given leave for the day, and Herr Feldbergen, as ultimate arbiter, had agreed that for this afternoon (as an exceptional thing) Karen should, in the unavoidable absence of Herr Schulz, take sole charge of the department.

She was delighted, and fervently hoped for a great crowd of buyers who would ask about prices, and really understand something about the stuff—not just come poking about for anything good that might be going cheap. But to her disappointment business was rather slack; nothing was sold but a pewter jar and a spinning-wheel. About six o'clock, Rosen came in with a gentleman who was interested in old Dresden and who looked through the different cases, but found nothing that suited him and left without buying. Rosen stayed.

"You are always so silent with me—are you afraid of me?" he asked. Karen uttered a frightened "no," pulled herself together, and began to talk about some carved chests. Herr Schulz thought they were Late German Renaissance, while Herr Feldbergen pronounced them to be Danzig *baroque*.

"But I almost think Herr Schulz is right," she said eagerly. "The line is too simple and fine for *baroque;* see, this is a purely architectonic movement, not in the least allied to *baroque* or rococo; I am sure it is rustic work of 1650 or even earlier."

Rosen looked sideways at her, and smiled. "This is clearly your element, isn't it?" he said.

Karen nodded, and now that she was started, she forgot herself and talked on excitedly. "I cannot un-

derstand how rich people can go into the shops and pay heavy prices for modern things. If *I* had a lot of money, I know how I'd furnish!"

He laughed amusedly. "How? Give me an idea. I'm quite curious."

"First I'd have a dear little 'Early Victorian' living-room, with everything genuine—pretty, useful, yet wholly graceful furnishing; on the walls, silhouettes in frames of dried rosebuds, and in the cabinets all sorts of sweet, sentimental ornaments of the period! In the bookcases, little masterpieces of binding in velvet and silk—and the morning sun should shine into *that* room. Then I'd have a drawing-room in heavy Renaissance style with a great deal of artistic carving, and stained glass in the windows, so that only a broken, suggestive half-light should come in—and Raphaelesque and Gobelin tapestries, and antique works of art. And the dining-room should be in the Old-Frisian manner, with old pewter and gay rustic china and stone-ware against the stiff black oak furniture, and a chandelier hanging from the ceiling. If I was very, very rich, perhaps there'd be as well a tremendously bright rococo salon with gigantic windows, and hundreds of candles at night."

"You have by no means bad taste, Fräulein Karen," said Rosen, much impressed. "You would make good use of your wealth. Most people who become rich have a rather fumbling manner of spending their money. Perhaps you'll get your wish some day."

"Oh, it's not exactly a wish!" laughed Karen. "I only think of what I'd do if I *was* rich."

"You probably *will* be. Depend upon it. . . I'm something of a clairvoyant. I see your future clearly before me."

"Mine? Good Heavens, how am I to get rich?" said she, somewhat disconcerted by his significant tone. Sud-

denly she felt that she had not the courage to look at him, though she knew instinctively that his eyes were upon her. Then he took her hand and forced her to look up at him, and into those bold, glittering eyes.

"Do you know what I see? Precisely the rooms that you have described, but with a great many more things in them, and one of them right on the street, with two or three great windows. And outside, over the windows, a broad name-plate, and what do you think is written on it? Why! little Karen, there'd be in great big letters: KAREN NICKELSEN, Art and Antique Establishment—and it will be all your own!"

"Ah, how should I ever get such a costly business?" said Karen nervously, trying to draw away her hand. But Rosen held her fast, and drew her towards the door, so that they both looked out at the Square.

It was a mild, sweet evening in May, the air a little heavy, as if rain were coming and yet did not quite venture to come. There was a light mist about the roofs, like wet dust, and in the whole atmosphere a sort of wistful expectancy which seemed, as it were, to slacken the pace of life, so that people walked more languidly, and the various noises were muffled by comparison with other days.

"Look at the people, little Karen," murmured Rosen. "At least eight out of twenty are in couples—little he and she. . . How old are you now? Nearly seventeen?. . . Have you a sweetheart yet?"

"Please, Herr Rosen, let go my hand," pleaded the girl, trembling beneath his now openly desirous eyes. "Why do you talk like this?"

"Why, it's only natural. . . I have no evil intent. Just look at all those couples! Many of them are like galley-slaves, bound together by an iron chain. Those are the married ones. They show it plainly; they look so cross and bored and worried. And now look at the

others. *They* are in chains, too, but chains of roses, forget-me-nots, evergreens; for they are people who are bound together in the right way—by friendship and free love. And so they're happy, being bound and yet free. . . Do you know, Karen, that you, with your youth and beauty and intelligence, with your whole rare delicate personality, are predestined to be the perfect friend of some fortunate man—"

But at this moment the shop door opened, and a gentleman and two ladies arrived to ask about old porcelain. Karen was now experienced enough to distinguish instantly the genuine customer from the mere "poker-about." The latter was rife on wet days—a terror to the assistants; for such visitors would spend hours in the shop, looking at everything, demanding information, and departing finally with the reassuring promise that they would "think it over." But although she saw at a glance that this trio was of such idlers, she received them with unalloyed satisfaction. For Rosen instantly took himself off. . . The terror which this episode had aroused in her lasted long; yet she could not bring herself to speak of it to anyone, not even Mieze—who never learnt that thenceforth Karen was almost afraid to go to the shop, and that all her innocent happiness was, for the present, done with.

CHAPTER XXVI

As soon as the temporary office of the new Müllenmeister house was opened, the earliest preparations for the internal arrangements were set going. Many connections were made, tenders came from every quarter, and each was conscientiously examined; even the first engagements were concluded. Everyone was as busy as a bee, getting the monster machine called Elmas, with its thousands of wheels, screws, levers, regulators and so forth, into working order.

Joshua often wished he could multiply himself twenty times over, for the old house required no less than the new his constant personal care. Hermann was not to be depended on for any important matter; he had unconsciously, of recent years, allowed himself to become Rosen's mere satellite. As for Rosen, he was as energetic, prudent, and indefatigable as ever—yet Joshua felt a growing estrangement between himself and the manager. Perhaps Mimi's refusal had offended him; perhaps the cause of his remarkable ill-humour lay deeper. The initiation of that "system of mutual control by the staff" had been his idea principally, and its countermand by the chief had visibly vexed and soured him. There now were frequent differences of opinion between Joshua and him, which more than once assumed a personal aspect and led on some occasions to sharp little "explanations." Joshua did not treat such episodes lightly. He knew what Rosen was worth to him; such capability as his was not easily replaced. It was policy to do much to retain it; but not at the cost of resigning his own sceptre.

The staff suffered visibly from this unsettled condition, which had never prevailed before. The fluctuations of method, the regulations that were no sooner imposed than altered, disconcerted and irritated the employees. There was no doubt that the firm had lost its former loyal and kindly relation with the staff. Side by side with the strict justice and paternal rule of the Chief, there now emerged a spirit of petty tyranny. The employees were deprived of direct access to the proprietor, for Joshua, in these overworked days, had been obliged to abandon the hours which had been reserved for personal interviews with his servants. Now Feldbergen, Rosen, and Hermann alternately received the complaints and petitions of the staff, and though Feldbergen desired to be fair to all, in general they were obliged to put up with promises and soft words which were never carried out in any degree.

Joshua was of course but scantly informed of the diffused dissatisfaction of the staff. At the end of April, the invitations for the meeting of emporium employees in connection with the "New World" schemes were sent out. Proprietors of big shops were officially invited to the assembly, which was convened by a former emporium assistant and the writer, Hans Matrei. Joshua resolved to go and hear what the people had to say, and what were their actual suggestions for reform. He knew the stepbrother of his future daughter-in-law but slightly, for Hans and Lotte, in their dread of seeming to intrude, had rather avoided than welcomed any acquaintance with the Müllenmeisters. But Friedrich had, from Chicago, pointed out his future brother-in-law as a capable writer for the Elmas articles, and as possible editor of the shop journal. In their few short interviews, Joshua had got the impression of a sympathetic but somewhat narrow sort of man who, like nearly all idealists, was wholly without practical knowledge of

his subject, reckoned with pure abstractions, and so could never attain a really objective view of the state of affairs.

For weeks there had been, among the assistants in the various emporiums, a lively discussion about their attendance at the meeting. The feminine contingent was a little languid about it—perhaps a little distrustful as well. No one knew exactly what to think, but, curiosity aiding, they decided to "face the music" and go.

When the meeting opened, it showed the women to be the greater part of the audience. The one-time emporium assistant was in the chair; Hans Matrei was the first speaker. He meant to lay the quintessence of his great work before those for whose sakes he had written it. He had summoned them, they had all obeyed. Row upon row, making one great block of human beings, the girls sat before him, with their feathered or brightly flowered hats—most of them smart and modern, many even charmingly dressed. They were nibbling sweets and chocolate out of ribboned packets, laughing, chattering; evidently they looked upon the whole thing as one huge joke.

Hans Matrei began with a general survey of the evolution of the emporium. Then he posed the question: "Do the emporiums constitute a help or a hindrance to social development?" Closely investigated, the paramount advantages that the emporium offered to the public were the convenience of being able to make several different kinds of purchases under one roof, and the general cheapening of commodities, which, be it observed, could only be brought about by a "squeezing" of the prime cost. Now, was this cheapening of commodities a furtherance to social welfare? The question was susceptible of an answer in the negative. The smaller businesses were blighted by the monstrous squeez-

ing of prices—they could not go the pace, and were quickly done for. Moreover, it was best for the community when prosperity was as evenly distributed as might be; and the accumulation of capital in a few hands created a small number of masters, and a great mass of thralls. . . "A country in which there are many flourishing private businesses is like a landscape watered by many rivers and streams, where plenty and prosperity reign—while from the rushing torrent of private capital ensue but waste stretches of fallow land. It is thus to be desired that some subtle system of engineering should achieve, by effective canalisation of the stream of capital, a well-devised irrigation of the country; and a time will assuredly come when this problem will be solved to the common satisfaction."

For without doubt the emporium was a form of commerce which had arisen from the demands and necessities of the age, and not at all a daring and successful speculation by sage individual capitalists. "The pulsating, feverish, workaday existence of great towns exacts imperiously a strict economy of time, which is attained by centralisation of the means of supply; and the lower prices—particularly in the necessities of life —create a new demand for many other articles, and are pre-eminently advantageous to the less prosperous members of the community.

"But two great spheres are inevitably hostile to the emporiums, despite the growing favour in which these are held by the public: The host of private-business proprietors whose very existence is threatened; and the circles from which the emporiums recruit their raw material, so to speak—that is, the shop-girls and shopmen. Both of these are directly injured; the emporium blights the former, and drains the strength and vitality of the latter. The employees of the emporiums may, in general, be compared to lemons in a powerful press.

They enter it full of sap and seed; they are cast out from it, after a course of years, as valueless residue.

"The great emporium is a state within a state. Very well then: it should treat its employees as public officials, giving them thereby a sense of security, and consequent pleasure in their work, since it assures them, above all things, a really well-devised and suitable provision for their old age. Everything that has as yet been done in this direction is mere piece-work. We hear to-day that a company undertaking on a great scale is about to carry out some long-cherished hopes and expectations in the most ideal manner. I rejoice in the tidings, but until I see confirmation of such rumours, in black and white, I confess that I lack belief in them. For a share company with great social beneficence among its plans is a rare plant in the garden of modern conditions". . .

Hans Matrei paused, and then proceeded to consider the organisation of the emporiums, which, as regarded the staff, left much [illegible] desired. The superintendents had too many rights, too much and too unlimited power in relation to the salesmen—and these, since such superintendents were not invariably of the finest type of human being, were exercised in despotic and unfair fashion against the assistants of both sexes. He went on to subject the stipendiary arrangements of individual houses to a searching criticism: some of them paid saleswomen, who had been for years in their service, a monthly salary of sixty marks—starvation wages, which explained why countless young girls, homeless and resourceless in a great city, went to moral ruin. It was a known fact that in the glove department of a certain emporium, young girls were employed at forty-five to fifty marks a month, and it was a matter of daily occurrence that well-dressed men, in buying gloves, were

given with their purchases a card bearing the address of the girl who served them.

Hans Matrei spoke long and exhaustively, bringing forward instances of great and small evils in the emporiums and suggestions for the abolition of each; he went into the matter thoroughly and earnestly, but his delivery lacked charm and persuasiveness; the speech missed fire; he himself felt that the longer he spoke, the more did inspiration fail him. His audience irritated him; the girls had evidently only accorded him a perfunctory interest even at the beginning, and soon became restless and inattentive, nudging one another, whispering, and busying themselves afresh with their bonbons. When Hans, for all his sober moderation, saw that his speech was falling flat, he felt an almost physical nausea. What was the good of talking? of displaying the quintessence of years of patient study, of detailed investigation, to an audience as yet wholly unripe for the consideration of social questions?

He gave a few more suggestions for the establishment of an ideal pensions fund. The Chiefs, whose profits ran into millions, should voluntarily devote a certain percentage of them to provision for the old age of their employees. "Any man who makes a yearly profit of two millions can easily use a quarter-million for the old-age pensions of those who have worked to get him the money —and if he will not, he must be compelled". . . In conclusion, he called upon the employees to enforce their legitimate demands with all their energy, and in the last resort to shrink not even from—the last resource.

"What? Are we to strike?"

A little quicksilver blonde in the front row squeaked with delight. "That *will* be fun!"

Somebody laughed aloud.

"Why, what is the fellow talking about? We are

like pigs in clover as we are." A great sense of satisfaction beamed from the assembly.

After Hans Matrei came Elias Bielefeldt. He spoke very restrainedly, with a sort of bow towards the audience, and a real one towards where Joshua Müllenmeister stood. . . His predecessor had of course meant that about the strike only figuratively. But the principal point was that all should draw together in a close community of interests, and thus achieve, by tact and energy, the fulfilment of legitimate desires. . . After he had spoken for half an hour, without producing any essential difference of effect from Hans Matrei, he was relieved by a high official from a great emporium in West Berlin.

This gentleman began by lashing the manner in which Herr Matrei had criticised the emporiums. Any commercial or industrial undertaking was in itself neither good nor bad, but, as the former speaker had himself allowed, a product of the age's necessity. . . Herr Matrei's performance had been innocent of any sort of practical knowledge of the case. Granted that in an emporium, as in any other business, there were a large number of subordinate positions, which demanded only a small degree of efficiency in the holder: these places were of course correspondingly poorly salaried. On an average, the salaries of saleswomen varied between ninety and a hundred and forty marks a month. Among a great number of saleswomen there would of course be occasionally found some undersirable characters, and the gentleman cited, who found the address of an assistant in his packet of gloves, would assuredly have done better to impart his discovery to the management of the particular house than to let it be used as an agreeably piquant ingredient in a socialistic agitation brew. Nor would the moral character of such a saleswoman be reformed by means of a few marks' addition

to her salary. . . The speaker then summed up the many advantages which the modern emporium offered its staff, by comparison with the private business. In his opinion pensions funds would be a fact of the immediate future. Let them just consider what colossal labour was implied in the arrangement of such a matter by the Chiefs—to say nothing of the gigantic pecuniary sacrifices. How long, for example, had the illness and accident insurances been adumbrated before they legally took shape? "I do not," he concluded, "perceive the necessity for such assemblies as this. An uninitiated person, coming in by chance, might fairly suppose that all these well-nourished, contented, elegantly dressed people had called a meeting for the purpose of composing an address of gratitude to the Chiefs for their kindness to these, their employees. . . I myself have been employed in an emporium for twelve years, and would not change with any 'independent' business proprietor."

"No wonder—with a salary of twenty-five thousand marks a year," said somebody in the background.

The girls put their heads together. Many of the last speaker's statements required contradiction. What? An average of ninety to a hundred-and-forty marks' salary?. . . He must have been guessing! And what the first man said about the superintendents was right enough. Unless one could square *them* one was pretty well out of it; and it wasn't always the best ones that carried favour, and so sneaked into the fat pasture lands of "commission-grabbing."

A few suggestions for practical details in connection with the pensions fund followed, but were accorded a languid attention by the ladies of the audience. And then, all of a sudden, the whispering ceased. Bending over the chairman's table, with her back to the audience, was a female figure in a dun-coloured waterproof,

a black hat with a shabby lilac cockade stuck anyhow on her grey hair. She was whispering to the chairman. His bell rang out again.

"Fräulein Henrietta Iversen has the word."

"Iversen!" The girls nudged and laughed. "Hush! What is it? What can *she* have to say?"

"Poor thing! Just look at her. . ."

"What a hat!"

"She's having an awful time since she left Müllenmeister's. . ."

Iversen leant with both hands on the rostrum. Under her threadbare cloak one could literally see her heart beating; her featureless face was suffused with sullen colour. When she began to speak her voice was jerky and hoarse with excitement and nervousness—often it was almost impossible to catch what she said.

"In an assembly like this it behooves everyone to express an opinion, particularly if one really has something to say. . . I have never spoken in public in all my life before, and don't understand how to clothe my thoughts in chosen words, so I'll speak as best I can. . . for I am following an inward impulse. . . I cannot help it. You laugh, ladies. I don't blame you. At your age probably I, too, should have laughed at the old thing on the platform, but I tell you all—there'll come a time when laughter will go away from you. . . That we don't perceive our situation till it's too late is the tragedy of the emporium assistant, whose bitterness many a one of you will taste one day. . ."

She drew a deep breath; and, as if with this preamble her very heart leaped forth, her words now came fluently, rushing from her lips as if driven by a strangely forceful and melancholy fanaticism. She depicted with rare eloquence the career of the female employee in an emporium. . . how she enters it at sixteen or seventeen, with the glow and colour of youth in her cheeks, the

sparkle of girlish glee in her eyes, a thousand hopes in her heart. . . Two years later, she is a blighted bud. The hot vibrating air of the place has drained the freshness from her cheeks and dulled the sparkle in her eyes. She has become like a plant that grows either in a bog or under some dank shadow. And such a plant she remains for the rest of her life, a sapless, hapless being, a thing, a chattel, an automatic selling-machine, who has neither wishes nor words of her own, but only sells on, on. . .

"The years go by. In other callings, the employee roots her existence deeper in the ground with every year of faithful, devoted, unselfish labour. But in the emporiums it is just the other way. Every year the ground grows more unsafe beneath her feet. At five-and-thirty, she is blighted, withered, a mere wreck. One in ten, perhaps, finds her way to a superintendent's place; the other nine are flung like carcasses into the street—for the machine needs fresh fodder, young hands. We must not be unjust; thousands of employees in other callings are—outwardly at any rate—no better off than we. But they have something that we have not: *Themselves.* The workwoman who spends her whole life in a dull factory, remains more of a human being than we do amid the gay finery of the big bazaars; for she, in the last extremity, preserves the moral courage to lift her meagre arms to Heaven and demand her human rights. The word 'strike' means for her only some days of hunger; need and hardship have made her strong—she can at least still fight. But *we?* You? You laugh at the word 'strike.' Your silly laughter almost choked me just now. Listen to what I tell you. The emporium you serve is taking from you the best thing you have, the thing that distinguishes men from the brutes—your character, your will. That enervating, exacerbating atmosphere is not only draining the physical strength from

your veins, not only consuming like a wild beast your youth and beauty, but is strangling your whole personality, stifling your soul, murdering your individual consciousness, your self-respect. And that's why the emporium girl is, in her young days, the 'sweet little thing' that the men in Halensee or in the dancing-room at Grünau delight in, but seldom ask to be their wife; and in her old age a dull, mechanical creature, an empty husk, a thing, a *nothing,* soon to be swept by the arm of arbitrary dismissal into the dust heap of destitute humanity.

"A pension fund? That's a pretty thing enough. But what is the use of pensions if the Chiefs choose to send you packing a year before you're qualified for one? If you're going to make claims, claim the amelioration of the dismissal clauses in your contracts. Protect yourselves against arbitrary dismissals, when you've held the place uncensured for more than ten years. After a decade of labor and devotion to duty, I think we've earned the 'right to work'! And when you've achieved that, you'll work more tranquilly and happily; you'll feel yourself to be more like a real member of the body corporate of the house, you'll devote yourself with affection and zeal to your particular work; and the firm will be the better for it in the end. If you still have a spark of energy and self-respect left in you, strain with all your might for the right to have a firm standing after ten years' service, and not to have to feel the Damocles sword of dismissal forever hanging over your heads. Claim *that,* for it's your just due! If you haven't the force to do it, then don't wonder on the day that you feel the whole net result of your long activity to be what I felt it after twenty-seven years of toil: HUNGER."

With a sobbing, choking cry the word rang out. . . HUNGER!

The room had grown very still. The laughter on the young faces was frozen. Even the little quicksilver blonde sat, suddenly serious, gazing down at the gloves that lay in her lap. The considered, logical discourse of Hans Matrei had never approached the effect of this improvised address by Iversen. They all knew that she was telling the truth. Unless one was lucky enough to marry, the future loomed before each of them like a brick wall. . . There were several more speeches, but none was anything like so effective.

When Henrietta Iversen got down from the platform, she went to her seat, took her umbrella, and left the hall, as if the proceedings had ceased to interest her.

The night was sultry and damp, rain hung overhead, but the air seemed, as on many a May night, to be impregnated with all sorts of sweet flower scents. She had not gone far when someone came up behind her, and laid a hand on her shoulder. She turned, affrighted—and saw Joshua Müllenmeister standing behind her, with a distracted look in his face. He had watched her go out, and followed her instantly.

The moving speech had not failed to impress him. He had been secretly reluctant, at the time, to agree to her dismissal; it always went to his heart to sign the doom of an old servant. But bitter necessity left him for the most part no choice. . . Iversen had really grown too old and plain for a saleswoman in the "ready-mades," and an equivalent place had not been at the moment vacant. Usually these older women had long foreseen their dismissal, and provided against the evil day. It was the stern logic of life that brought about such incidents as this; to make the warehouse system responsible was mere folly. In all callings, all situations, all conditions of life, the older generation must give way to the younger. Nevertheless, he was sorry for the aging woman. She was remarkably intelligent, and,

as her speech had shown, capable of logical thinking; despite her deprecation, too, she could express her thoughts arrestingly. Though for purely external reasons, she was no longer suitable for the salesroom, there must be many other posts for which she would be excellently adapted.

"You have had hard times since you left us, Fräulein Iversen?" he asked, and his voice was full of genuine feeling and human sympathy.

Iversen, in her young days, had, like nearly all the female staff, adored the Chief and sung unwearyingly the praises of his kindness and amiability. But despair had altered her former feelings, and her face was stern as she answered him.

"I've had, for that matter, no harder times than thousands of others who have been suddenly deprived of their livelihood, and some of them have to feed a row of hungry mouths. When, one day, the poison bottle goes round instead of the coffee-pot, or gas-jet sings by mistake for the kettle, why! it's nothing out of the way, Herr Müllenmeister."

Joshua did not at once reply. He was thinking. "I should like to do something for you, Fräulein Iversen, if I only knew what."

"Give me back my place. I had never been reprimanded."

"That is impossible. I cannot give you back your former place—it would be against the principles of our house; and principles are the very basis of business. . . But I am considering just now whether I can't offer you something equivalent. I almost think I can."

She looked at him eagerly. He walked on beside her, and unfolded his idea.

For some time thefts in the shop had been increasing to an almost alarming extent. In general, such pilferings were not seriously regarded—so long as they were

kept within tolerable bounds. The management took into consideration the "suggestion" of tempting opportunities offered by emporiums, and when the "long-fingered" ladies *were* caught in the act by the female house detectives, they were always allowed to go scatheless for a first offence.

But for months past the thefts had taken so wide a range that stern measures were becoming imperative. There were many indications that things were stolen from the very warerooms, and if that were so, the thief must be hand-in-glove with members of the staff. Hitherto investigations had been fruitless; the house detectives, for all their watchfulness, had been unable to discover anything. Joshua had for some time considered an appeal to the police for an increase of their special detectives. Those who daily operated in the shop were unsuitable for more than one reason. A conference of the leading officials of the house, had, however, led to the determination to appoint a number of capable female private detectives. Perhaps Iversen might prove useful in such a capacity. The sudden thought had quickly developed. This elderly woman, who thoroughly understood the warehouse system, and who was not only sufficiently intelligent, but possessed of unusual penetration and good sense, was precisely the right person for the post. Externally, moreover, she had all the desirable qualifications; she was insignificant looking, quiet, just the figure to escape the notice of any guilty eye.

As Joshua talked on, the suspense gradually faded from Iversen's face.

"As I said, if you cared to try it. . . I would allow you a hundred and fifty marks for the present; and if you qualify for the post, you should be permanently engaged. You might see the superintendents to-morrow morning at about eleven o'clock."

"Yes; I shall be there punctually—" but she broke off, sobbed once or twice, then caught his hand and held it tightly in her own for a minute. "You shall be satisfied with me, Herr Müllenmeister. I will show you that even an old. . . that I'm worth something—that I. . ." Her voice was thick with tears; suddenly she loosed his hand, and fled.

Joshua hailed a passing droshky. Once seated, he took off his hat and laid it beside him. The night was very warm. With folded arms he lay back and stared with wide-open eyes into the soft, velvety air. He was in an oddly excited mood. It always rejoiced him when he found an opportunity of making good an unintentional error; but it had been a lucky day in other senses, too. Several advantageous arrangements for the Elmas had been made; and he had at last overcome the disinclination of the committee for the concert hall, and for a similar proposal for popular lectures to be principally connected with the various wares on sale. Then Mimi delighted him by the zeal and earnestness with which, ever since her birthday, she had entered into his ideas. To-day he had made a round of the house with her, and had been agreeably surprised to find with what thoughtful sagacity she had investigated various aspects of the interior. Nor had even the meeting in the evening been of a kind to leave any lasting feeling of depression behind it. What had there been adduced was so wholly of the surface, had so little to do with the real significance of the emporiums in the economic system! Joshua's self-reliance, moreover, was, for all his simplicity and modesty, too firmly based and balanced for any mere variation of temperature in his moods to cause a definite fall or rise, though there were moments in which he did feel conscious of a sort of triumphant "Cæsar" sensation. During this drive through the night from Hasenheide to Halensee, the proud moments

of his life passed before him, as in a long, bright panorama. The small beginnings—the retail shop in the Alexander-platz, the ever-growing house, the new building and its fantastic dimensions, its fairy-tale-like splendour and magnitude, an Imperial Palace of Commerce, whence the Müllenmeister dynasty should govern the earth. . . In the whole world lies no zone, no region, no calling, no work, no civilisation, where the banner of the Müllenmeisters shall not fly! The mechanism of the house reaches to the furthest corner of the earth, takes into its service all products, all energies, of all nations. For Müllenmeister hum the looms of the East; rustle the mahogany forests, ripen the fruits, of the South; for him do the mountain dwellers wrest from the bosom of the land its minerals and precious ores, do the rifles fulminate in the solitary snow-bound night of the Arctic zones, do steamers and sailing vessels plough, treasure-laden, through the grey foam-strewn highways of the ocean. One shining, glorious vision after another floated past; and, before he knew, the droshky had stopped at his own hall door. It was long since the drive had seemed so short.

When he alighted, he saw his doctor's automobile at the door. Late though the hour was, a light still burned in the vestibule. A vague anxiety awoke in him; and at that moment, the doctor came out. Joshua hastened forward, and greeted him.

"Good-evening, Mr. Health Commissioner! Is there anything wrong with us?"

"Unfortunately, yes, my dear Herr Müllenmeister. I was fetched quite two hours ago to your gracious lady. She had suddenly become unconscious. When I arrived she was herself again, but in great pain. I stayed with her till the crisis came. She is now sleeping. . . but alas, alas! our hopes for a new scion of the Müllenmeister dynasty are at an end for the present."

"And my wife is out of danger?"

"Definitely, if no special complications arise."

"That is the principal thing. When I left this afternoon, she was quite all right. If I am not mistaken, my prospective daughter-in-law was to be here this evening?"

"Yes; Fräulein Matrei is still in the house. I do not quite understand the occurrence. Usually it is a fright or a fall which leads to a premature confinement, but according to Fräulein Matrei's account—she was alone with Frau Müllenmeister—our patient suddenly fell from her chair in a swoon. . . It is very regrettable, as I say, but there is no ground for serious apprehension. I shall see her again to-morrow. Sleep is the best medicine at present. Good-night, Herr Müllenmeister."

With some perplexity in his mind, Joshua passed the servant who had seen the doctor out, and found Agnes in the vestibule, putting on her hat and coat.

"Do not go just yet, Agnes," he said. "Wait a minute or two until the chauffeur has been told, for you must drive home, unless you will spend the night here. And I should like to hear some details from you. How did this come about so suddenly? Had my wife said anything about not feeling well?"

"No, she was in a particularly cheerful mood. We were alone the whole evening. About half-past nine there came a letter by special messenger—"

"For my wife?"

"Yes. She read it, put it in her pocket, and then took it out and read it again. Suddenly she stood up and caught at the table, looking as pale as death. Before I could reach her, she was lying on the ground."

"What was in the letter? Did it seem to disturb her?"

"I do not think so. I remember now that I put it on

the writing-table in the boudoir. I had forgotten all about it in the excitement."

"Thank you, Agnes, for taking care of my wife. Then you prefer to go home? The motor will be ready in a quarter of an hour."

He pressed her hand. She looked after him with a furtive, sneering smile. *Had* she not read the letter! At first she had not quite known what to do with it, when, after Henny's swoon, she saw it lying on the carpet. Very assuredly the servants must not read it! While she hesitated, she heard, from the boudoir, the droshky drive up and saw Joshua getting out. Then her resolve was taken. He should read it. It should be her little revenge for the lecture which he had given her, and the distrust which, as she was well aware, he had felt for her ever since that day. Well that he should learn, with a skeleton in his own cupboard, not to be quite so sharp with other people!. . . But her heart beat fast as he ascended the stairs. She longed to flee, but as he had given the order for the motor, she must face it out. Nervously she listened for sounds from above. First he went to his wife's room, to take a look at the sufferer. Agnes gasped; the wild beating of her heart had suddenly deprived her of breath. . . Then her better instincts got the upper hand, and she vehemently wished she had destroyed the letter. What would happen? It was dreadful. . . Obeying an urgent impulse, she rushed up the stairs. Before he entered his wife's boudoir, the letter must be gone. He should *not* find it!

Henny's bedroom was faintly lit by an electric night-light. By the bed sat the housekeeper, an elderly woman, watching the slumber of her mistress. Henny slept the sleep of exhaustion. There were dark shadows about her pale, regular features, but she breathed tranquilly. On tiptoe, as he had entered, Joshua went

out. The feeling of oppression had left him, as he beheld the quiet slumber of his wife. The hope of a new heir or heiress had from the beginning afforded him but scant delight; if he were to be honest with himself, this turn of affairs was more of a relief than a disappointment to him.

He went across to her boudoir to discover the contents of that urgent letter which had possibly been the indirect cause of the catastrophe. The door was ajar, the electric light was blazing from the ceiling. He stood for some seconds in amazement at the door—then was on Agnes in a flash.

"What does this mean? Will you have the goodness to give me that letter—it is evidently the one you spoke of. Come—give it here!"

"No, no—please. *Do* leave it with me," said Agnes. "It is—it concerns me. . . It is a joke. . . Oh, please, please!. . . No, I won't give it up; it belongs to your wife." She stopped, all a-tremble beneath the imperious look that held her, and crushed the letter in her hand. Instead of answering, Joshua seized her arm, forced her fingers open, and took the letter.

"I am not usually given to curiosity, but your behaviour is so suspicious that now nothing will keep me from knowing what this urgent and ominous message is. For the rest, I perceive that in maintaining, as you did just now, that the contents were unknown to you, you were lying to me again; you know what I think of that."

"I can't help it: please, please give it back to me unread." She flung herself against his arm, and tried to snatch the letter. He pushed her violently away.

"What are you thinking of, Agnes? My patience is at an end. You make me very uneasy—"

He drew the sheet from the cover and began to read. With a little cry Agnes literally fled the room. Down-

stairs she stood still for a moment—listening again, amid the mad beating of her heart, for sounds from above. All was still, and she went to the door where the motor panted in readiness for her drive home.

Heartily did she repent her revengeful fit; the consequences of her action rose like a menacing spectre before her, torturing her with all sorts of frightful imaginings. She did not once close her eyes that night.

Nor did Joshua Müllenmeister, either. He wandered about till the grey dawn came in, the fateful letter in his hand. And after the first moments, when he stood in the open window and in his seething fury, mechanically gripping the silken hanging, wrenched and tore it—after his thoughts had whirled in maddest gyration, so that he felt as if he were going crazy. . . he had gradually retrieved some clarity of emotion, and with it the power to consider the case in a sober, logical light.

He put his hand to his brow, and asked himself where his eyes could have been that this little, horrible message, wherein Eduard Van Hoolten, immediately before his departure for Norway, took leave of his mistress, should have been the first revelation to him of the state of affairs between his wife and the young libertine.

"I can no longer endure your worrying, Henny *mia,*" wrote Eduard; "and so I am going abroad for an indefinite period. When I return in the autumn or even later, you will, I hope, be over your critical time, and be again accessible. Until the event, you had been a reasonable woman—and so you will be again. But one thing is imperative: you must be more tolerant. I assure you once again on my word of honour that your jealousy of that little go-ahead Ella has up to the present been wholly unfounded. I am sending this letter by special messenger, because your sister, who is supping with my governor to-night, happened to see my luggage

being taken down, and may quite possibly hurry out to tell you the news. So at least you must be told beforehand; for I know you women. My departure without a verbal good-bye will irritate you, but you will not be irreconcilable. The unexpected tidings from your sister, I know, you would never have forgiven me.

"EDDIE."

Joshua bent his head. He knew the writing—could have guessed the sender without the signature to help him. . . A keen disdain was on his face. That dissolute boy—it was scandalous! Eddie Van Hoolten had frequented the Müllenmeisters' house from his thirteenth year. At that time Joshua had had a particular affection for the gifted young fellow. He had never understood why the old man had so abjured all influence over his son, and made no effort of any kind to restore the boy to his senses. Eddie's visible descent to the lowest depths of the enervating debauchery of a great city had awakened an almost paternal pity in Joshua's heart.

The monstrous revelation that it was this very young man who had dared to make such a breach in his family life was at first so overwhelming that he could not consider the question of any future developments. And the abominable letter contained another poisonous disclosure as well. That, too, he surely should have seen long ago. Erica's princely expenditure since her second husband's death might well have given him to think. She lived in Van Hoolten's house; in Van Hoolten's motor she drove daily through Berlin; Van Hoolten "managed" her income. . .

Joshua suddenly stood still. An eloquent gesture showed his prevalent sensation to be simply disgust. . . Good God!. . . The room whirled round him for a minute. The furniture, carpet, pictures, the hundred trifles of use and ornament, seemed suddenly endowed

with gyrating movement; and, with them, the new Müllenmeister house, too, seemed to totter on its foundations. Those had been laid, so to speak, by the financial genius of a Van Hoolten; now, as if loosened by an earthquake, they were rushing together, and the huge erection that might have been built by the giants of old time, was to fall beneath the dainty jewelled touch of a frivolous woman!

The disdainful sneer deepened, as he realised that "society" would now expect from him an "extra special" performance to the sound of trumpets, as the Injured Husband. That would be the last straw!

His social position had drawn him, much against his personal desire, into circles in which he felt neither happy nor at home, and which he frequented only for Henny's sake. Those elegant, blasé, frivolous folk who counted Henny among their intimates, and who all belonged to the so-called "best society," were to him, with their fashionable slang, their absurd self-importance, their reduction of all things to the small change of their daily amusements, their self-imposed laws and codes, the very essence of the word "strangers." What did such creatures signify to *him!* He belonged to another world—to a world in which no one was "bored," in which everyone went his own way, the way of stern self-control and incorruptible integrity of word and deed.

As almost always in moments of spiritual crisis, his dead wife was near him; directly he shut his eyes he fancied that he could feel the loving pressure of her hand, as she drew him onward, onward, in an endless communion, till the present fell away, and the happenings of the last few hours seemed like nebulous mist-clouds. Tranquillity crept into his heart, and he could think clearly.

He communed thus for hours with the dead Mimi.

So plain was the vision that he could almost believe he was listening to her soft, lilting voice, with its characteristic after-vibration. The voice told him that the young wife below was still a stranger to him.

"Be not hard, not unfair. In any wrong there are nearly always two guilty. If people would only learn always to look for the *other one*, the one *behind* the wrong, and summon him to justice! In most cases no unmitigated sentence would then fall upon the head of the accused.

"You ought not to have married this girl, Joshua.

"What could you offer her? Besides your money, nothing—nothing at all.

"You two belong to different worlds. As little comprehension as she has, or *could* have, for your work and interests, have you for the needs of a young girl who has grown up in an atmosphere of endless pleasure-seeking.

"What you are feeling now—this mingled sensation of anger, hatred, indignation, contempt, bitterness, and a longing to free yourself by some act of violence—is, if you thoroughly analyse it, nothing more than the pain of recognition, the reaction from an error too late realised.

"You are enraged at the thought of continuing to work, shoulder to shoulder, with a man whose son has done you and your name an unpardonable wrong, and who himself has the effrontery to keep a connection of yours in a humiliating and dishonouring dependence.

"Go—break with him! Proclaim your dishonour in the market-place!. . . What will you have gained by it?

"And the great work which is to set the crown on your life's endeavour will be imperilled, perhaps annihilated.

"Joshua Müllenmeister, have you subordinated all personal desires and interests to your life-work, now in

a moment of weakness to sacrifice the harvest of your toil for the sake of a frivolous woman, who is essentially alien to you?

"Go—crucify your feelings. Live them down.

"There runs a tale that in times of old they always immured a living man in every great public building, so that the stones might be inspired with life. There is a profound significance in that barbaric myth. *The work that is to prosper must be alive. . .*

"Go thou and do likewise. Immure the best part, the inward part—immure your *soul* in your new house.

"Think well; hurry not at all. Cool blood, Joshua! Head up! Think of Elmas, the Troy of all your striving—are you going to burn it down for another Helen? Your whole life hitherto has been a sacrifice on the altar of duty. Go; take your heart in your hands and throw your egotistic feeling as a burnt-offering on that altar, in honour of *your* God, the Holy Spirit of labour, of progress along all lines, of unlimited and illimitable development. . . Be whom you have been till now: JOSHUA MÜLLENMEISTER."

As, in the early morning, that spirit-voice which spoke to him from his innermost soul, fell silent at last, he knew what he was going to do.

Worn out with fatigue, he sank into a deep, dreamless slumber.

CHAPTER XXVII

At the outset of June, Henny Müllenmeister, with her sister, journeyed to Karersee, where they meant to stay some weeks and then go for a long time to the Engadine.

The whole band of their adorers saw them off from the station! Joshua arrived at the last moment; the signal for departure had already been given, and there was only just time for the married pair to shake hands. This caused the faithful to declare, amid furtive shrugs, that such a business-ridden, commonplace man could neither understand nor deserve a charming wife like Henny. Nobody suspected what they two alone knew—that this hand-shake was probably the last they would ever exchange.

In a talk that Joshua had had with her after her recovery, Henny, like the clever woman she was, had bowed to the inevitable and consented to all her husband's wishes. She had pledged herself to acquiesce in a separation, and not to return to Berlin till the suit was ended. As ground for the petition they were to plead unconquerable mutual aversion, and in case that failed, deliberate desertion on the wife's part. The world was not to have the fun of seeing the name of Müllenmeister dragged through a *cause célèbre.* In the unlikely case of their being unable to obtain a separation, Henny further pledged herself to take up permanent residence in another place. When she had first realised that her secret was discovered, she had been rather dismayed; but once the first fright was over, she had, with her characteristic sagacity, at once

grasped the best and most sensible manner of regarding the situation.

Joshua had never been anything to her but the indispensable "Middleman" for a life of luxury. Possibly her better self might have led her to some remorse, some compassion for her victim, if look or tone had betrayed that he suffered in any degree at the impending separation, that what had passed had hurt him even a little, or at all disturbed his mental balance. But there he had sat before her—courteous, calm, correct, developing his suggestions in his coolest, driest, most business-like tone; and at the sight and sound there woke in her soul a defiant pride, and all her hundred exculpations of her conduct died on her lips. In her view, nine hundred and fifty out of a thousand pleasure-loving women would have done as she had done. Her husband had gone his own way, had lived for his shop alone, and had never thought to ask if *she* were in any way dissatisfied. . .

They agreed upon a yearly income of fifteen thousand marks, which should be unaffected by the result of the separation suit.

Almost at the same time, Van Hoolten senior advised his friend Erica to take a lengthy "change of air." Joshua had dropped the bank director several hints which left no doubt of his acquaintance with the nature of the platonic friendship between Erica and Van Hoolten. And the latter had given his friend as delicate and clear an intimation that the thing should come to an end. He himself had long wished for a speedy and radical break.

Perhaps, like Ingwer Lynegaard before him, he had looked for something deeper and more satisfying behind Erica's dazzling beauty than she had to offer. At any rate, his friendship with the lovely woman had

wearied him in the long run, and what she gave was not at all proportioned to the claims she made upon him. Moreover, it was painful in connection with Müllenmeister. . . So—a line underneath; and, THE END.

This explanation did not go so smoothly as that of the Müllenmeisters. Not that Erica had ever had any genuine feeling for Van Hoolten; but the fact that any-one to whom she had yielded so much of herself as she had to him, should give her up of his own accord—actually *give her up*—seemed to her a shattering proof that she had had her day as "the loveliest woman in Berlin"; and this frightful recognition almost wholly obscured another fact—namely, that many practical interests depended also on Van Hoolten's friendship. For that matter, he offered to manage her property for her, and "arrange" her money affairs in all respects as heretofore; and as Erica's moral delicacy had been seriously impaired of recent years, she saw nothing offensive or humiliating in such an adjustment of their relations, assuring herself, as she had done before, that she was an emancipated thinker, and lived her life by her own lights. Indeed, she had become so thoroughly philosophical that she would forthwith have accepted another friend in Van Hoolten's place, if such a personage had been able to offer the same substantial tribute. But as no new adorer at once appeared, she gave herself up to distraction and despair at her unhappy fate.

In this hour of need, Henny arrived and sought to bring her back to reason. Wisely she kept silence on the conflicts in her own abode. Her clever tactics succeeded in tranquillising Erica and bringing her to decide on the trip abroad. Ella was to be sent to a fashionable West End *pension*.

When, at this time, Joshua mused on himself and

his private affairs, he sometimes marvelled to realise that Henny's departure had left no gap of any kind in his life. All went on as before. In his younger days he had been so conservative that even a change of servants, the strange face of a maid waiting at table, had made him uncomfortable. But the violent upheaval that his second marriage had caused in his private life had made him undomesticated and "strange" in his own house. He had never felt really at home therein. The charming villa was a sojourn for his few leisure hours, but no "home" in the sense that the plain little flat in the Alexander-platz had been of old. Now, with the pretty, capable mistress gone, the apparatus she had set in motion moved automatically on. At meals, Mimi presided in the wife's vacant place.

The relation between father and daughter had grown tenderer than ever in these recent weeks. Mimi could scarcely help guessing the reason for the rupture. Since Ella had given her those hints about her own mother's connection with Van Hoolten, a certain *gêne* had invaded her former easy relation with Henny. Erica had suddenly become repulsive to her; and this sense of a purely instinctive dislike coloured—though she tried to hide it—her feeling for her stepmother. Yet she hardly dared seriously to accept the monstrous idea that Henny had sinned in the same way as her sister. To betray a man like her father. . . She felt as if she were looking into an abyss, wherein, if she gazed long, she herself might sink. . . But she drew nearer than ever before to her father. Often, after dinner, they would sit an hour together, talking of things and events which formerly they never would have discussed, and for which Henny had shown, at the best, but a politely simulated interest. Sometimes Joshua, when he rose, would suddenly take Mimi in his

arms and kiss her. He had never done that in the old days. It was like a spontaneous impulse to make up to this daughter for the years of lacking tenderness.

"You are *my* daughter, Mimi," he would say; "and you don't know how happy it makes me to see that you are no less the daughter of your dear, wise mother. Why, it gladdens me so that all thought of my recent vexations seems to disappear."

Agnes came but seldom to Halensee now. Joshua had long and deeply mused on what the girl's motive could have been in leaving the compromising letter, which she had undoubtedly read, open on the writing-table. His conjectures were not far from the truth. The character of his future daughter-in-law had long since fallen sadly in his estimation. To the manifold anxieties and vexations of these last weeks had been added, often and often, the uneasy doubt that Agnes really possessed the qualities to make his favourite son a happy husband. That the honour of the house lay in the hands of such a girl was an uncomfortable reflection. Nevertheless, he had not again referred to the events of that evening with Agnes. She palpably avoided him. More even than before did she seem to be possessed by timidity and embarrassment in his presence.

Friedrich came back in the beginning of August, strikingly altered. He almost looked as if he had grown; at any rate he was broader, and moved with more decision. The soft shining of his eyes had turned into a clear, joyous brilliancy. In his gestures and speech there was now an unconscious dominance which lent the note of energy to his personality, though without in any degree spoiling the gentle charm which had always been his distinguishing trait.

kept within tolerable bounds. The management took into consideration the "suggestion" of tempting opportunities offered by emporiums, and when the "long-fingered" ladies *were* caught in the act by the female house detectives, they were always allowed to go scatheless for a first offence.

But for months past the thefts had taken so wide a range that stern measures were becoming imperative. There were many indications that things were stolen from the very warerooms, and if that were so, the thief must be hand-in-glove with members of the staff. Hitherto investigations had been fruitless; the house detectives, for all their watchfulness, had been unable to discover anything. Joshua had for some time considered an appeal to the police for an increase of their special detectives. Those who daily operated in the shop were unsuitable for more than one reason. A conference of the leading officials of the house, had, however, led to the determination to appoint a number of capable female private detectives. Perhaps Iversen might prove useful in such a capacity. The sudden thought had quickly developed. This elderly woman, who thoroughly understood the warehouse system, and who was not only sufficiently intelligent, but possessed of unusual penetration and good sense, was precisely the right person for the post. Externally, moreover, she had all the desirable qualifications; she was insignificant looking, quiet, just the figure to escape the notice of any guilty eye.

As Joshua talked on, the suspense gradually faded from Iversen's face.

"As I said, if you cared to try it. . . I would allow you a hundred and fifty marks for the present; and if you qualify for the post, you should be permanently engaged. You might see the superintendents to-morrow morning at about eleven o'clock."

"Yes; I shall be there punctually—" but she broke off, sobbed once or twice, then caught his hand and held it tightly in her own for a minute. "You shall be satisfied with me, Herr Müllenmeister. I will show you that even an old. . . that I'm worth something—that I. . ." Her voice was thick with tears; suddenly she loosed his hand, and fled.

Joshua hailed a passing droshky. Once seated, he took off his hat and laid it beside him. The night was very warm. With folded arms he lay back and stared with wide-open eyes into the soft, velvety air. He was in an oddly excited mood. It always rejoiced him when he found an opportunity of making good an unintentional error; but it had been a lucky day in other senses, too. Several advantageous arrangements for the Elmas had been made; and he had at last overcome the disinclination of the committee for the concert hall, and for a similar proposal for popular lectures to be principally connected with the various wares on sale. Then Mimi delighted him by the zeal and earnestness with which, ever since her birthday, she had entered into his ideas. To-day he had made a round of the house with her, and had been agreeably surprised to find with what thoughtful sagacity she had investigated various aspects of the interior. Nor had even the meeting in the evening been of a kind to leave any lasting feeling of depression behind it. What had there been adduced was so wholly of the surface, had so little to do with the real significance of the emporiums in the economic system! Joshua's self-reliance, moreover, was, for all his simplicity and modesty, too firmly based and balanced for any mere variation of temperature in his moods to cause a definite fall or rise, though there were moments in which he did feel conscious of a sort of triumphant "Cæsar" sensation. During this drive through the night from Hasenheide to Halensee, the proud moments

of his life passed before him, as in a long, bright panorama. The small beginnings—the retail shop in the Alexander-platz, the ever-growing house, the new building and its fantastic dimensions, its fairy-tale-like splendour and magnitude, an Imperial Palace of Commerce, whence the Müllenmeister dynasty should govern the earth. . . In the whole world lies no zone, no region, no calling, no work, no civilisation, where the banner of the Müllenmeisters shall not fly! The mechanism of the house reaches to the furthest corner of the earth, takes into its service all products, all energies, of all nations. For Müllenmeister hum the looms of the East; rustle the mahogany forests, ripen the fruits, of the South; for him do the mountain dwellers wrest from the bosom of the land its minerals and precious ores, do the rifles fulminate in the solitary snow-bound night of the Arctic zones, do steamers and sailing vessels plough, treasure-laden, through the grey foam-strewn highways of the ocean. One shining, glorious vision after another floated past; and, before he knew, the droshky had stopped at his own hall door. It was long since the drive had seemed so short.

When he alighted, he saw his doctor's automobile at the door. Late though the hour was, a light still burned in the vestibule. A vague anxiety awoke in him; and at that moment, the doctor came out. Joshua hastened forward, and greeted him.

"Good-evening, Mr. Health Commissioner! Is there anything wrong with us?"

"Unfortunately, yes, my dear Herr Müllenmeister. I was fetched quite two hours ago to your gracious lady. She had suddenly become unconscious. When I arrived she was herself again, but in great pain. I stayed with her till the crisis came. She is now sleeping. . . but alas, alas! our hopes for a new scion of the Müllenmeister dynasty are at an end for the present."

"And my wife is out of danger?"

"Definitely, if no special complications arise."

"That is the principal thing. When I left this afternoon, she was quite all right. If I am not mistaken, my prospective daughter-in-law was to be here this evening?"

"Yes; Fräulein Matrei is still in the house. I do not quite understand the occurrence. Usually it is a fright or a fall which leads to a premature confinement, but according to Fräulein Matrei's account—she was alone with Frau Müllenmeister—our patient suddenly fell from her chair in a swoon. . . It is very regrettable, as I say, but there is no ground for serious apprehension. I shall see her again to-morrow. Sleep is the best medicine at present. Good-night, Herr Müllenmeister."

With some perplexity in his mind, Joshua passed the servant who had seen the doctor out, and found Agnes in the vestibule, putting on her hat and coat.

"Do not go just yet, Agnes," he said. "Wait a minute or two until the chauffeur has been told, for you must drive home, unless you will spend the night here. And I should like to hear some details from you. How did this come about so suddenly? Had my wife said anything about not feeling well?"

"No, she was in a particularly cheerful mood. We were alone the whole evening. About half-past nine there came a letter by special messenger—"

"For my wife?"

"Yes. She read it, put it in her pocket, and then took it out and read it again. Suddenly she stood up and caught at the table, looking as pale as death. Before I could reach her, she was lying on the ground."

"What was in the letter? Did it seem to disturb her?"

'I do not think so. I remember now that I put it on

the writing-table in the boudoir. I had forgotten all about it in the excitement."

"Thank you, Agnes, for taking care of my wife. Then you prefer to go home? The motor will be ready in a quarter of an hour."

He pressed her hand. She looked after him with a furtive, sneering smile. *Had* she not read the letter! At first she had not quite known what to do with it, when, after Henny's swoon, she saw it lying on the carpet. Very assuredly the servants must not read it! While she hesitated, she heard, from the boudoir, the droshky drive up and saw Joshua getting out. Then her resolve was taken. He should read it. It should be her little revenge for the lecture which he had given her, and the distrust which, as she was well aware, he had felt for her ever since that day. Well that he should learn, with a skeleton in his own cupboard, not to be quite so sharp with other people!. . . But her heart beat fast as he ascended the stairs. She longed to flee, but as he had given the order for the motor, she must face it out. Nervously she listened for sounds from above. First he went to his wife's room, to take a look at the sufferer. Agnes gasped; the wild beating of her heart had suddenly deprived her of breath. . . Then her better instincts got the upper hand, and she vehemently wished she had destroyed the letter. What would happen? It was dreadful. . . Obeying an urgent impulse, she rushed up the stairs. Before he entered his wife's boudoir, the letter must be gone. He should *not* find it!

Henny's bedroom was faintly lit by an electric night-light. By the bed sat the housekeeper, an elderly woman, watching the slumber of her mistress. Henny slept the sleep of exhaustion. There were dark shadows about her pale, regular features, but she breathed tranquilly. On tiptoe, as he had entered, Joshua went

out. The feeling of oppression had left him, as he beheld the quiet slumber of his wife. The hope of a new heir or heiress had from the beginning afforded him but scant delight; if he were to be honest with himself, this turn of affairs was more of a relief than a disappointment to him.

He went across to her boudoir to discover the contents of that urgent letter which had possibly been the indirect cause of the catastrophe. The door was ajar, the electric light was blazing from the ceiling. He stood for some seconds in amazement at the door—then was on Agnes in a flash.

"What does this mean? Will you have the goodness to give me that letter—it is evidently the one you spoke of. Come—give it here!"

"No, no—please. *Do* leave it with me," said Agnes. "It is—it concerns me. . . It is a joke. . . Oh, please, please!. . . No, I won't give it up; it belongs to your wife." She stopped, all a-tremble beneath the imperious look that held her, and crushed the letter in her hand. Instead of answering, Joshua seized her arm, forced her fingers open, and took the letter.

"I am not usually given to curiosity, but your behaviour is so suspicious that now nothing will keep me from knowing what this urgent and ominous message is. For the rest, I perceive that in maintaining, as you did just now, that the contents were unknown to you, you were lying to me again; you know what I think of that."

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"What are you thinking of, Agnes? My patience is at an end. You make me very uneasy—"

He drew the sheet from the cover and began to read. With a little cry Agnes literally fled the room. Down-

stairs she stood still for a moment—listening again, amid the mad beating of her heart, for sounds from above. All was still, and she went to the door where the motor panted in readiness for her drive home.

Heartily did she repent her revengeful fit; the consequences of her action rose like a menacing spectre before her, torturing her with all sorts of frightful imaginings. She did not once close her eyes that night.

Nor did Joshua Müllenmeister, either. He wandered about till the grey dawn came in, the fateful letter in his hand. And after the first moments, when he stood in the open window and in his seething fury, mechanically gripping the silken hanging, wrenched and tore it—after his thoughts had whirled in maddest gyration, so that he felt as if he were going crazy. . . he had gradually retrieved some clarity of emotion, and with it the power to consider the case in a sober, logical light.

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"I can no longer endure your worrying, Henny *mia,*" wrote Eduard; "and so I am going abroad for an indefinite period. When I return in the autumn or even later, you will, I hope, be over your critical time, and be again accessible. Until the event, you had been a reasonable woman—and so you will be again. But one thing is imperative: you must be more tolerant. I assure you once again on my word of honour that your jealousy of that little go-ahead Ella has up to the present been wholly unfounded. I am sending this letter by special messenger, because your sister, who is supping with my governor to-night, happened to see my luggage

being taken down, and may quite possibly hurry out to tell you the news. So at least you must be told beforehand; for I know you women. My departure without a verbal good-bye will irritate you, but you will not be irreconcilable. The unexpected tidings from your sister, I know, you would never have forgiven me.

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Joshua bent his head. He knew the writing—could have guessed the sender without the signature to help him. . . A keen disdain was on his face. That dissolute boy—it was scandalous! Eddie Van Hoolten had frequented the Müllenmeisters' house from his [illegible] year. At that time Joshua had had a particular affection for the gifted young fellow. He had never understood why the old man had so abjured all influence over his son, and made no effort [illegible] to restore the boy to his senses. Eddie's [illegible] to the lowest depths of the enervating debauchery of a great city had awakened an almost paternal pity in Joshua's heart.

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The disdainful sneer deepened, as he realised that "society" would now expect from him an "extra special" performance to the sound of trumpets, as the Injured Husband. That would be the last straw!

His social position had drawn him, much against his personal desire, into circles in which he felt neither happy nor at home, and which he frequented only for Henny's sake. Those elegant, blasé, frivolous folk who counted Henny among their intimates, and who all belonged to the so-called "best society," were to him, with their fashionable slang, their absurd self-importance, their reduction of all things to the small change of their daily amusements, their self-imposed laws and codes, the very existence of the word "strangers." What did such creatures signify to *him!* He belonged to another world, to a world in which no one was "bored," in which everyone went his own way, the way of stern self-control and incorruptible integrity of word and deed.

As almost always in moments of spiritual crisis, his dead wife was near him; directly he shut his eyes he fancied that he could feel the loving pressure of her hand, as she drew him onward, onward, in an endless communion, till the present fell away, and the happenings of the last few hours seemed like nebul[illegible] clouds. Tranquillity crept into his heart, ar[illegible] think clearly.

He communed thus for hours with the d[illegible]

So plain was the vision that he could almost believe he was listening to her soft, lilting voice, with its characteristic after-vibration. The voice told him that the young wife below was still a stranger to him.

"Be not hard, not unfair. In any wrong there are nearly always two guilty. If people would only learn always to look for the *other one,* the one *behind* the wrong, and summon him to justice! In most cases no unmitigated sentence would then fall upon the head of the accused.

"You ought not to have married this girl, Joshua.

"What could you offer her? Besides your money, nothing—nothing at all.

"You two belong to different worlds. As little comprehension as she has, or *could* have, for your work and interests, have you for the needs of a young girl who has grown up in an atmosphere of endless pleasure-seeking.

"What you are feeling now—this mingled sensation of anger, hatred, indignation, contempt, bitterness, and a longing to free yourself by some act of violence—is, if you thoroughly analyse it, nothing more than the pain of recognition, the reaction from an error too late realised.

"You are enraged at the thought of continuing to work, shoulder to shoulder, with a man whose son has done you and your name an unpardonable wrong, and who himself has the effrontery to keep a connection of yours in a humiliating and dishonouring dependence.

"Go—break with him! Proclaim your dishonour in the market-place!. . . What will you have gained by it?

"And the great work which is to set the crown on your life's endeavour will be imperilled, perhaps annihilated.

"Joshua Müllenmeister, have you subordinated all personal desires and interests to your life-work, now in

a moment of weakness to sacrifice the harvest of your toil for the sake of a frivolous woman, who is essentially alien to you?

"Go—crucify your feelings. Live them down.

"There runs a tale that in times of old they always immured a living man in every great public building, so that the stones might be inspired with life. There is a profound significance in that barbaric myth. *The work that is to prosper must be alive. . .*

"Go thou and do likewise. Immure the best part, the inward part—immure your *soul* in your new house.

"Think well; hurry not at all. Cool blood, Joshua! Head up! Think of Elmas, the Troy of all your striving—are you going to burn it down for another Helen? Your whole life hitherto has been a sacrifice on the altar of duty. Go; take your heart in your hands and throw your egotistic feeling as a burnt-offering on that altar, in honour of *your* God, the Holy Spirit of labour, of progress along all lines, of unlimited and illimitable development. . . Be whom you have been till now: JOSHUA MÜLLENMEISTER."

As, in the early morning, that spirit-voice which spoke to him from his innermost soul, fell silent at last, he knew what he was going to do.

Worn out with fatigue, he sank into a deep, dreamless slumber.

CHAPTER XXVII

At the outset of June, Henny Müllenmeister, with her sister, journeyed to Karersee, where they meant to stay some weeks and then go for a long time to the Engadine.

The whole band of their adorers saw them off from the station! Joshua arrived at the last moment; the signal for departure had already been given, and there was only just time for the married pair to shake hands. This caused the faithful to declare, amid furtive shrugs, that such a business-ridden, commonplace man could neither understand nor deserve a charming wife like Henny. Nobody suspected what they two alone knew—that this hand-shake was probably the last they would ever exchange.

In a talk that Joshua had had with her after her recovery, Henny, like the clever woman she was, had bowed to the inevitable and consented to all her husband's wishes. She had pledged herself to acquiesce in a separation, and not to return to Berlin till the suit was ended. As ground for the petition they were to plead unconquerable mutual aversion, and in case that failed, deliberate desertion on the wife's part. The world was not to have the fun of seeing the name of Müllenmeister dragged through a *cause célèbre.* In the unlikely case of their being unable to obtain a separation, Henny further pledged herself to take up permanent residence in another place. When she had first realised that her secret was discovered, she had been rather dismayed; but once the first fright was over, she had, with her characteristic sagacity, at once

grasped the best and most sensible manner of regarding the situation.

Joshua had never been anything to her but the indispensable "Middleman" for a life of luxury. Possibly her better self might have led her to some remorse, some compassion for her victim, if look or tone had betrayed that he suffered in any degree at the impending separation, that what had passed had hurt him even a little, or at all disturbed his mental balance. But there he had sat before her—courteous, calm, correct, developing his suggestions in his coolest, driest, most business-like tone; and at the sight and sound there woke in her soul a defiant pride, and all her hundred exculpations of her conduct died on her lips. In her view, nine hundred and fifty out of a thousand pleasure-loving women would have done as she had done. Her husband had gone his own way, had lived for his shop alone, and had never thought to ask if *she* were in any way dissatisfied. . .

They agreed upon a yearly income of fifteen thousand marks, which should be unaffected by the result of the separation suit.

Almost at the same time, Van Hoolten senior advised his friend Erica to take a lengthy "change of air." Joshua had dropped the bank director several hints which left no doubt of his acquaintance with the nature of the platonic friendship between Erica and Van Hoolten. And the latter had given his friend as delicate and clear an intimation that the thing should come to an end. He himself had long wished for a speedy and radical break.

Perhaps, like Ingwer Lynegaard before him, he had looked for something deeper and more satisfying behind Erica's dazzling beauty than she had to offer. At any rate, his friendship with the lovely woman had

wearied him in the long run, and what she gave was not at all proportioned to the claims she made upon him. Moreover, it was painful in connection with Müllenmeister. . . So—a line underneath; and, THE END.

This explanation did not go so smoothly as that of the Müllenmeisters. Not that Erica had ever had any genuine feeling for Van Hoolten; but the fact that anyone to whom she had yielded so much of herself as she had to him, should give her up of his own accord—actually *give her up*—seemed to her a shattering proof that she had had her day as "the loveliest woman in Berlin"; and this frightful recognition almost wholly obscured another fact—namely, that many practical interests depended also on Van Hoolten's friendship. For that matter, he offered to manage her property for her, and "arrange" her money affairs in all respects as heretofore; and as Erica's moral delicacy had been seriously impaired of recent years, she saw nothing offensive or humiliating in such an adjustment of their relations, assuring herself, as she had done before, that she was an emancipated thinker, and lived her life by her own lights. Indeed, she had become so thoroughly philosophical that she would forthwith have accepted another friend in Van Hoolten's place, if such a personage had been able to offer the same substantial tribute. But as no new adorer at once appeared, she gave herself up to distraction and despair at her unhappy fate.

In this hour of need, Henny arrived and sought to bring her back to reason. Wisely she kept silence on the conflicts in her own abode. Her clever tactics succeeded in tranquillising Erica and bringing her to decide on the trip abroad. Ella was to be sent to a fashionable West End *pension*.

When, at this time, Joshua mused on himself and

his private affairs, he sometimes marvelled to realise that Henny's departure had left no gap of any kind in his life. All went on as before. In his younger days he had been so conservative that even a change of servants, the strange face of a maid waiting at table, had made him uncomfortable. But the violent upheaval that his second marriage had caused in his private life had made him undomesticated and "strange" in his own house. He had never felt really at home therein. The charming villa was a sojourn for his few leisure hours, but no "home" in the sense that the plain little flat in the Alexander-platz had been of old. Now, with the pretty, capable mistress gone, the apparatus she had set in motion moved automatically on. At meals, Mimi presided in the wife's vacant place.

The relation between father and daughter had grown tenderer than ever in these recent weeks. Mimi could scarcely help guessing the reason for the rupture. Since Ella had given her those hints about her own mother's connection with Van Hoolten, a certain *gêne* had invaded her former easy relation with Henny. Erica had suddenly become repulsive to her; and this sense of a purely instinctive dislike coloured—though she tried to hide it—her feeling for her stepmother. Yet she hardly dared seriously to accept the monstrous idea that Henny had sinned in the same way as her sister. To betray a man like her father. . . She felt as if she were looking into an abyss, wherein, if she gazed long, she herself might sink. . . But she drew nearer than ever before to her father. Often, after dinner, they would sit an hour together, talking of things and events which formerly they never would have discussed, and for which Henny had shown, at the best, but a politely simulated interest. Sometimes Joshua, when he rose, would suddenly take Mimi in his

arms and kiss her. He had never done that in the old days. It was like a spontaneous impulse to make up to this daughter for the years of lacking tenderness.

"You are *my* daughter, Mimi," he would say; "and you don't know how happy it makes me to see that you are no less the daughter of your dear, wise mother. Why, it gladdens me so that all thought of my recent vexations seems to disappear."

Agnes came but seldom to Halensee now. Joshua had long and deeply mused on what the girl's motive could have been in leaving the compromising letter, which she had undoubtedly read, open on the writing-table. His conjectures were not far from the truth. The character of his future daughter-in-law had long since fallen sadly in his estimation. To the manifold anxieties and vexations of these last weeks had been added, often and often, the uneasy doubt that Agnes really possessed the qualities to make his favourite son a happy husband. That the honour of the house lay in the hands of such a girl was an uncomfortable reflection. Nevertheless, he had not again referred to the events of that evening with Agnes. She palpably avoided him. More even than before did she seem to be possessed by timidity and embarrassment in his presence.

Friedrich came back in the beginning of August, strikingly altered. He almost looked as if he had grown; at any rate he was broader, and moved with more decision. The soft shining of his eyes had turned into a clear, joyous brilliancy. In his gestures and speech there was now an unconscious dominance which lent the note of energy to his personality, though without in any degree spoiling the gentle charm which had always been his distinguishing trait.

Joshua inwardly rejoiced. He had never hoped to find Friedrich precisely like this. The American "cure" had then suited him well, had purged both mind and spirit of the sentimentality which would merely have made life difficult for him. With alert, observant eyes the father secretly watched the meeting between the engaged couple.

Agnes, too, was visibly perplexed by the change which had come over Friedrich. If she had read his letters a little more attentively, this surprise would have been spared her, for their contents would have proved more clearly with each one that her betrothed would not return as the blindly adoring boy she had known, but as an experienced man, accustomed to measure those around him with the cool, apprising shrewdness of the merchant.

The cordiality of his greeting, his visible joy in reunion, left nothing to be desired; but from his altered disposition there seemed to breathe an unknown air which warned her to be cautious in the future. . . As in a sort of stupor, she sat beside him on the first evening, and this feeling strengthened as he took her home in the motor. He spoke of their wedding, the date for which was now at last to be arranged.

"You agree with me in wishing for a very quiet one, Agnes? I am glad of that. In the circumstances a public affair is out of the question. I think my father means to set aside a part of the villa for our use—either the ground floor or the first. Do you consent, then, to our getting married very soon?"

"I?. . . But of course. . . As you like," murmured Agnes, miserably.

Friedrich stroked the hands that lay so inertly in her lap. "Why, you're icy cold, little one. Aren't you well? Yes? Thank goodness! Do you know,

my treasure, I was almost afraid you'd begun to repent of having bound yourself to me—"

Agnes trembled. "What made you think such a thing, Friedel?"

He laughed. "Why, I was really a very silly sort of youth in those days. When I think of the evening at Tegel and my sentimental confession of love, I often have an uncomfortable feeling that I must have made rather an ass of myself—"

"But—Friedel!"

"Have I hurt you? That was far from my thoughts, darling. And it was beautiful, that night—uniquely beautiful. . . But ah! life is *all* beauty, Agnes dear."

He stretched his arms above his head and drew in, with long, deep breaths, the sultry night air. "Do you know, sweet, you must be more of a sportswoman; you must ride, and practise gymnastics, and play tennis, and take lots of walks, and drink in lots of fresh air—"

"When am I to find time for all that? I've been in the shop until these last few weeks, and had less freedom than the lowest of the saleswomen. Once, when I had something to do in the repairing-room and was a little delayed, because the man didn't at once understand what I wanted, I got 'what for' from your father, I can tell you. He humiliated me so that I'd hardly have dared to offer a crust to a dog after it; and just because I'd been away five minutes more than I ought!"

Friedrich frowned slightly. "Don't you think you must have taken it up wrong, Agnes? I don't recognise father in such a light; he is neither petty nor unjust, and certainly not impatient!"

"He *is* petty and unjust in many ways," said Agnes hastily. "Believe me. . . And he can't endure me—that's certain."

"No; it is pure imagination, my darling, a little, fixed idea! It really pains me when you speak so of my father. Do you think that a petty, narrow-minded man in his circumstances would have given his consent to our marriage? I can only tell you that there's no one on earth whom I more honour and love, and esteem so highly, as that father of mine. 'First-class,' as the Americans say—and he *is* first-class in every respect."

"And so there's no one on earth whom you love more—why don't you say, love *as much* as your father? That shows me how much you love *me*."

"Why, Agnes, you little goose, we're not going to quarrel on our first evening. . . But do remember all my father has to think about, and then these matrimonial bothers just lately; it isn't wonderful if he's sometimes a little nervous and irritable—though I can scarcely imagine him anything but indulgent. . . By-the-bye, do you know anything precisely about how all this came about? I was simply thunderstruck. A separation suit, between *our* people! It took away my breath. And I don't like to ask questions. . . They got on so well together!"

"Yes—until she took up with young Van Hoolten, and your father found it out. I had long seen that there was something. . ."

"Adultery? Good God. . . And with that ass. . . Oh, Agnes, it's unthinkable. You must be mistaken."

"No, no; it's as sure as death. Why are you so astounded? Those things happen not only in the lower circles, but in the best families. Lately a girl was dismissed from the shop, because she had an affair with a married man, and, despite a warning from the superintendent staff, went on with it. I think that's unpardonable. What has the firm to do with the private

affairs of the saleswomen? People are the same in all classes."

Friedrich did not answer; he had scarcely heard her remark.

"Unbelievable!" he murmured. "It's so utterly common, so unclean, that one can hardly bear to think of it. And you had a suspicion? And said nothing?"

"I should think not! I'd have got into a pretty pickle. Besides, I knew nothing definite."

He was silent. All desire for further conversation had suddenly left him. On the return journey he called to the chauffeur to go quickly. He longed for an hour's talk with his father; and Joshua was awaiting him in his workroom.

They had much to say to one another. Friedrich had, shortly before his return, made a very advantageous purchase of furniture, through the mediation of a Chicago business friend, Samuel Sanderson, who years before had been with Joshua in the Magasin du Louvre. The furniture was chiefly chairs, rocking-chairs and so on, and was to arrive in the autumn by a sailing vessel—a cheap means of transit. Samuel Sanderson had been particularly friendly and helpful to the son of his one-time colleague. His house dealt in agencies and commissions, chiefly transatlantic, on an enormous scale. He had married a very beautiful Creole, and had two pretty, up-to-date daughters—regular Yankee girls.

Joshua nodded, as Friedrich smilingly paused.

"I know. He said right out to me that you would suit him admirably as a son-in-law."

"He gave me to understand the same, unequivocally enough; but I must say, to his honour, that my no less unequivocal refusal caused no diminution in his friendly feelings towards me. The two girls, Alice

and Maud, were good friends with me. They are fine creatures, sound to the marrow of their bones."

"Splendid—that is! Sound blood and sound mind —the two best foundations for a happy marriage."

There fell a little, ominous pause. Friedrich sprang up suddenly and opened one of the windows.

"Do you mind? It's frightfully close. . . By-the-bye, we must soon be thinking about my wedding. I think the engagement has lasted long enough."

"I've often wished I hadn't been so hasty in my consent to that rash engagement, Friedel."

"Why? What's wrong with Agnes?"

Joshua sighed. "*She* is neither inwardly nor outwardly as sound as I should like the mother of my grandson to be, Friedel. . . Time enough about the wedding. Think it over. Two years ago, you were very youthful in your ideas, and somewhat morbidly idealistic. And I was a fool to consent until I had some actual knowledge of her family, her origin, all about her. If I had known what I know to-day, it should not have gone so far. The father was a drunkard, the mother a light woman, the brother and sister are consumptive, she herself the decadent child of a decadent family—"

"Agnes decadent? In what way?"

"Don't fly into a rage. I don't want to influence you in any way. Only I had rather the marriage was not hurried on. . . Well, I'm glad that you're here for the general meeting next week. The rules for the direction of the staff are at last to be decided on; so is the question of the pensions fund. We shall have some hard nuts to crack!"

"*Must* you go in for the pensions?"

"Do I hear aright? Is this Friedel!"

"Yes, I have changed my views in many respects during these years. I know I used to think it unavoid-

able. But over there, there are neither pensions funds, nor old-age insurance, nor any eleemosynary arrangements of the sort; and the people are on the whole better off than here. Give them salaries that they can save on. I should suggest the institution of a house bank, which should manage advantageously the savings of the staff; but don't give them charity, and thus degrade them below the level of the private person, who makes his own future, or rather his own bed for his old age."

"Assuredly it would be better, and fairer, if each individual looked after himself; but we live in an age of officialdom, and everyone is infected by its spirit of dependence on the State, and is ready to let others look after his interests, while he enjoys himself. If we are called upon to save for the old age of our employees, because they have not the moral force to lay by a part of their earnings for the future, it is merely, in essence, the appeal of helpless children to the greater wisdom of grown people—in plain words, a forced contribution. Nevertheless, the people demand it, and we can but try."

"A progressive participation in the profits would be a better solution, I think. With the best will in the world, a man can't save enough out of a very small salary to give him any security for his old age. But as I said, the increased salary, managed by a conscientious system of banking, might in certain circumstances, represent a nice little capital after twenty years. If the shareholders, for example, would be content with a dividend of seven per cent., and relinquish anything over that to the staff—"

"That might certainly answer, if the company was composed of a few idealists, but a company whose shares are quoted on the Bourse and pass from one hand to another is not to be counted on for such busi-

ness principles. Something or other must and shall be done for the good of the staff. I had indeed hoped that you might have some practical suggestions to make."

"I'll try. . . How does Rosen do, since Mimi refused him?"

"Hm. . . for the present I see no change, but he's sulking, I'm sure. I am continually occupied with the thought of whether we shall make him a partner or not."

"Is there any reason to do so?"

"Well, yes. You and I will need all our strength for the new house, and I don't know that Hermann and Feldbergen can manage the original business alone. Possibly Rosen may hesitate to throw up a post with a thirty thousand marks' salary; but I suspect him of having certain resources behind him. It's quite likely that he may make himself unpleasant one of these days, so as to drive us into making him an offer."

"Then let him pack. A rascal who will take such means to his end is too dear for our house at any price, even if he *has* an abnormal capacity for work, and an 'over life-size' business manner!"

"Just what I'm always saying to myself."

After a short pause, they both plunged into mercantile interests again, and did not separate till half-past twelve o'clock.

CHAPTER XXVIII

AND now to work! Plunge in, head over ears, dive deep and swim with and against the stream, as the interests of the House of Müllenmeister demand, never backwards and never too rashly forwards; yes, swim in work till the breath threatens to give out; concentrate all one's thoughts on the business. . . that's good!

A wet, foggy morning hung over Berlin, as Friedrich drove to his father's shop for the first time after nearly two years. On the way, he happened to take out his letter-case to look over some notes; as he opened it, some leaves fell out, and a photograph with them. He bent, picked them up, and for a moment or two held the photograph, which was one of Agnes taken shortly before his departure, thoughtfully in his hand. Since he had received it, the picture had never left him for a moment. He had always carried it about him, and in the first months there had scarcely been a free moment in which he had not drawn it out, looked at it lovingly, and kissed it. Then such moments had grown fewer; days and weeks had gone by without his bestowing any tender attentions upon it. And gradually came the time when the photograph of his lovely fiancée caused him a certain indefinable shyness and discomfort. What Agnes, in her cursory reading of his letters, had failed to perceive, *her* hasty missives had revealed to him. They were growing away from one another; this correspondence was not a bridge whereon their thoughts and interests gladly met; each empty letter, with its light trivial gossip, was a tributary to the broad, estranging river

that flowed between their true selves. It was comparatively lately that full recognition had come to him, with a terrible inward pang. Too late?. . . Down with the traitorous thought, the rebellious feeling! Agnes was just as enchantingly beautiful as he had left her two years ago; and his love was not dead. Merely, he had not found in her all that his fancy had once dreamed. It was not her fault that in the wonderful silver casket of her body, there did not lie enshrined the jewels of brilliant intellect and soft shimmering tenderness. . . "Agnes is the child of her decadent family. . . Bodily and spiritually decadent." That was the truth; but one must not let oneself see it.

Arrived at the shop, he was seized by a desire to pay a flying visit to the antique department. Agnes had given him an idea, now and again, of the great development of this branch of the business. It was here that, every morning, while she was still sole denizen, he had been wont to greet her. He nearly said, "Good-morning, darling," when at his entrance there appeared in the background of the dimly lit room a slender, erect, black-and-white figure coming towards him. But then the words died on his lips. . .

"Why, Karen! I beg your pardon, Fräulein Karen—no! it is Fräulein Nickelsen that I should say. How do you come here? Are you actually with us?"

"I have been, for almost two years, Herr Müllenmeister. Didn't you know? But how should you?. . . You have changed a little, but not so much that I should not have recognised you at once."

"I might say precisely the same of you. You are grown up—a complete young lady! Well, well, how the time goes. . . Do you remember our walk in the wood, when you asked me to go and see 'Aunt Mieze' for you?"

"Yes. You were always so good to me. I trusted you absolutely; else I should never have dared to ask you such a thing."

"And now you are with us—and in the 'antiques' of all places! Do you like being here?"

"I love the department passionately. I always had more than enough of a fancy for beautiful things, but a sense for the artistic products of past epochs came to me for the first time here."

"And are you happy with us in other respects?"

The radiant eyes darkened a little. "Of course. . ." But the words came hesitatingly. She could not tell *him* that her days in the department were spoilt, because whenever she was alone there, she feared an invasion from Rosen; and, besides, continually apprehended a summons to his office. But Friedrich had noticed her faltering assent, and resolved to make her confess her trouble to him some other time. As he gazed at the lovely, rounded young face with its charming contrasts of white, black, and blue in complexion, hair, and eyes, he clearly recalled his impression of her likeness to Agnes. She was a sweet little thing!

The department had indeed most admirably developed under "Uncle" Feldbergen's direction. That affectionate, sweet face, and the well-assorted, exquisitely tended pieces, were two delightful impressions for him to carry away to his office on that first morning of work.

The clerks in the counting-house rose as he entered, and welcomed the return of the elder son of the house. On many faces was to be seen a definite surprise at the change that had come over him, visible as it was in his whole being and all his movements. He shook hands with each, asked about each, and, before he reached the Chief's private room, where he was to work

for the present in Joshua's absence, he was at home again with the entire counting-house staff.

Hermann looked rather sleepy and was in a bad temper. He had had a meeting the evening before, and had come home in the small hours, after making a tour of Berlin by night with his *protégée*, Trudchen Schiller. In a restaurant of the Friedrich-strasse they had met with Feldbergen; and if the old gentleman didn't hold his tongue about it to Papa Joshua there'd be the devil to pay, for such proceedings were strictly forbidden. If Joshua were by any chance to discover that his younger son was at the bottom of Trude's decision to go on the stage, there would most certainly ensue a storm of enormous violence. . . He stretched himself, yawning, in his writing-chair.

"I do assure you the governor gets on one's nerves with his antediluvian moralities. The shop's not a convent. But if he had his way, every girl would have to produce a certificate of chastity before she was engaged. We, on our side, are to look on them as nuns, and as such respect them. . . Hullo, Rosen! How goes it with little Karen? A little bit of all right, eh? A *Karnickelchen,* isn't she? Karen Nickelsen—*Karnickelchen:* see the joke?"

Friedrich, who was looking through a book, turned round. Rosen had entered by the door opposite the writing-table; he now came forward and welcomed the elder son in his characteristic manner, which, as ever, combined five per cent. of deference with ten of arrogance.

"Welcome home to the old country, Herr Müllenmeister. You look radiant. Evidently the transatlantic climate has suited you admirably."

"Yes; I was very well over there, Herr Rosen. Life in America does not train the muscles only; one learns to see and hear. By-the-bye, *you* did not hear,

I suppose, that my brother said something to you as you came in?"

"Herr Hermann made, if I mistake not, one of his renowned witticisms," said Rosen in a singularly cutting voice. "Did you not, Herr Hermann?"

Hermann murmured something under his breath, like a stubborn clerk who has been called to order by his superior.

"The old gentleman is failing," and he laughed somewhat constrainedly. "Rosen has moral attacks sometimes, too, but fortunately only in theory. By-the-bye and apropos: last night I had another proof that our people don't have by any means a bad time of it. In the 'Riche' bar, I came across Trude's brother, little Schiller. Do you know that the rascal had a solitaire worth at least six hundred marks on his finger? Promising youth!"

Friedrich heard no more of his chatter. Joshua had just arrived in his sanctum, and Friedrich had to attend to his father's account of various matters connected with the shop and the firm. But Hermann's horrible *"Karnickelchen"* echoed above the calm voice that talked of calculations, transactions, new arrangements, and distracted him. . . What had the fellow to do with the child? He made up his mind to keep an eye on the little girl whom he had always liked so much.

"You are not attending, Friedel," said Joshua, with some rebuke in his tone. "Come, we'll make a round of the house."

In these two years, the shop had grown out of all knowledge; nearly every department had been enlarged, better stocked, and visibly better organised; yet the place had never seemed to Friedrich so proletarian, so common, so stiflingly small, as on this first round after his return. Its contrast with the great businesses

in which he had been working was almost overwhelming.

"I could not work here now; the place would have to be altered from attic to basement," he thought, but refrained from saying it.

In the afternoon he went to take Agnes out.

Shortly before Friedrich's return, Joshua had given her three thousand marks "for her trousseau, and as pocket-money for the present." She had bought some good frocks, and laid the rest aside for Elias Bielefeldt. She and Friedrich drove to the Grünewald, had coffee in Paulsborn, walked a little by the sea, and came home about seven o'clock. Some guests had been invited for the evening—Director Van Hoolten, Rosen, Feldbergen, Herr Markus and Herr Mühsam, Breuer with his wife and only daughter, some girl friends of Mimi's, and a distant relative of the late Frau Müllenmeister, who, as oldest lady and nearest connection, did the honours of the house.

The big round table in the dining-room was festively decked with pale pink roses and myrtle. Three great vases stood on the costly table-cloth, and between them silver candelabra with rosy shades. The still sultry night air streamed in through the wide-open doors of the veranda.

Agnes had had her evening dress sent out to put on at the house. In the long-trained white chiffon, painted in delicate colours, and girdled close under the breast by a narrow gold belt, she looked in her waxen beauty, her slender neck rising from a deep *décolleté*, like the incarnation of a portrait by an old English master. Friedrich stood at the foot of the stairs as she descended with her leisurely grace. Involuntarily he caught her in his arms, and kissed her with passionate admiration. . . It was the first caress that day, although they had been together for hours.

"Now come, darling, I've set out your bridal present and all my trophies from America."

A little curious, but with none of a bride's loving expectancy and joy, she let him lead her into the so-called breakfast parlour, beside the dining-room. Among a lot of charming and for the most part costly things, there lay, in a white satin case, her princely wedding adornment from the heir of the House of Müllenmeister—necklace, bracelet, brooch, earrings, and ring in great gleaming diamonds and pearls.

"You like it, eh?" said he smiling. "Ever since I came back, I haven't seen your eyes so bright as they are now!"

Instead of answering, she fell on his neck and pressed her face to his shoulder. "You are too good, Friedel. I don't deserve it a bit. . ."

The guests arrived about half-past eight; at nine they went to supper. Agnes sat between Joshua and Friedrich. Joshua called her "thou" for the first time; the gentlemen kissed her hand; Rosen's bow was half-a-yard deeper than usual. . . gradually she realised her changed position in the house and the society. During the two years of Friedrich's absence, the betrothal had been regarded merely as a kind of probation; with his return it became an accepted fact. Till now she had been, in everyone's eyes, waiting on the steps of the throne; *now* she was officially the fiancée of the future Chief of the House, and sat by his side before all the world, awaiting her coronation day. . . Again, as at the first recognition of her engagement, the sense of power came over her like a spell and stifled all other emotions. Her cheeks flushed, her eyes shone. Till now they had suffered her; from to-night, she began her rule. In this moment she was grateful to Elias Bielefeldt for having guarded her from folly. How right he had been; nobody should sacrifice such a

future to mere passion, no matter how madly that made the heart beat, or how flamingly it stirred the blood. Riches are power, power is greatness, greatness is happiness.

The party could not get into the right mood; the shadow of recent occurrences seemed to haunt the table. Many whispers were in circulation in Berlin. Nobody knew who had originated them, but everybody nodded and "wondered". . . So, despite the roses and myrtle, there was an oppressive constraint; it was like a funeral gathering. The spectre of the house, guessed at now even by strangers, hovered in the room.

Feldbergen proposed the "Welcome Home," Mendel Mühsam the engaged couple; and then Director Van Hoolten rose.

"Here, in what I may call the inner circle of the friends of the House of Müllenmeister, assembled in honour of the future Chief and his return, I feel compelled to give expression to my own joyful feelings. The sight of the happy young couple so deeply gladdens my heart that I can no longer restrain myself, and am about to impart a secret which was to have remained untold until the return of my son—but of course under the seal of the strictest privacy.

"I dare say you are all aware that I have long cherished a wish that my own son should soon present me with a dear daughter-in-law. Hitherto he had seemed little inclined to oblige me. The right woman had not appeared—or rather, she *had* appeared, but he had not perceived it. It was under this hospitable roof that his eyes were first opened. We all know that ladies are born match-makers; and in this case, also, it was two soft, graceful womanly hands that led the hesitating, vacillating fellow with sisterly, I might almost say with motherly, solicitude into the right path to the right woman; and thus brought the two young people

to an understanding. This afternoon, my son, Eduard von Bergen, told me of his engagement to Ella von Reeren. . . So I beg you, ladies and gentlemen, to empty your glasses to the health of the young couple, and then, as I said, to forget my indiscretion, until the official intimation. Out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaketh."

The expectant faces had turned into frankly amazed ones, as Van Hoolten named Ella von Reeren.

When they had clinked glasses and resumed their seats, Van Hoolten handed Joshua a telegram, which the latter read silently, and returned with a look of comprehension. This was it:

"Wish promptly carried out. Just engaged myself to Ella. Both doing as well as can be expected."

Joshua nodded, well pleased. That was the old man's work—a subtle, sage solution of the problem. This engagement crushed the hydra of scandal, before it had raised its head. And Henny was to be supposed to have made the match! That was a refinement of diplomacy which silenced all idle rumours from that day forward.

On Mimi's face the look of joyous amazement lingered. She herself found Eddie Van Hoolten unendurable, but for Ella he might very well be the right man. And above all, this marriage would regulate Ella's behaviour; moreover, the friendship between Eddie's father and Ella's mother would take a different turn. . .

Coffee was served on the veranda. The older men were soon in full tide of Elmas talk, though Feldbergen was chafing a little with Mimi's friends, Rosen paying much attention to Alwine Breuer, and Cornelius Arfst following with burning eyes the fiancés

in the garden. He gave such answers to Mimi's questions that she soon paused in annoyance, but he did not seem to notice. Never yet in her young life had she shown a man so much interest and spontaneous liking as this foreign architect, and, therefore, she had never felt so bitterly and grievously as in this moment the slight of being overlooked, nay! treated as if she were not there. Somewhat markedly she rose and joined her friends. Arfst stared after her with a half-awakened, half-distraught look in his eyes. Since he knew not when, Agnes had enthralled his fancy, his dreaming. In vain he sought to understand the nature of the strange possession. It was not a purely erotic feeling; rather, a sort of artistic ecstasy. He had no desire to have her for his own, but he grudged her to others. His enthusiasm for the pale, somewhat sickly beauty of the young fiancée had some analogy with religious madness.

When Mimi left him, he suddenly felt a sense of missing something. She had such a soft voice, it accompanied his dreams like gracious music. Dimly he felt that he had offended the girl in some way; and he rose, followed her, and seated himself beside her.

"Why are you angry with me?" he asked, in a low voice.

"I am not in the least angry with you, Herr Arfst," answered Mimi coldly. "Why should you think so?"

"I just thought so. . ." He smiled faintly, shut his eyes, and waited eagerly for her to speak. "Do say something," he urged after a while. "Your voice is restful, it tranquillises the nerves."

"A thousand thanks!" She laughed outright, and her friends joined in. One of the girls tapped her forehead: "Notoriously 'dotty'," she whispered. . . Just then Cornelius Arfst slowly lifted his heavy, long-

lashed lids, and looked at Mimi with his own peculiar intensity.

"While you were speaking just now, a new idea came to me. You see that's the way I get inspiration—directly through the senses. When I hear a Beethoven Sonata I build in imagination a glorious portal. Everything that I see and hear turns itself into stone and masonry, into mosaic, pillars, bronzes. When I look at Fräulein Agnes, before the eyes of my imagination whole wall-surfaces cover themselves with pastel pictures; and your voice, Fräulein Müllenmeister, paints before me enchanting country cottages—little nests of modest comfort, idylls of tranquillity, veritable lyrics—I want to set them down that instant. . . Do you at all understand me?"

The other girls laughed, but Mimi nodded. She did understand, and was ashamed of her little touchiness of a moment ago.

"Certainly I never dreamed that my feeble voice could do such wonders! But whenever you want to dream country cottages, I am most gladly at your disposal, Herr Arfst," she said cordially.

The party broke up early. Agnes found Mieze still in the living-room, mending some clothes. Radiantly she displayed her jewels, and Mieze duly admired the beauty of the stones and the tasteful setting. "It's a set fit for an empress."

"It's very valuable, isn't it? Do you think one would get ten thousand marks if one sold it?"

"My goodness gracious me! Here's a mercenary little wretch! Is that the way to look at your bridal jewels? For that matter, I should think the big solitaire alone was worth more than that."

"Well, I only wanted to know." Agnes sighed, and then gave some details of the evening—of the surprise of the new engagement, and of how Papa Joshua had

arranged for her to go with Mimi for four or five weeks to the sea, and of how her wedding had been postponed till after Christmas.

"Good-night, Fräulein Mieze—I begin to feel really tired. Hans never opened his mouth the whole blessed evening, except for a few minutes' talk with my fiancé. And Karen was nearly as bad. Just imagine, Friedel wants me to have her with me after our marriage. . . Good-night!"

Despite her fatigue she did not go to sleep for a long time. She had not seen Elias Bielefeldt for nearly a week. He was evidently avoiding her. That stung and excited her; her thoughts vacillated between her shining future and her passion for him. Why shouldn't she combine them both?. . . She flung off the evil imagining, but it had fired her cheeks, and kept her in agitation of mind, until, amid ponderings, debatings, pangs of conscience, and yieldings to her own light, superficial nature, she fell into a deep, dreamless slumber.

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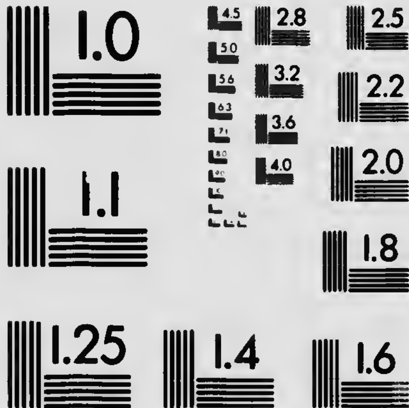

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CHAPTER XXIX

THE almost daily apparition of Fräulein Iversen in Müllenmeister's shop struck the employees, but they did not long puzzle over it. They concluded that she was studying the various emporiums in the interests of social democracy, and noting all the grievances of the staffs for future disclosure. She had managed to convey that very impression by various remarks, and nobody was surprised, remembering her performance at the general meeting. . . Undoubtedly (said they) she was going in hot and strong for socialistic agitation, and of course, having discovered her talent for that kind of thing, she was now turning it to good practical account. . . Quite evidently she was improved in circumstances. Her dowdy clothes were new and neat; for the rest, her dim personality was so easily overlooked that people scarcely noticed her presence. In her dun-coloured, cheap gown, with the dark sailor hat and withered face beneath it, she was just "somebody or other" to be seen, forgotten, and seen again unrecognized the next moment.

To-day she was strolling languidly, like someone who has much time to look and little money to spend, by the counters, now and again standing still to examine the wares and then wandering further. Her rather dull grey eyes were following furtively but attentively a stout dark-haired woman, who was moving along unconcernedly between the tables towards the silk department. At one moment, Iversen collided, accidentally as it seemed, with an elderly man, apparently belonging to the lower middle class. He murmured an apology and hastened by. Only a very shrewd and close observer

could have seen that, in the chance encounter, he moved his lips, and exchanged a quick, significant glance with Iversen. She went quietly onwards. Nobody noticed her inward excitement. . . She had now been for nearly five months in the secret service of the firm, and had not yet succeeded in furnishing a proof of her qualifications for the new post.

What she had at first done reluctantly in obedience to her urgent need, had gradually become a kind of passion. The at first detested tracking and spying, listening and watching, had slowly, to her own surprise, grown to be second nature; she no longer thought there was anything "unfair" in it. The instincts of the bloodhound had wakened in her, and now she was following with eager zest the long-sought trail she had at last scented.

She had never been a sentimental woman; in her long, weary combat with every kind of care and privation, and in the inevitably nerve-racking toil of the emporium, all soft feminine feelings had gradually died. She had not the smallest compassion for the menaced existences of those who should be discovered in these thefts; nor did she feel, either, any malignity towards the culprits. A feverish but purely objective interest in the success of her exacting and fatiguing efforts had extinguished all personal feeling.

Meanwhile the portly, dark-haired woman had reached the silk department, and was standing at a little distance from Felix Schiller, who was serving a customer with nervous, restless movements, and looking dreadfully pale and ill. It was easy to see that his heart was not in his work. The "U" stuff, with its distinguishing blue "25," seemed to matter no more to him than the premiumless "E" article. And the customer chose, after some hesitation, that article.

Then the portly woman with the dark hair, and the

admirable black velvet coat, stepped forward and greeted him.

"Dear Herr Schiller, I'm so *sorry*—so *sorry* for you. How ill you look, poor boy. Is it true then?"

"Quite true, Frau Klebel. Old Van Hoolten, I heard by chance, announced the engagement a whole six weeks ago at the Müllenmeisters'. At that time she was still writing me sweet letters, the false little snake! And her letter yesterday. . ."

"What did she say, the good-for-nothing creature?"

"What she had said once before. 'It must come to an end; she wouldn't have such another chance'. . . Well, what is it to me? Damn her! When I think what I've done for her sake. . . it's enough to drive a man mad."

"Don't take it so to heart. There are plenty more pretty girls, Herr Schiller. And you can always say. . ." Klebel pursed up her lips and whispered. "*That's* in your power, Herr Schiller. If you like, we'll write Mr. Fiancé an anonymous letter that will open his eyes. Who knows? She might be running into your arms of her own accord, one of these days."

"I don't want her any more. The devil take her, and me, too. Do you know, I bought a revolver this morning?" He raised his coat a little, and showed the barrel projecting from an inner pocket.

Klebel uttered a small scream. "Oh, my goodness gracious me! Think of the sin! Remember your poor parents—and *me*. Haven't I trusted you? and now, because of your affair with that silly little goose—"

"No, no. Calm yourself, my friend. You shall not lose by me. Perhaps I'll get over it. Life is good, after all. One must learn to bear reverses. But it's so nice, you know, when one can always say to oneself. . . Ah, but it's all over now. It's the end of all things."

Klebel breathed again. "You only think that now,

because you're so wretched. . . I want some white duchesse satin, Herr Schiller—heavy white duchesse, for a wedding gown. From eighteen to twenty yards; show me something really good—the best you have."

"Of course. Nothing but the best for you!" And he added, in a lower voice: "But don't forget to note it. The accounts weren't quite correct last month, I think."

"I take that as a joke; otherwise it would be an insult which, God knows, I haven't deserved from you, Herr Schiller."

Felix threw some pieces of heavy, shimmering white satin on the counter, and Klebel examined and selected. At last she chose enough for two dresses—one in snow white, the other in cream; the satin, in each case, was seven marks a yard.

Felix made out a bill for ten yards of pongee silk at one mark, and eighteen of half-silk satin, at one mark twenty. . . Then she chose an expensive blouse silk, and got four yards.

As she went with the docket to the cash-desk, while Felix himself carried the goods to the packing counter, Iversen came from the opposite side with a pay-docket in her hand. She stood so that as Klebel paid, she could see the amount on the bill. Two minutes later, Frau Klebel was handed her parcel packed wonderfully quickly.

Iversen turned quickly. There were two crimson spots on her sallow cheeks. With unprofessional haste she followed the woman, who was strolling to the entrance. At the door she was seized by Iversen.

"Will you have the goodness to follow me for a moment?" said the latter with almost exaggerated politeness, but holding the horrified Klebel's arm as in a vice.

"What is this? Such impudence! Are you mad?"

cried the woman. "What do you mean? I have paid for my things."

"If a mistake has been made, we shall apologise; but just now I am ordered to bring you upstairs for enquiry."

"Indeed? That is pleasant. . ."

"Pray do not make any unnecessary disturbance," said a cool voice beside them. The man who had collided with Iversen was standing at her side, and quietly showed the white-faced Klebel his official badge.

"I don't know what this means! I am aware of nothing wrong; I shall complain to Herr Müllenmeister. . ."

"Please," and Iversen, almost good-naturedly, put her arm in Klebel's, and led her to the staircase. The policeman accompanied them, walking on Klebel's other side. Willy-nilly, the woman was obliged to go with them.

Felix Schiller was still mechanically serving.

The breach with Ella had really distressed him. In the first place he had honestly loved her; and in the second, his vanity was deeply wounded by her having preferred another and a richer suitor to himself.

The conceit and self-assurance of old Schiller had descended in full measure to his son. A little time ago, he had thought no goal too high for him to reach. From the first rendezvous that Ella had granted him, he had been filled with a feverish longing to impress her, never to let her see a weak point in him, always to seem like the well-dressed men of her own circle. It had been difficult, very difficult, to make his outlay fit with his at first inconsiderable income; even later, when he was a highly placed salesman with salary and premiums, it had been almost impossible to keep both ends together, for his own needs and Ella's demands increased daily. His passionate love, and his wild desire

for enjoyment, dragged him into a whirl of expensive pleasures. The incipient ambition grew to full proportions; he *must* dress like a gentleman, have boxes at the theatres and good suppers in little furtive restaurants by rose-coloured lamplight, with intoxicating string-music and champagne. . . But it cost a lot of money; and if Frau Klebel had not appeared on the scene, the costly comedy would have ended from sheer fright, for sufficient premiums could not be scraped up by the most skilful of salesmen.

At first, it had gone against the grain with him; but before long he began to understand the philosophy of the benevolent lady. "Young people in the emporiums made her so *sorry!*" Toiling from morning till night for a few marks, and all the colossal profit going into Jewish purses—was *that* justice? A wise man would take what was rightfully his. In such a sense, everyone ought to be a democrat. . . "If you won't give of your own accord I'll take it myself:" that was applied democracy. What was the good of fine theories and speeches, and waiting till the future state was established with all its idealism: by that time you'd be old and grey, or, more likely, rotting in your. . . "Who takes, keeps!"

He had contended vehemently against such maxims. But what was the use? "Eat, bird, or die!" A man likes to live a decent life like other people, and he could not do without Ella, and for life and love money was absolutely necessary. . . "Who takes, keeps!"

Gradually he lost all fear of discovery. The complicity of the girl at the packing-counter troubled him a little; but Frau Klebel managed to dispel his fears, and inspire him with a sense of safety. But for some time now a terrible apprehension, sudden and quite unreasoned, had begun to loom. Supposing. . . What on earth should he do?

It was looming to-day. Not that he felt any particular anxiety, or pang of conscience; but when he thought of Ella and her betrayal, he could not help thinking of this as well. Whither had that passion led him? Had not his existence been founded on a volcano ever since that day?. . . But the traffic should come to an end, as soon as he was out of Klebel's books.

The telephone rang. One of the superintendents came up to Felix. "You are wanted upstairs, in the staff-office."

"But you see I'm serving."

"Mertens can take your place."

In the lift he met the girl who had put up Frau Klebel's parcel. He turned deadly pale.

"Are you wanted upstairs, too?"

"Are *you?*"

They looked into one another's eyes in blank terror. "Oh, nonsense; don't be silly; it's just a chance. . ."

But his confident bearing broke down when they told him, in the office, that Klebel had been arrested an hour ago, and after a search had been made in her house and a whole shopful of stolen articles discovered, had offered a full confession [illegible] as not strictly in accordance with the truth, bu[illegible] as too overcome to weigh probabilities. When he [illegible] as accused of complicity in the thefts, he judged further denial to be fruitless, and confessed all—all.

Then the girl was examined. She, too, lacked the courage to plead not guilty. . . Yes—knowingly and willingly she had packed the two pieces of satin and the blouse silk under the false docket, and falteringly she admitted that this "conscious error" had been made before—made frequently.

Felix leant, almost fainting with terror, against the wall. On his handsome young face there were deep, dark, greenish shadows, which made it look old and

sunken. He felt as if he were dreaming some horrible dream, as if a mountain were crushing him, and if he could only wake, it would fall off. His icy hands groped towards his forehead; he opened his eyes wide, and bit his lips. . . No: it was not a dream, but frightful, unthinkable reality.

His thoughts flashed like lightning through his brain. Like the pictures in a cinematograph, his visions followed one another in rapid succession: the proceedings at the law courts, the sentence, the imprisonment, the discharge, the ruined future. . . And then Ella—the scandal. . . himself branded as a thief, dishonoured in her eyes. . . His hand gripped something in his pocket.

When he had bought the revolver, he had been only playing with the thought of suicide. It had been a pleasantly stimulating, exciting sensation—that of the cold, deadly steel near the warm beating heart. And then the touching it—the thought, "It's loaded; the pressure of a finger". . . Almost unconsciously his hand, holding the revolver, was lifted to his temple. . .

His last thought was of Ella.

The sound of the shot caused a veritable panic in the upper floors of the shop.

Terror hung in the air. Only a few initiates knew of the arrest, yet the whole staff was seized by the same instant consternation.

"Somebody has shot himself. Who is it? Little Schiller of the silk department!. . . Why? For God's sake, what was the matter?"

Cold sweat stood on pale foreheads; from deathly faces looked eyes that were faint with terror or lit with wild despair. Here and there the assistants threw down the things they were selling, and rushed upstairs to find out the truth, others left the shop in senseless flight. The public asked questions, scolded, grumbled at the

bad attendance, and hoped for a "sensation." Some of the agitation of the staff infected the customers. *Why* had somebody shot himself upstairs?. . .

In the staff bureau Tobias Ribbeck, who had been one of the first to rush from the repairing-room to the fatal spot, held the blood-stained head of the suicide on his arm. The hurriedly summoned house doctor could do no more than attest the instant death of the unfortunate young man.

Tears were falling from Ribbeck's eyes upon the face, now stiffening in death. "Did I not tell you, Ignaz Schiller?" he thought; "the emporium has devoured your children."

Soon they came with the bier to fetch away the body.

Iversen was sobbing in a corner. The horrible happening had momentarily extinguished her exultant joy in her first unexpected success. She had not wanted *this*. If she could have foreseen it, she would never have touched the business. But never again! Better starve than drive a fellow being to suicide. Never would she forget the sight. . . Friedrich Müllenmeister, who in passing heard her despairing self-accusation, came up and tried to calm her. In his face, too, there was horror and dismay at the frightful incident.

"You must not reproach yourself, Fräulein Iversen," he said, soothingly. "It had to happen. The pitcher goes to the water until it breaks. . . Come! Go home and rest for a few days. We are all as overwhelmed as you are."

He went on, and exchanged a few words with the policeman who had conducted the investigation. Its result had been to show that Frau Klebel's corruption of the assistants extended through nearly all departments. Very probably other emporiums had suffered as well, but it was clear that in this house she had incited a great number of the employees to continued thieving.

How had it been done? How had such a state of affairs remained undetected for weeks, months, nay! years, despite all discipline, all vigilance, despite house detectives and police and the supposedly best conceivable system of regulating sales and deliveries?

Friedrich, in his dejection and distress, pondered the perplexing problem. It had been arranged that he should be in the antique department at five o'clock, to fetch Agnes; it was six now, and she was not there.

Karen was serving a customer, who had asked to see some old lace. With her tranquil sweetness she was displaying the considerable selection of costly pieces to the lady, explaining, pointing out, drawing attention to the arduous patterns, and the beauty of some particular specimens. And all the while she had to keep her wits about her, for the casket of lace represented an enormous value. At last the lady bought a piece of Mechlin worth three thousand marks.

Friedrich sat on one of the antique chairs in the background. Evidently the echo of the catastrophe had not penetrated to this remote and quiet part of the shop. As the customer disappeared, Agnes rushed in, all horror, compassion, and half-joyful excitement at the "sensation."

"There you are! My God! how awful all this is!. . . The poor boy was led astray, I'm certain. . . Why, hasn't Karen heard about it? Haven't you, really, Karen?" And instantly she poured forth the disastrous story. "Isn't it dreadful?"

Karen staggered as if from a blow, and finally fell upon a carved chest. Her hands pressed to her face, she broke into loud, piteous weeping, like a child.

"How could you tell her like that, Agnes!" said Friedrich reproachfully. "Do soothe her; I must go to the counting-house again for a moment."

"And I have something to do in the shop [illegible] ake a

very bad child's nurse, moreover. Shall we meet here again at seven?"

He nodded. As the door shut behind her, he turned to Karen, took her hand in his, and gently stroked it.

"Yes—weep, little Karen. There is matter for weeping. My heart is heavy, too, but we cannot undo the past. . . Why are you alone here?"

Karen answered tearfully that Agnes had been called away, then she raised herself and bravely choked down her sobs. "I will pull myself together, Herr Müllenmeister."

"That's right!"

She smiled at him with quivering lips. His voice had had its wonted effect on her—consoling, tranquillising. .

Then he went away.

CHAPTER XXX

For weeks the newspapers had daily articles about the thefts in the Müllenmeister emporium. Over forty employees had been imprisoned on remand, awaiting sentence for the crimes they had one and all admitted.

Klebel had mos[illegible]ly corrupted the young people who *"always mad[illegible] so sorry."* She had shown them manifold kindnesses, lent them money and so put them under obligations to her, permitted them to use her house as a rendezvous, and thus gradually beguiled them into peculation. Usually the thefts were "worked" in such a way that two employees in the same department, one at the counter and one at the packing-desk, passed the articles she "bought" into each other's hands; but other methods, too, were current. Frau Klebel kept a veritable storeroom of conveyed articles, which she disposed of to receivers of stolen goods in Leipzig, Magdeburg, Breslau, and other large provincial towns, where they [illegible]e sold at absurd prices as *occasions.* Her transactions had been quite regular and businesslike; on the first of every month, her shop friends received an accurate statement of accounts "for goods delivered," and these—with vast generosity—were rated at twenty-five per cent. of the shop prices.

The suicide of young Schiller raised the fate of all these young people, led astray by frivolity, love of pleasure, and vanity, to the level of tragedy. Of course the thieving was deprecated, but on the whole people were more inclined to pity the victims of a knowing hag than the actually injured owner of the emporium. An anti-Semite sheet boldly and unctuously described "the very

existence of the emporium" as "a breeding-place for criminal impulses"; indeed, according to this organ's blazing diatribes, the shop itself should have been in the dock.

Joshua had a bad time. There seemed to be an epidemic of annoyances, worries, differences of opinion, accidents. Early in the New Year, the new house was to be opened. After many contests, the question of the progressive participation of the staff in the profits had been settled at the last general meeting. The arrangement was that as soon as a dividend of eight per cent. on the share capital had been secured and laid aside, the employees should participate progressively to the extent of ten to twenty-five per cent. of the net profit. The old-age insurance and the pensions fund were not to be instituted for two years after the new house had been opened. Greater concessions had been unobtainable.

Breuer, who had been particularly zealous on the socialistic side of the undertaking, suddenly withdrew almost entirely. At the last general meeting he had not even put in an appearance. Rosen had been remarkably intimate with him and his family of late. . . At the beginning of November Rosen gave notice; and at Christmas his long rumoured engagement to Alwine Breuer was announced.

Joshua heard the news with mingled feelings. Rosen's departure had long been foreseen; but his promotion to the place of Breuer's future son-in-law opened an unpleasing perspective. Breuer had always had a little weakness for Rosen, and an unbounded admiration for his business capacity. It was to be supposed that he would now act solely in the interests and spirit of his new connection. Either he would seek to secure for Rosen a commanding position in the Elmas house, or, failing that, would possibly withdraw altogether from the scheme, so as to capitalise an undertaking for him.

But Joshua was resolute that Rosen should not come to the new house; and the rest must be left to the future. . .

The Christmas festivities were somewhat dreary at the Müllenmeister villa. The hostess of the occasion, an elderly, unmarried, somewhat acidulous lady, poorly replaced Henny, all grace and charm. On Joshua's suggestion, Ella von Reeren had been asked to come to Halensee until her marriage, and she had gladly accepted Mimi's cordial invitation. The wedding was to take place in January. . . In society, people were racking their brains to find out "what it all meant," but nobody could discover the word of the enigma—which was precisely what those most concerned had desired.

The wedding of Friedrich and Agnes was again postponed. At the end of October, Agnes had caught a bad cold, which soon set up an obstinate and disturbing cough. Joshua insisted on her going to the cure at Meran, and remaining there until she was quite well again, so that she might celebrate her wedding as a "really healthy" bride. But at Christmas she returned, though the cough was no better, and indeed had been increased by the journey. Joshua was vexed; but as she declared that her longing for Friedrich had literally dragged her back, there was not much to be said. The date of the wedding was then finally fixed as the fifteenth of March.

Friedrich urged it, though for very different reasons from those which Agnes professed. To his own consternation, he had observed that so far from her absence making a definite gap in his life, he had felt a certain relief in it. As she had once read his, so did he now read her, letters—that is, very cursorily; there was so little in them, and that little so unimportant! Moreover, he was so driven by the ceaseless grind of business that he was hardly able to think of his private affairs, which

was possibly a fortunate thing; since when he *did* ponder at all on the future, he was ever conscious of a strangely uneasy and melancholy premonition, for which he could not definitely account. But the more aware he grew of the fact that it would have been better if his former feeling for Agnes had not crystallised into a binding declaration of love, the more affectionate and tender did his letters and his whole bearing towards her become.

No one but his father saw anything of this, or suspected, behind his taciturnity in daily intercourse and his almost fanatical devotion to work, the deeply hidden causes and motives. Joshua read aright the altered demeanor of his favourite son—and since his return, Friedrich had been more than ever that—but even he could see no way out. He had for long reproached himself, and now more than ever, for having consented to the engagement, and secretly pondered the possibility of speaking to Agnes on the point; but, uncertain of her attitude, and apprehensive that Friedrich's annoyance at any intrusion with regard to his personal affairs might make matters worse, he failed to come to any conclusion.

While Agnes had been in Meran, Friedrich had often taken her little niece out on Sundays, and invited her and Hans Matrei to walk out to Halensee or go with him to the theatre. These invitations usually included Karen, as Irmgard's dearest friend. Talking with the two young girls, he often forgot for hours his melancholy mood. Sometimes Karen's sweet silvery laughter and Irmgard's soft mirth would echo in his ears the whole week through. Strange! Agnes never laughed like that. . . He wondered why.

Hans Matrei and the girls were asked for the two Christmas evenings to Halensee. Karen had refused for the first holiday, which she was to spend with Mieze and the Ribbecks, but on the second, urged by Irmgard, she arrived with her. It was dull enough. Ella and her

betrothed were at a bridal dinner, Hermann, too, was out, Agnes was yawning over a novel in the rocking-chair, Mimi was looking over a sketch map with Cornelius Arfst, who was now a constant visitor at the villa. . .

Friedrich asked the girls to come into the conservatory and see "his" lilies. Five years ago, a friend had brought him the bulbs from Japan, and now they were blooming for the first time—"and at Christmas, too!"—in a big tub. There were about fifteen of them, very tall, traditionally graceful, and snowy white, except for little ruby-red spots at the edges, like flecks of blood. The place was filled with their sweet, strong scent.

"Fräulein Karen, would you like to come over to the new house?" asked Friedrich. "Yes? Would you really? You should just see our antique department! Three huge halls, and one of them arranged as a succession of 'period' rooms, all perfectly carried out. The department represents a value of over a million. . . But we want a young saleswoman."

"My apprenticeship is not finished, you know."

"If *I* consider you qualified, that is enough. Or is there some particular reason for your staying where you are?"

"Oh, no, on the contrary. . . that is. . ." She hesitated. "Herr Rosen is going to the new house, too, isn't he?"

"God forbid! Herr Rosen leaves on the first of April, possibly sooner. Why do you ask? What has he to do with your going or staying?"

Karen turned crimson.

"You will have nothing more to fear from Herr Rosen," said Friedrich. Suddenly he recalled the "*Karnickelchen,*" and felt fiercely angry. A hot choking sensation got him by the throat, depriving him of breath; his very hands were burning. If Rosen had

been anywhere near, he would have rushed at him and throttled him. . . The paroxysm lasted fully two minutes; then he bethought himself. In his profound agitation, he bent over the lilies and cut two blooms. "They would be withered to-morrow," he said, almost apologetically, giving them to the two girls.

Agnes smiled rather maliciously as Karen and Irmgard, each with a lily, came into the drawing-room. The day before she had asked Friedrich, for a whim, to give her a couple to take home. He had refused, saying it would be a pity to cut them.

"Ah ha!" she said, slyly. "Just like a man! Your lilies are not too good for the young people. Oh, youth, youth!. . . Well, Karen looks very well as 'Emily with her Lily.'"

"Forgive me! I'll get you one now—"

"No, don't trouble; I'm not fond of their deathly perfume. Nor am I jealous, my dear." She yawned, and took up her novel again. . .

At tea, which was served in the little breakfast-room, Hans Matrei related what he had heard about the further development of the new co-operative scheme of private businesses, which was to bid defiance to the emporiums. It seemed of late to have taken an unlooked-for range, for people said that as many as eighteen houses had been purchased. Meanwhile the buildings already arranged for were being proceeded with; they were to be practical, modern, but wholly unostentatious. Joshua listened attentively. Several of his own men, who had cut adrift, were interested in the scheme—Herr Tük, from the curtains and carpets; Herr Levy, from the jewellery and fancy goods; lately, too, Elias Bielefeldt had given notice, and was about to open a millinery establishment in the "Berolina Commercial Rooms."

Joshua was far from regarding it as serious compe-

tition, but he made a principle of observing all newcomers in the field of commercial activity with unprejudiced and interested eyes.

"Is the new scheme likely to pay, then?" asked Agnes, breaking into the men's discussion.

"If they have sufficient capital, and if the thing is put in the hands of a capable organiser, why not? But certainly they should not have too many insignificant hangers-on, like Levy and Bielefeldt. Tük is a different pair of shoes; he may well be a profitable partner. I'm not very confident, on the whole."

"What is your attitude towards the affair, Matrei?"

Hans shrugged. "In itself, this combination of private businesses into a defensive and offensive alliance is a very sound idea."

"I see. 'A country which is irrigated by many small rivers and brooks, et cetera'. . . A charming parallel, Matrei. But now imagine all those rivers and brooks conjoined into one stream, and on that stream a great number of existences floating, each, in your view, with the same right to independence, or at any rate to a share in the profits gained—and then go and ask Herr Bielefeldt, that ardent champion of 'improved conditions for the emporium employee,' how *he* means to share the profits with them! And ask, further, whether the employees of the 'Berolina Commercial Rooms' have everything they wish for. The impossibility of any final solution of the social problem lies, in the last resort, in the circumstance or rather the fact that a man always changes his opinion and even to some extent his ideals, according to the social position he occupies. The employee, from the day he becomes a proprietor, regards the claims of other employees from a totally different point of view. And it's the same in all callings. The building contractor beholds the needs of the workmen from a new standpoint, once he has ceased to be him

self a bricklayer or hodcarrier. This transformation often results from a mere promotion; I have observed that the man who is advanced to a superintendent's post suddenly acquires quite other perceptions of the rights and duties of the salesman from what he had when he stood behind the counter himself."

Friedrich nodded. "Yes—just as when, as a mere pedestrian, one has to endure the smell and dust of a motor, one is much inclined to rail against the danger to the community of such an abominable means of locomotion; but, once possessed of the thing oneself, is unable to understand the reactionary folk who do not rejoice in the progress and ease implied by such quick methods of communication."

"Just so!" Joshua produced his letter-case, and spread out a sheet. "A love-letter, just come by special messenger!" and then, to Friedrich: "Read that! Rosen begs me to let him go on the first of February, and refers to Breuer, 'whose wishes he will thus be enabled to fulfil.' What do you say to it?"

"Pack him off! One mustn't stop the man who's catching a train." Friedrich threw the letter down with a scornful gesture. "Only I'd like to know. . ."

"So would I!" said Joshua. "Then I'll send him word at once that we shall not stand in his way."

Friedrich nodded. At the same moment, he looked across at Karen, and caught such a radiant look in her eyes that his suspicions of Rosen became certainties.

After a long conference between Joshua and Director Van Hoolten, some new arrangements with regard to Ella's marriage were made. In the beginning of January, Frau Lynegaard was to return to Berlin for a flying visit, and inhabit her old abode. Ella would then of course leave the Müllenmeisters' and go to her mother. On the eighteenth the wedding was to take place quietly,

with no greater festivity than a dinner at the Hotel Bristol, after which the young couple would start for their honeymoon on the Riviera. Two days later Erica would return to Vienna, where she was residing for the present. Of Henny Müllenmeister it was to be announced that she was still ailing, and was in a sanatorium on the Lago di Garda. The real fact was that, since Ella's engagement, the sisters had fallen out. Henny had been beside herself, and had quite seriously demanded that Erica should interpose her maternal authority against such a "disgraceful farce." But Erica saw too clearly the advantages of a marriage which "saved them all" to yield to her sister's jealous exactions.

"It's *his* doing," she said, meaning Van Hoolten senior. "I see his hand all through. He's a gentleman to his finger tips; and it's a sign to me that he still loves me passionately;" whereat Henny disdainfully shrugged. "She's envious, actually envious," thought Erica. Thenceforth their intercourse was limited to the barest daily needs, till Erica left for Vienna.

Joshua was glad when the wedding was over. His own affairs had been raked up again, and the less people knew, the more gaily and luxuriantly did wild conjecture flourish. For the rest, so many fresh annoyances immediately ensued that he had scarcely time to worry his head about gossip and slander.

When Klebel saw that the game was up, she did not mince matters. In Joshua's presence, she retailed at great length and with cynical satisfaction, how young Schiller's first peculations had been for the sake of his sweetheart, Herr Müllenmeister's niece. Fräulein Ella von Reeren had probably worn the "ball dress he gave her" more than once under Herr Müllenmeister's own eyes. . . A charming, sweet young lady, a little haughty and reserved on first acquaintance, but, later, very grate-

ful. . . She had often been at the house with young Schiller; they had only to confront Klebel with the young lady if they did not believe her.

Joshua did believe her. Nothing surprised him, after the experiences he had had in his own house and in connection with his sister-in-law; yet he was much distressed by this disclosure. Possibly the silly, vain, pleasure-loving young fellow would have come to grief anyhow; but that did not obliterate the lamentable fact that he had been directly driven to his first step on the path of crime by a near relation of the house of Müllenmeister. . . The villa at Halensee, where the drama of his second marriage had been played out, became detestable to him. At every turn he was reminded of Henny—and reminded thereby of the whole succession of unpleasant incidents, some of them afflicting and sinister, all depressing, which were connected with the two beautiful sisters. When one day a chance presented itself of selling the villa, he instantly seized it. He himself wanted to live, with Mimi, somewhat nearer to the new shop, and Friedrich and Agnes must look out for themselves.

"As you've waited so long, you can wait a few weeks longer," he remarked to the couple, and neither had anything to say. The preliminaries for the imminent opening of the Elmas house were absorbing momentarily all the men's energies, so that in any case it would have seemed wise to postpone the wedding till after that event.

In society, people were already beginning to whisper. . . These everlasting postponements were no good omen, they said. But those directly concerned heard nothing of the gossip, and if they had, it would hardly have altered their plans.

Agnes was now living out at the villa, and Friedrich had found temporary quarters near the new shop. As

both he and Joshua divided their time between the Alexander-platz and Elmas, and as all their daylight hours were full, it would have been quite impossible to go out in the forenoons to Halensee; and both men often worked on till midnight. Frequently Friedrich did not get out to Halensee at all during the week; and intercourse between the fiancés was usually limited to a brief talk over the telephone in the daytime. They asked after one another, exchanged a sentence or two, told of this or that incident, and—rang off.

After such an interview, Friedrich was wont to hang up the receiver with a peculiar feeling of emptiness in his head and heart.

"What will be the end of it?" would jingle in his ear. And over the hundred interests, labours, and occurrences of the day, that eerie question would flicker like a threatening search-light: "What is to become of us two, Agnes? What will the future bring us?"

CHAPTER XXXI

The telephone summoned Fräulein Marie Meier to Herr Feldbergen's office. Mieze was amazed; and on the faces of the others who heard the call, astonishment was painted, varied, according to the degree of liking for "the Meier," by dismay, curiosity, and the love of sensation. A call to the staff-director's office in the middle of the day! It might mean anything, but scarcely anything good.

Mieze now had not a real enemy in the shop. Her sunny charm and unfailing sweet temper had gradually conquered even her most obstinate opponents, and in the blouse department they had learnt to prize their merry, kind-hearted, and incorruptibly "fair" superintendent, and to dread the project of a change.

"Fräulein Meier. . . What *can* be the matter?"

She shrugged. "Don't know; perhaps I am to be prepared for my pensioning-off! Well, children, don't cry! The destiny of the fowl is the fire, and we poor old hens are shoved into the oven by the youngsters—that's the way of the world. It doesn't matter. Perhaps I may set up a little shop for you all, somewhere, or turn cook! 'Twill all come right, my dears."

She put her cravat straight, smoothed her obstinately wavy hair with her hand, and went, outwardly composed, but inwardly somewhat agitated and expectant, to Feldbergen's office. That it should be *he* who summoned her was assuredly of good omen; for he had always been nice to her from the first, and Karen was extremely fond of the kind old man.

His "Come in" sounded a little nervous. She found him alone.

"Sit down, Fräulein Meier." He indicated a chair opposite the writing-table, leant far back in his own seat, and stroked his beard.

"Well, Fräulein Meier, I sent for you. . . hm. . . I dare say you are wondering why I summoned you here—"

"I thought you were going to warn me of my impending dismissal."

"As a matter of fact, I was. Does it greatly distress you?"

"Yes, Herr Feldbergen, very greatly. My work here represents, so to speak, my dinner. Out of my own few pence, I could manage dry bread in the evenings, and a roll and butter for breakfast; but you know people like a hot meal every now and then, and unless I find something else to do, my dismissal means the end of hot meals."

"You *will* find something else, Fräulein Meier. . . The little girl below always calls you Aunt Mieze, and I think the name suits you, Fräulein Mieze. Well, now, you know, there are other situations—not so exacting as this one, which keeps you on your legs the whole day. You are always merry, and that pleases me—I like a cheerful face. . . Tell me, Fräulein Mieze Meier, you—do you like Madonnas?"

"Do I like *what?* Madonnas?. . . I never was one myself, Herr Feldbergen. Girls who look like Madonnas are usually the slyest of all. Or do you mean the painted ones—like in the Kaiser Friedrich Museum? Some of them are lovely, others a little too sweet for my taste. . ."

"I mean, can you—would you take care of Madonnas?"

Mieze looked at him in amazement. "I don't understand. . ."

"Listen now. . ." Feldbergen folded his hands over his stomach and began. His housekeeper, who had been with him twenty-one years, had inherited forty thousand marks from her uncle, and wished to go home to Altenburg and end her days with her sister, also a legatee. This had been a hard blow for him; he was such a creature of habit, and she had always so tenderly cared for his Madonnas. "My collection, you know. . . Although she couldn't cook—Martha, I mean—(I had to have a cook besides) she was a treasure, I assure you, Fräulein Mieze. I believe I'm still quite upset by the blow of her giving me notice."

"Ha, ha! how do you like 'notice' yourself?" laughed Mieze. "Perhaps if you had married her, Herr Feldbergen?"

"I thought of that once, but she was too nasty tempered—peevish, you know. Her one virtue was her love for the Madonnas. . . Well, Fräulein Mieze. . . I can't help it, but you are now my only hope. Could you not make up your mind—"

"To take care of Madonnas? Why not?" she laughed aloud. "We never know our luck! I should never have dreamed that I'd spend my last days as a Madonna nurse. . . Well, I should like it very much, Herr Feldbergen, provided that the pay is decent, and that I retain a certain degree of independence."

"Ah, but that's just what I don't want. Then *you'd* be going and having a legacy some day."

"Out of the question. Unfortunately I don't possess such a thing as a legacy-leaving uncle."

"Or you might want to marry—"

"Equally out of the question. My years protect me. I am forty-one. Who would want an old thing like me?"

"I do, Fräulein Mieze. I want to engage you for your lifetime. I want to marry you, provided that you

don't dislike me. As for myself, I love you as a man of sixty-one may love a charming and sweet-natured woman like you. I don't say I'll hang myself if you refuse me, but it will take all joy from my life for a long time. You know what I can offer you in other respects, but I am sure that would not weigh with you if I were personally unsympathetic. Therefore I do not speak of it. Well—what do you say?"

Mieze looked down. This turn of affairs was most astonishing; she would have thought of anything sooner than that Feldbergen should want to marry her. Her white, exquisitely manicured hands [illegible] nervously over her black woollen apron. . . Then she looked up, and straight into the kind grey eyes of the old man. The agitation of the moment had heightened his always fresh colour—he looked really handsome and youthful, and Mieze was, to her own surprise, aware of a stirring of warm emotion. He had estimated her rightly. Not for millions would she have sold her liberty and her person to a man who was unsympathetic to her, but this kindly sexagenarian might have succeeded with her even if he had been poor and a mere employee of the house.

"I like it all, Herr Feldbergen," she said slowly. "And I like *you*, just as you are, quite apart from your financial circumstances. But you see. . . I have only loved one man really in all my life, as one loves when one is young, and he was a poor painter with a sick wife and a little child. The wife died, and the man died, too, and only the child was my own, and has remained so. And the child is—"

"Little Karen? I know quite well, Fräulein Mieze, that in marrying you I marry her. And it would but add to my joy."

"Yes, but then I have another child, also entrusted to me by her dead mother—Fräulein [illegible]'s niece, Irm-

gard Presser. I can't forsake *her,* either, Herr Feldbergen."

"Good. I'll marry her, too!"

"And besides those, there are some others who need me, because in all Berlin they have no real home or anyone to care for and look after them—such as old Ribbeck, Karen's foster-father, and his son, and the writer, Hans Matrei. Why! just think, that consumptive fellow is so unpractical and foolish that when his feet get wet *I* have to remind him to change his stockings. Would you believe that he goes about with his boots actually falling off his feet, unless I happen to notice, and send them in good time to the cobbler? Apart from his writing, he is a most hopelessly silly person."

"Yes—but I can't marry *all* these people, you know," said Feldbergen, laughing.

"I think if you would let me collect my little circle on, say Sundays, and occasionally look after them and mother them a little, we might achieve a compromise. Otherwise I must say no. One has one's duties."

Feldbergen got up; so did Mieze.

"Mieze, you're a splendid fellow!" said he, catching her hands. "Do you know what I'm regretting? That we didn't meet and marry twenty years ago, or ten—why! if I hadn't been an old donkey I'd have asked you to marry me at first sight two years back. For I loved you even then. So, for goodness' sake, do what you like, so long as you don't neglect my Madonnas and me amongst them all. . . Then you are dismissed from here on the first of March."

"And I begin my new engagement on the first of April?"

"I wish to God I could manage it sooner, Mieze."

Just at the moment when Feldbergen kissed his pretty, youthful-looking fiancée for the first time, Friedrich knocked hastily and came in.

"No, no—come along! Your old uncle isn't making a fool of himself," cried the happy man. "I have just got engaged to Fräulein Meier. You may congratulate us."

Friedrich's first embarrassment changed to delighted sympathy. "It's the cleverest thing you've ever done, Uncle Feldbergen. My heartiest good wishes to you both. I don't know anything that could have given me a pleasanter surprise." He shook hands with each. "And what will Fräulein Karen say to this?"

"She is my little daughter now. She will come to us."

"Then we shall lose her. I wanted to take her with me to the new house."

"I don't think we really ought to take her away from her beloved old things," said Mieze. "Why should we? As she enjoys her work, she shall stick to it. Anything one does with love makes life happier—doesn't it? And she's already looking forward so eagerly to 'Elmas.' "

"Really? Is she really?"

"Indeed she is," said Mieze, a little astonished at the almost joyful cry. "But now, gentlemen, I must return to my post."

"Till later, then, Mieze—*auf Wiedersehen!*"

"*Wiedersehen,* Fräulein Meier."

On her way to the blouse department, Mieze suddenly stopped short. In her happy mood, she was tempted by a roguish impulse. The girls should not hear it all at once! She still kept a little trace of the "quick-change" artist. In a moment, her beaming and joyful face was drawn into a mournful guise; two deep, melancholy lines dragged downwards from her nose, her bright eyes clouded, and a doleful shadow was suggested round her laughing lips. They all rushed to meet her.

"Fräulein Meier, how you look! What happened?"

Mieze put her handkerchief to her eyes and began to sob. "I am dismissed on the first of March."

There was a tempest of indignation.

"But you mustn't let them! A fortnight's notice! Unheard of!"

"I *must* let them. . ."

"But what is it? We always get a month's notice."

"Yes, yes; but I don't want to stay here any longer," Mieze loudly whined.

Perplexed and rather shocked, the girls stood around her. Then she let her hands fall from her face—the agitated, miserable expression dropped like a mask, and under it appeared such a radiant look that the girls were literally speechless with surprise.

"You've been pulling our legs, Fräulein Meier," said a little saucy girl.

"Well, what do you mean by pulling your legs? I *am* dismissed. But I tell you, even a blind old hen can find *some* corn. So don't despair, my dears!"

"An extraordinary Elmas meeting, Uncle Feldbergen! Father has just telegraphed from Van Hoolten's. Shall we drive there together now?"

"This very moment?"

"Yes, this very moment. And it can scarcely be about anything pleasant. In your newly engaged state, you're not in the mood for an Elmas dispute, eh? I can't blame you!"

"Nothing of the sort! Business first, and pleasure afterwards, boy!"

"Well, I must say I congratulate you enormously on your decision, and your choice. The Meier is a capital person."

"She is much more than a capital person, my boy; she is a rare, noble person, a woman who is a standing proof of the decadence of contemporary manhood!

How is it possible that hundreds of little geese and donkeys should have got married over her head, and that nobody thought of securing that dear, sweet creature? The idea of her coming to the age of forty-one!"

"Yes, yes, men do make mistakes;" and Friedrich sighed. "*You* should rejoice in their decadence, though!"

"So I do, my boy, not a little. I am simply blissful. We're to be married in the beginning of April, so I'm stealing a march on you."

"You've waited long enough. *I'm* delighted chiefly on Karen's account. I'm really absurdly fond of that child."

"Yes; she's a dear good girl. . . *Allons!*"

Feldbergen had been a member of the Elmas committee for a fortnight, Breuer having given up his seat in the council at the beginning of February. Rosen, directly after his departure, had signed on as director of the new "Berolina" scheme, so Joshua's conjectures and apprehensions had been quickly justified.

Breuer had without delay set about getting rid of his Elmas shares. For some days now there had been a vigorous offer of Elmas paper on the Bourse, and the price had of course rapidly fallen. From a hundred and forty the shares were quoted at a hundred and twenty-eight, and to-day, in consequence probably of a defamatory article in the form of a pamphlet which was loudly hawked about the Friedrich- and Leipziger-strasse, it had further rushed down to the extent of five per cent.

This was the reason for the extraordinary committee meeting. The attacks were undoubtedly not the usual sensational lies of penny-a-liners, speculating on a scandal-loving public's coppers; they proclaimed themselves plainly to be an adroitly planned scheme for

undermining the great new undertaking, and Joshua Müllenmeister in particular. The pamphlet opened with the sanctioned laments and attacks on the emporiums, but soon fastened on the recent incidents in the Müllenmeister house, and set itself to "expose" the "Schiller Case". . . A whole family ruined by the Müllenmeister emporium! By the establishment of fringe-making workrooms in the house, such wares had been so reduced in price that the fringemaker Schiller, who had formerly worked for the shop, could no longer earn a living, and was now face to face with ruin. His son had yielded to temptation, and had shot himself in his dread of punishment and disgrace. The daughter, who had been a saleswoman in the same house, was kept by the younger son of the proprietor —a lost woman. "Thus does the evil influence of the emporiums break up your families, consume your sons and daughters like a ravening beast, annihilate your existences, crumble the ground under your feet. . . Defend yourselves! Defy them! Guard your holiest possessions!"

The new gigantic house (it went on) was a gigantic swindle. The monstrous undertaking was condemned by its very dimensions. So fantastic a scheme could not possibly pay; the founders and promoters knew that right well, and had long since feathered their nests. The thing was one vast impudence. Müllenmeister himself had already made many millions out of the scheme by speculations in ground-rents and shiftings of mortgages. The new speculators who had bought shares at par or a little over, had long ago got rid of them by means of an artfully worked rise, so that almost the whole of the sixty millions' worth of shares were now in the hands of private people, for the most part possessed of little capital. When—and it was only a question of time—the whole tottering Colossus should

crash to the ground, these small capitalists, who had bought Elmas shares at a hundred and twenty or thirty, or even higher, thus filling the pockets of the promoters and big speculators, would be the sole sufferers, for Müllenmeister himself was covered by his profits on the sites, and the original shareholders, too, would laugh in their sleeves.

"People, defend yourselves!"

To that point, the pamphlet was in the typical manner of libels; but thenceforward the language was more reasoned, and the writing gradually rose to the level of real ability; any attentive reader would have perceived that another hand held the pen, and that the sensation monger had been thrust aside.

The new author revealed many of the Elmas secrets, described the expanded scope of the business, and made his mocking comments on the "all-sidedness" of the undertaking. For one must term it "all-sidedness"—not merely many-sidedness! In the basement of the Elmas there were to be a motor garage and a carriage-jobbing business; further on, an undertaking department; then a big printing house, whence the weekly Elmas-sheet should issue—to say nothing of the "bureaus," and a huge town kitchen. For Elmas was to make, see to, undertake, "manage" everything—weddings, funerals, festivities of every kind, dinners, suppers, luncheons, balls, children's parties, outings, trips, and "conducted tours". . . No longer need the mistress of a house bother her head with: "What shall I set before my guests? How shall I amuse them? Have I enough silver? Is my house presentable?" Elmas will relieve her of all anxiety. She need only name a price, and punctually at the hour fixed, the Elmas "brownies" will appear upon the scene, decorate the rooms, supplement the furnishing at need with carpets and show pieces, lay the table! The dinner,

sent half-cooked from the town kitchen, will be finished by the Elmas chef, for Elmas will supply trained servants. Elmas will arrange the music and all other entertainments, and at the end of the feast—that very night—the brownies will again arrive, to pack up everything, tidy the rooms, set all in its customary order—so that next morning the mistress will find not the smallest trace of the nightly feast, and "all will be like a beautiful, radiant dream," without any attendant discomforts. . .

The pamphlet then went on to speak of the great luxury in the appointments of the new house, and calculated, with a skill that showed intimate knowledge of the routine of emporiums, that the consequence must be either a heavy deficit, or such cheapness in the wares as would prove purchasers to be in a still fairer dream than the housewife relieved by "Elmas parties." The cost of this monstrous pomp and the enormous salaries of the management—Joshua Müllenmeister, as Head Director, was to get eighty thousand, his son, as "Sub.," forty thousand, marks as yearly salary—*must* be got out of the prices. Ostensibly low prices were always taken out in low quality. . . In this manner did the pamphlet proceed for three closely printed pages; and concluded with the sinister prediction of an impending crash, whose effects would be felt far and wide.

Joshua [illegible] the thing aloud, and laid it on the table before him.

"There would be nothing to say about this, and it certainly would not have been worth while worrying you by an extraordinary meeting, gentlemen," he began, "if I did not believe myself to be correct in surmising that this otherwise harmless expectoration of venom was only the overture to further attacks and hostilities. That even this miserable sensation monger

is able to do us some harm, we have learnt from to-day's drop in prices. If things get worse, a positive fall is *inevitable;* and that would naturally prejudice and embitter the public against us beforehand. We must get ready for a fight, gentlemen, and a fight with, I admit, an adversary by no means negligible. Now, since an opportune indication as to the manner of warfare is always an advantage, I reckon it an agreeable circumstance that this advertisement here—all the morning papers insert it—shows us beforehand what we have to expect, and reveals, no less, the originator of these attacks—if, indeed, we did not already guess at his identity."

He took up a pile of newspapers, and read:

HANDELSTÄTTE BEROLINA

"As we learn from the most authoritative sources, the above firm, which has been registered as a company, will open its doors to the public at the middle or end of April. It is a combination of first-class private businesses, under the management of Herr Julius Rosen, already so widely renowned for his very remarkable business capacities.

"The new undertaking bases itself on the sage recognition that proprietors of private businesses do not serve their own cause by mere laments over the annihilating supremacy of the emporiums, nor even by 'exposures' and similar quixotic methods directed against some recent developments of the system. What they must do is to offer the public equal advantages; and this can only be achieved by the closest co-operation. The 'Berolina' abjures all ostentation; the premises will be simple, hygienic, and adapted to their ends. This line has been followed on the just supposition that the public prizes above all else the quality

and worth of the wares for sale. Reduced expenses for rent, management, and so forth, will enable the owners of the various shops to sell their wares at the same prices as the emporiums and possibly even cheaper."

"That's a blow from the shoulder!" said Joshua. "I know the style. *Now* I see what sort of nuts our friend Rosen is going to give us to crack; and we can make our arrangements in that sense."

"How so? I don't understand you at all." Mendel Mühsam had a cold and was rather hoarse. "What sort of 'nuts,' Müllenmeister?"

"Price cutting! That's the game."

Mendel Mühsam laughed outright, and Markus tittered. "The ass wants to run a race with *us?* It'll tell on his wind!"

"I don't regard it quite so lightly, gentlemen. Remember the fable of the mouse and the lion. We can't live on our o[illegible]at, any more than other people."

"But neith[illegible]n these chaps."

"Who knows?. . . Rosen has his father-in-law Breuer, and probably in case of need, other big capitalists behind him. If he succeeds in inspiring the public with animosity against us, and if we are obliged —all this is supposing the scheme develops into a serious competition, which, with Rosen at the head, I have no doubt it will—to take up the challenge, the 'ass,' as Herr Markus calls him, may give us enough to do."

The others shrugged incredulously. "Nonsense! It's scarcely thinkable."

"You're an old raven, Müllenmeister!" snorted Mühsam. "You've got the shivers; puling about 'danger' and 'animosity' and a lot of other rubbish. . . No offence!"

Van Hoolten broke in. "Hm. . . I think, gentle-

men, we may trust to the flair of our friend Müllenmeister. Pray continue, Müllenmeister. What is your idea?"

"It's all nonsense," cried Mühsam. "They're to slay us with a little cutting of prices! Why, if they sell lettuce at three pfennigs a head, we'll sell it at a halfpenny."

"The fundamental principle of the emporium is the reckoning of pfennigs, my dear Mühsam," said Joshua quietly. "We count every fraction of a pfennig. The Berolina won't *slay* Elmas; but it may manage, by its exertions, to make our accounts look uncommonly queer at the end of our first year, and we must not present our foes with that sort of triumph."

"Then in the devil's name, let's get up our steam! You must know what's best to be done."

"Precisely, Herr Mühsam; we'll signal full steam ahead! I think our first step should be to expedite the opening of Elmas; the Berolina must not steal a march on us, I want your acquiescence in our putting our best foot foremost, and opening the house in the beginning instead of the middle of April, as arranged. . . As to the pamphlet. . ."

"The silence of death! Not a sign!"

"I think so, too. Moreover, several papers have *feuilletons* this evening, anyhow, talking about our arrangements. Are you, then, all agreed in our engaging some hundreds of extra workmen, and opening on the first of April?"

"Why, of course."

Joshua regarded the assemblage. Nobody protested. "I thank you, gentlemen."

"Just one thing more, as we're all here."

"Well, Herr Wewermann?"

"What about the Elmas journal? I heard that the brother of your prospective daughter-in-law was to

undertake the editing. Herr Matrei is said to be a furious opponent of the emporiums. Are you wise in venturing to use him?"

"The Elmas sheet is to serve chiefly as our propaganda; it will have, as principal feature, a bright *feuilleton* in each number, and practical, common-sense articles upon commodities; then there will be supplements pointing out some special attraction of our house. Herr Matrei could scarcely find an opportunity for expressing his views on social questions."

"For that matter, Hans Matrei isn't by any means keen on the editorship; I even think he would be glad if we let him off," remarked Friedrich Müllenmeister.

"I know of a very talented young man, who would willingly co-operate. Perhaps you would let me introduce him to you—Doctor Eric Schimmelmann, a journalist by profession."

"He shall come and see me at his convenience. If it will oblige you, I shall try to make use of him."

Town Councillor Wewermann nodded, well pleased; and after some incidental questions, the meeting broke up.

"That's the worst of a share company; one has to 'oblige' so many people," said Joshua rather vexedly, as he went up the Bellevue-strasse with Feldbergen and Friedrich. "I have made places for at least a dozen protégés and favourites, without having the least idea if they have any qualifications of any sort for their posts."

"But in this case, I think, as I said, that we shall be doing Hans Matrei a kindness by relieving him of the editorship. There's an idealist and eccentric for you! the bread and butter doesn't tempt him in the least. . . By-the-bye, you must congratulate Uncle Feldbergen, Father, he has just got engaged to Fräu-

lein Mieze Meier—our Fräulein Meier of the blouse department."

"Feldbergen—is it true?"

"Quite true."

"Then I wish you luck from the bottom of my heart, man! I believe you've got hold of a right good thing." Joshua stopped and shook Feldbergen's hand. "I've always liked the girl. . . Talking of her, reminds me of the unfortunate Schiller family. Schiller is a relative of Ribbeck's. I should like to look the man up, particularly after the abominable statement in that lying pamphlet. And yet—Hermann. . . but one really should not allow oneself to believe it."

"You may believe part of it, anyhow, Joshua. I saw him one evening this autumn in a saloon with the girl—she was dressed up to her eyes. But she was bound to go wrong—she's the born kept-woman."

"So she may be; but Hermann must keep his hands off her. After the business with the brother, it would be a monstrous thing. . . Old Schiller lately applied for a place in Elmas. Of course we couldn't consider it for a moment. I'm sorry for him; but after all, Elmas isn't a beneficent institute—nor an invalid's home, either! He's forty-nine."

"We must do something for him," Friedrich put in.

"Certainly; and I have an idea already. I'll just drive there now." He looked at his watch. "I have half an hour to spare." He hailed an automobile, and jumped in.

CHAPTER XXXII

The Schillers lived in a corner house on the Wallner-theater-strasse, three flights up.

Frau Schiller, a thin little woman with a meagre, shrivelled face, opened the door, and showed Joshua into the living-room; then she went to summon her husband.

Joshua looked about the longish, two-windowed room, which said many things to a keen observer. Amid the angular walnut furniture, in the middle-class fashion of twenty years ago, the modern pictures, which were mostly reproductions of very recent works of art, looked violently out of place. Above the much-carved, plush-covered sofa hung Böcklin's "Toteninsel" in a tasteless frame. On the shelves stood marble busts, majolica vases, and imitations of the Copenhagen animal pottery. A new and gaudy Axminster carpet covered the floor, and on a little table in the window was a great bunch of lilies-of-the-valley. On a hook behind the door hung a fashionable black chiffon gown with rich jet trimming.

After about five minutes, Schiller appeared. He had hastily tidied himself and put on a black coat. The events of the autumn had left visible traces. His beard had turned grey, and was not so carefully kept as of yore. It was evident that grief and anxiety had lain heavy on him; his old dignity had gone, and he seemed to have lost all fancy for boasting.

"You applied for a post in Elmas, Herr Schiller," said Joshua, after the greetings. "Unfortunately we

were obliged to refuse. Your business is somewhat depressed?"

"Alas, yes, Herr Müllenmeister. You know, what with the altered conditions, and the cheap prices at the emporiums—"

"We can afford, by reason of our modern, practical contrivances, and our advantageous arrangements for getting cheap yet excellent raw material, to make and sell the goods for less than you could."

Schiller shrugged. "Nor can I blame you; but we small people, who cannot afford those contrivances, and have not the capital to pay down for enormous consignments of raw material. . . Well, we simply can't compete. We're 'run over,' as my cousin Ribbeck says."

"But my old friend Ribbeck has made his peace with the spirit of the time, and finds himself very well off with us, so far as I know."

"Of course, of course, and so I always told him. Anyone that doesn't see it is a fool; and that's why I applied for some sort of a place in your new house."

"We must see to it in the new house that we have young hands, Herr Schiller—hands that will remain with us for a reasonable length of time; moreover, in almost every position there will be great demands on the capabilities of those employed."

"And ever since *then*—you know what I mean—I've been going head over ears to my death. I only hang together by my bones." He sighed heavily. "Ah, it was too terrible. I and my wife—we can't get over it. Our Felix—our handsome clever boy! My favourite son. . . And how he loved his work! I assure you when he happened to stay at home of an evening, or on Sundays, he'd talk of nothing but the shop; and Herr Rosen himself said to me: 'You'll be

proud of your son some day, Herr Schiller; he's a clever salesman—the youngest in the department, and always with the best premiums. . .' Everyone was in love with the young rascal—even as a boy. . . He was our one hope, Herr Müllenmeister. And they brought him home to me like *that*. . . How did I ever survive it!. . . But when I got calmer, I said to myself, 'The boy did the best thing he could,' Herr Müllenmeister. Better death than disgrace. He was led astray, all the people say so; not a soul condemns him, and *you* don't either, Herr Müllenmeister, or you wouldn't have come to the funeral. That did us good, and comforted us, me and my wife: it was a rehabilitation for us. . . Yes, yes—in those days we grew, my wife and I, fifteen years older."

"It was a heavy blow for you. One must only regard such things as Fate, a *force majeure,* something predestined—otherwise one could never get over them. . . And your little daughter?"

"Thank you; it goes well with her." Schiller got a little confused. "You perhaps know, through your son, that Trude is going on the stage. He was so good as to interest himself in that. She has a remarkable gift. The director is going very soon to give her a trial as a *diseuse.* Later she will go to a legitimate theatre."

"Hm. . . Have you thoroughly ascertained that your daughter is in good hands with this teacher?"

"Yes—at least we don't know very much about it, Herr Müllenmeister, and so I am all the more grateful to your son for seeing to it and recommending a teacher. You know that Herr Hermann became great friends with my son Johannes, during their period of military service. That is why he has indirectly taken a little interest in our Trudchen."

"Only indirectly? Listen, my dear Herr Schiller!

The indirect interest of a young man in a pretty girl like your daughter seems to me somewhat problematical, to be quite frank. If I were in your place, I should be afraid that the indirect interest might develop into a very direct love-affair."

Ignaz Schiller drew himself up. He felt inclined to say that his Trude was as good as the "Princess Agnes" any day, and that Herr Hermann really loved her beyond anything. But perhaps it was better to be silent about that. "My Trude," he said, "is a proud girl, and needs no supervision. She knows very well what she owes to herself, Herr Müllenmeister."

"So much the better. But I should advise you to make personal enquiries about her teacher, and in any case to take the thing into your own hands. Have her tried by some well-known actor, who will soon tell you if she really has any remarkable talent. An *un*remarkable one is a misfortune for any girl. My son Hermann is very young; I greatly doubt that he is the best patron for your daughter."

Joshua paused. He had done his duty, and warned the father. Hermann, too, he meant to speak with; he could do no more, since he knew nothing positive about his son's relations with the red-haired little cat.

Then he went straight to the reason for his visit. In the house on the Alexander-platz the fringe-making workroom must be given up for want of room. "And I thought of you, Herr Schiller. I might assist you to enlarge your business, in return for your undertaking to furnish our consignments for a yearly consideration, employing, say, at least from twenty to twenty-five workmen. We would make a contract pledging ourselves to give you, on certain conditions of delivery and so forth, yearly orders to the extent of a stipulated minimum sum. I should advance you, at four per cent., the cost of an initiatory large consignment of raw

material—in short, you would work under the same conditions as those in which our own workroom has hitherto flourished. I think you should do well, and you will thus preserve your independence; *we* shall not be at a loss, either."

Schiller put his head in his hands. The suggestion was a complete surprise. It was the very fulfilment of his highest ideal: a big business of his own, his "own factory". . . But Müllenmeister need not know that the mere prospect of such a thing almost took his breath away.

"We might talk it over, if the terms are agreeable to me. I confess that I should greatly like it. But you must remember that for the moment I am very hard-pressed, and, as regards ready cash, rather at the end of my tether. I don't mean to convey that I'm wholly at my wits' end. I shall pick up again; only, as I said, my family misfortune has injured me both physically and mentally."

"I have already told you that I will advance the initial expenses. If we work satisfactorily together, there is no reason why you should not have the work for Elmas, too; but of course everything would then be on a still larger scale. Have you a suitable place in your eye? Your present one would hardly be large enough?"

"Probably not". . . Down went Schiller's head again. In imagination he heard his cousin Ribbeck laughing. Of course Ribbeck would put his damper on this joy. He could positively hear him. . . "You wiseacre, you! Müllenmeister wants to remove his fringe-making workrooms; and he removes them. And *you* undertake to be responsible for his new place; *you* obtain the raw material, from *his* chosen source, mind you! and with *his* money; *you* make the things to his order at the price fixed by *him*—and are, look

at it as you please, nothing more than a responsible clerk and manager in Müllenmeister's workroom. But our wily Joshua knows you! You remain the 'Manufacturer Schiller'—by the grace of Müllenmeister!. . ."

"And what if I do?" cried Schiller defiantly, from the midst of his thoughts.

"Then you are not in principle opposed to my suggestion?"

"I agree to it, Herr Müllenmeister."

"Come—let me see, to-day is Thursday; shall we say on Saturday?—to my office. By that time we can have an estimate of the cost made out. How many workwomen are you employing at present?"

"Hm. . . We are very slack just now, and are working with only two assistants." *They* had stayed away since Friday, because their wages were a fortnight in arrears; but there was no necessity for thrusting that under Müllenmeister's nose.

"Then it's settled that you are to come to my office in the Alexander-platz on Saturday morning at eleven." Joshua got up and shook hands. "Will you listen to some good counsel from me, my dear Schiller? Keep your daughter off the stage. Of course she lives with you?"

"She was so continually disturbed in her studies, this is a dreadfully noisy house; so I let her take by the day a quiet little room in the same house with her teacher."

"Fetch her home, and let her help your wife in the house. I have a strong aversion to the stage as a career for young girls. If I had twelve daughters, and they all had divine gifts, not one of them should go on the stage."

"If your daughters had a real vocation for the art, you wouldn't prevent them."

"Stuff and nonsense about 'vocations.' Cooking and

housekeeping are a woman's vocation. . . Good-bye, my dear Schiller. Till Saturday!"

"How obtuse he is!" thought Joshua, as he went downstairs. "But he's pretty well broken-up. At the worst, I must give the girl a talking-to myself."

His automobile was waiting for him outside.

His vexed mood did not last long. He was never happier than when he had done a kindness to somebody, and, despite Ignaz Schiller's desperate attempt to keep cool, he had seen how the proposal had affected the hard-driven man. The idea had come to Joshua in a flash, and it was not bad. The business man must see to it that his house was not at a loss; but at the same time he meant to make sure of Schiller's earning at least the ample salary of a superintendent, and perhaps a good deal more.

Joshua was too good a merchant not to have his own advantage at heart in the concluding of any bargain. The great transfer of sites to the Elmas company, by which (as the libel not incorrectly maintained) he had made millions, caused him not the smallest pang of conscience. The share company had naturally had to pay the price of the sites, as it stood from the day that the project became known. Possibly it was not a very high-minded or lofty way of enriching oneself; but his mercantile instinct saw nothing unfair about it. Side by side with his cool and balanced spirit of business, there still existed in Joshua something of the youthful delight in speculation which had been suppressed only by his iron will. There were two souls in his breast: the steadily progressive, ruthless, and calculating one, which was cheerfully ready to do anything for great business ends, and was moved as much by ambition as by greed of gain—and the gentle, kindly, humane one, that earnestly strove to be unswervingly fair to individuals. The thought that by his undertakings whole

classes and callings might be swept away, deprived of their means of subsistence, rendered incapable of survival—troubled him not at all; but for every individual whom he indirectly harmed he felt the deepest sympathy, and in all single cases he made the most strenuous efforts to neutralise as far as possible the effects of his victory over an unequal opponent.

CHAPTER XXXIII

BERLINERS made many bets as to whether Elmas would be ready for the opening by the dog-days or not. They regarded as a good joke the idea of the First of April, and the fact that invitations for the inaugurative ceremony had already been sent out. March was drawing to an end, and the scaffolding still surrounded the unfinished house; the internal arrangements, too, were very behind-hand. An army of laborers and craftsmen was busy day and night inside the mighty erection. German, American, and French contractors were actively engaged with their staffs of underlings; and endless rows of vans were unloading their contents in the various departments.

But in spite of predictions to the contrary, on the night between the 30th and 31st of March, the scaffoldings were taken down from the façade; and, next morning, the giant shop burst for the first time, in its exultant height, its coloured glory, and its enormous dimensions, on the surrounding streets. It was like a jubilant fanfare, a triumphal chant in stone. There it stood, like a giant conscious of his strength, and through that consciousness enabled to laugh in glee and self-satisfaction at the grey streets and buildings around.

Even the sky advertised Elmas! Into the blue spring heaven, rose the greenish cupolas, the golden minarets, the quaint turrets, the gracefully cut gables; and the sun literally pointed with long golden fingers to the extravagant, fantastic, yet never tawdry, decoration of the house. Sunbeams played dazzlingly on the

brilliant frieze with its gold ground, that spread above the third storey, allegorising and glorifying the victorious march of modern commerce; sunbeams laughed into, and toyed with, the broad surfaces of mosaic, where, on a ground of lapis-lazuli blue, many typical incidents of trade were depicted; sunbeams swept their soft golden sheen across the solid, well-designed mason work that climbed from the basement to the first storey, and wove their gleaming veils in the countless shut eyelids of the giant.

The tall bronze gates were still closed before the portals in their snow-white marble jambs covered with such exquisite chiselling as recalled the delicate patterns of old Italian laces. The monotonous rows of iron blinds spoilt the complete effect of the splendid façade; but on the First of April, sharp on the stroke of noon; the Elmas giant opened his eyes! The ugly blinds slipped into their grooves, and displayed to the dangerously packed crowd before the windows a thousand radiant examples of the wonders within.

The opening of Elmas was a symbol of Spring; May-boughs, branches of young birch, sheaves of white bloom, and April flowers arranged in novel and charming devices, framed every window.

A whole fortunate human existence passed before the gazers at the long display. The corner window simulated a christening. The baby's robe was a masterpiece in old Mechlin lace, the cradle was in carved rosewood with delicate paintings at head and foot, the toilettes of the guests were in the most exquisite taste, the christening vessels, show pieces of the modern goldsmiths' art.

The next window showed the further development of the child. Baby was seen in its dainty nursery, busy with its artistic toys, and surrounded to the last word in luxurious appointments. Then the gazers followed

it through its childhood, saw it play with balls and dolls, or at hoops and tennis; assisted at the dancing lessons, and watched the happy being, in faultless tourist's equipment, accompanying the grown-ups in a mountain-climbing trip. Then came the Confirmation, the first ball, hunting on a tall horse, and, as the end of the first period of youth—a wedding. The bride wore a gown fit for a princess, and her trousseau was of wonderful originality and very evident costliness.

A further series afforded glimpses into the domesticity of the graceful pair. A dinner table, laid for a large party, gave an idea of what Elmas could do in the way of finest porcelain, crystal, napery, and silver: and there were also a fashionably decked tea-table, and a linen cupboard. An automobile is one of the indispensable requisites for a gradiose manner of life—and so Monsieur and Madame were seen stepping into a new white Mercedes car, both in the very smartest motoring kit. Indeed, they seemed to spend the greater part of their life away from home, for a large window was needed to display their expensive, modish, yet thoroughly useful traveling bags and so forth. They were great "sportsmen," too. Madame possessed a yacht, and Monsieur was evidently a good man with a gun. . . But as in even the most sheltered existences the rosy light of happiness sometimes fades, so in these a sad note was struck. Suddenly both were seen in deep mourning, amid a fashionable funeral gathering. But perhaps it was only an aunt with money to leave, or an octogenarian rich uncle who had thus proved the transitory nature of things, and whose legal estate might provide the fortunate legatees with the means to purchase a country place. . . At any rate, one next beheld the couple, now of mature age, breakfasting on the terrace of a stately house, while their offspring amused themselves on swings and various gymnastic

apparatus in the distance. Delightful garden furniture wooed one to repose under flowering cherry trees, unless one preferred an alluring tent.

The second corner window gave, as apotheosis, a golden wedding. Beneath blooming spring foliage sat the good-looking and unchangingly elegant old couple, surrounded by children, grandchildren, great-grandchildren, and friends, all bringing golden gifts.

An endless succession of other windows further illustrated the already advertised great attraction of Elmas: "Complete furnishing at all prices, from five hundred to twenty thousand marks, and higher. From the simplest working-class establishment—including furniture, beds, kitchen requisites, and linen—to the luxurious appurtenances of a member of the Upper Four Hundred."

All the articles, whether they consisted of the plain man's cheap pine wood living-room and kitchen furniture, his thick crockery and coarse linen, or the costly equipment of the millionaire, were chosen with the same comprehension of requirements, the same sterling good taste—indeed, the simple things were more striking in their excellence and cheapness than the others. Nobody could understand how it was possible to offer such good stuff at such a low price.

A formidable posse of police was needed to regulate the traffic near the house, until late in the evening. In the Friedrich and Leipziger-strasse, there was one never-ending block; even in the Mauer and Kronen-strasse huge crowds surged before the windows, every one of which presented an artistically contrasted colour-symphony, a marvellous piece of still life, or a tableau vivant in waxwork.

About seven o'clock, the guests began to arrive for the private view and inaugural ceremony. Two thousand and five hundred invitation cards had barely suf-

ficed for the numerous representatives of Berlin society who happened to be in town, to say nothing of the personal acquaintances of the Müllenmeister family, and the parties brought by the chief shareholders. Many people had hurried home from the Riviera so as not to miss the *première* of the supreme Müllenmeister creation. But these two and a half thousand human beings would have dwindled into nothing amid the broad courts, halls of light, arcades, gardens, galleries, of the complex structure, if there had not been a general meeting-place in the great central court of the building.

Verily the opening of Elmas was a symbol of Spring! The whole house was one blooming garden. Alleys of cherry- and peach-blossom, boskets of almond-trees, alternated in the decoration with flowering lilac and laburnum, rhododendrons, azaleas. From every corner surged the glories of the spring; they climbed up the softly gleaming marble columns, rioted on the gilded balustrades and galleries, spread in broad carpet beds over the floor of the halls and courts; while thousands of blossoms lay, as if poured from a giant's cornucopia, strewn on every table, every stand, and hung in festoons from walls and ceilings, pouring their sweet strong odours all around.

The first impression of the interior was of something gigantic, monstrous, almost overwhelmingly imposing. These pillared aisles, these halls of commerce, were well-nigh alarming in their extreme grandiosity; it seemed scarcely possible that a sufficient number of people to give real vitality to the place could ever traverse such immensity. A crowd was quite unthinkable.

The building was divided into four great wings, each of which had its own dome-shaped opening to the light, which reached through all four storeys. These four wings, which were connected by circular halls, grouped

themselves in their turn round a central court, surpassing all other divisions in immensity, and with a ceiling, in the form of an enormous cupola of plain and coloured glass, which was so beautifully decorated in bronze that it was worth seeing by itself alone. As everywhere in the house, so here, the materials were genuine throughout. The columns, wall decorations, stairs, arches, jambs, together with the galleries of the surrounding storeys, were all in blue-veined marble with discreet inlays of bright-gold bronze. In a colossal basin of the same blue-veined marble, with nymphs and frogs on the rim, played a *fontaine lumineuse,* which cast its changing lights of blue, mauve, pink, and green as far as the second storey. In contrast to the lavish display of colour in most of the halls, and the smiling splendour of the other courts, this one impressed by its majestic calm, the sober breadth of its design, and the delightful unity of its material—that costly, gleaming marble!—but above all by the peculiarity of its total lack of any apparent medium of light. From invisible sources streamed a deep yet wonderfully gentle radiance, which had almost the effect of moonlight on a blue summer night. In the tranquil, proudly secluded splendour of the huge rotunda, where the silence was broken only to seem intensified by the monotonous plashing of the water, the architect had achieved his highest triumph. It was an almost unsurpassable example of the art.

An open staircase, ten yards wide, divided half way up into two parts, and flanked by immense allegorical figures of craftsmanship, industry, trade, and commerce, led to the upper storeys. On the central division stood Joshua Müllenmeister. He had received and welcomed his guests, and was now delivering the inaugural address.

"*Capital*. . . It is a word which acts like the lash

of a whip upon people of no possessions and moderate incomes. And we must calmly and fairly grant that the idea of capital has something brutal about it. Nevertheless it is false to identify it unreflectingly with 'exploitation of the masses,' 'oppression,' 'slave-making,' 'blood-sucking of the poor and labouring classes,'—and all the other big words of abuse. Capital in itself is a thing, a circumstance, an objective conception—call it what you will—which is neither good nor bad. Not the capital is the essential, but the way in which it is used. All associations are only another form of it; indeed, strictly speaking, the boldest democratic dream of the future builds itself on the principle of capital. For in this it is simply that the dreamer desires capital to be, not in the hands of individuals (for that, he thinks, disperses it); but in the possession of the State, as in a reservoir, thus to pour its 'blessed stream' in equal measure over people and land. What is that but the idea of capital in disguise—even though it be somewhat differently conceived? Capital inspired by the modern spirit of tolerance and philanthropy, can produce effects as beneficent as the same thing, poisoned by the spirit of one-sided gain, can produce of destructive.

"The emporium is a product of capital, and a thoroughly progressive and beneficial one. The times when we had to fight against public prejudice of every sort are happily past; and the reasoning members of the middle class have realised the fact that the emporium is one of those phenomena which are shaped and demanded by the spirit of the age. Its right to existence is, though perhaps reluctantly, granted; but our foes work now as then in secret, and overwhelm us with reproaches for errors and inadequacies.

"The tasks which the ELMAS has set itself are known to all; I need not recount them. Elmas wishes

to be socially beneficent in every respect, no less by the utmost exertions in favour of the purchasing public, than by the disclosures of fresh opportunities and fields of activity to industry, and by the creation of new conditions for home workers. But above all, we are resolved that never shall ELMAS lie under the sanctioned imputation of working our employees to death, and driving our saleswomen into the arms of vice by paying them insufficient wages. The smallest salary of our saleswomen amounts to ninety marks a month. Two hundred and eighty small rooms, with three hundred and fifty beds among them all, are at the disposal of such as have no parents, and no home in Berlin. Young girls will, in the part of the house which is especially reserved for them, have lodging and full board for from forty-five to fifty marks a month. A common reading and assembly room offers them an agreeable refuge in the evenings—in short, as employees of Elmas, they are deprived of none of the comforts of home. This ought to solve the problem of the female staff satisfactorily enough.

"In the name of the ELMAS company I now thank our architects and artists for the brilliant—I may say, as *you* will, after you have inspected the house—the dazzling success of their very complex undertaking.

"On the first page of visitors' books an old custom inscribes the beautiful words 'With God—with the Good.' That old phrase I should like to lay as a christening text in the cradle of our new house. 'With Good Will, with earnest untiring endeavour always to bring the Best out of the Good, do our doors open, to nobody's harm, to everybody's joy, to the bliss of many.' So shall we attain our lofty aim. . . I declare the House of 'Emporiums, Limited, Müllenmeister and Sons' to be open."

Some time since, servants had noiselessly brought

champagne and now all drank to the health and prosperity of ELMAS.

Then the company, conducted by an official of the firm of Markus and Hennigs, began the round of the building. Admiration flowed almost unceasingly during the tour, which lasted close on two hours; but the unstinted recognition of the tasteful, now discreet, now boldly grandiose furnishing and arrangements was continually drowned in amazement and well-nigh awed taciturnity before the vast dimensions of the departments. Special enthusiasm was awakened by the charm and privacy of the salons for model gowns and hair-dressing, the wonderful jewellers' and goldsmiths' displays, the attractive lounges, the lingerie and linen departments, furnished in rosy peach-blossom chintz, and above all by the music-room and concert hall, fitted in pale-brown walnut with delicately tinted lilac hangings. Between the two tall pointed windows behind the platform there stretched a moderately broad, as still undecorated wall-surface. The guide explained that there was to be a Gobelin tapestry there, made in Beauvais, and designed by Herr Cornelius Arfst.

"I am immortalised thereon," said Agnes, loud enough for those around, and above all Mimi Müllenmeister, who was close beside her, to hear. "While I was still in the antique department at the Alexander-platz, Herr Arfst was always coming and drawing me—as Saint Cecilia. I haven't seen it yet, and am desperately excited."

Agnes was not at all happy, nor had she for a long time looked so tired or felt so feverishly nervous and irritable as to-night. Her admirable taste, too, had deserted her in the choice of her gown for the inauguration—the turquoise-blue silk did not suit her at all. Its greenish hue displayed arrestingly the deadly pallor of her face, and made her look horribly ill. She was wearing

her new jewels for the first time. They did not become her, either, and she wore them very self-consciously, as if all eyes must be fixed on them, though amid the wondrous *parures* of the other women they did not in any way stand out. Friedrich smiled a little when he saw her nervously put her hand over the necklace on catching his kindly, admiring glance.

It was with difficulty that she concealed her ill-temper. Bielefeldt and Tük had been asked at her request, and Bielefeldt, after a profound bow, had behaved as if she did not exist for him, sticking fast to Tük's elbow, and scarcely glancing in her direction. That was how it had been for weeks; whenever he could, he avoided her. It was almost impossible to come across him—still less speak with him alone. And the unwilling austerity to which she thus saw her passion condemned, urged it almost to madness.

For years she had dreamt of this proud hour; it had irradiated many a lonely moment to imagine it in every detail. Now that it was here, the sweetness of her triumph was lost in the vexation and raging jealousy which grew with every day. If Elias, who owed her so much, now ostentatiously turned from her, there could be, in her reading of the case, but one explanation—another woman. But she would show him that she was not going to be played with.

As always, she felt in her explosive mood a lively need to vex somebody, to give her inward rage some slight vent, were it only by means of a sneering remark or wounding allusion. She had long since noticed that Mimi had a great weakness for the young architect, and it gave her a little malicious satisfaction to see a sensitive quiver on the girl's hitherto radiant face.

"He was clean off his head at that time," she whispered to Mimi, with would-be innocent vanity. "I really

couldn't escape him. He would sit there the whole day long."

Mimi turned away, as if she had not heard. Agnes smiled; the shot had gone home. . .

The staff boarding-house was in the fourth storey. The charming arrangement of the rooms evoked universal admiration: bright japanned furniture, gaily-flowered muslin curtains in the windows, the beds as white as blossoms—the whole sparkling in neatness and newness. People read with interest the not very lengthy list of regulations on the door of each room, which included the intimation that each inhabitant must be home at night punctually by eleven o'clock. If anyone intended to stay out longer, she must give notice to the superintendent. Permission was not to be accorded more than four times in the month. A cheerful dining-room, a cosy library full of books, and with conveniences for writing, gave the *pension* the character of a real home, wherein even spoilt young girls might feel happy.

Immense and original, like everything else in the house, was the great restaurant in the central storey. The oblong rooms all surrounded an inner court, which on one side was arranged as a garden; from the two lengthwise ones you looked over handsome golden-bronze balustrades, into a courtyard. Before one side-room there spread the picturesque prospect of the Oriental Bazaar; behind the other, a palm-decked lounge led to the staircase. The broad terrace framing the quadrangle on the inner side was devised so as to be open in the summer. When the glass sides disappeared, visitors would be sitting out-of-doors looking into the rose garden, which was to contain, as a special attraction, a profusion of the rarest and finest roses. When one pictured how, according to the designs, a sea of red, white, and yellow blooms would foam below and breathe their perfume upwards, and how the manifold blossoms

of the climbing varieties would drape the walls and climb to the galleries of the terrace, one could hardly imagine a more delightful place for lunch or tea.

Supper was served in the restaurant. The Elmas "town kitchen" proved its capabilities in an exquisite menu, and the loaded buffet presented an "advanced cookery exhibition" in itself.

The manifold and overpowering impressions afforded by the round of the house had somewhat wearied the guests, but they recovered during the meal. The wine restored gaiety; people began to exchange opinions on what they had seen, now in a strain of overflowing enthusiasm, now with a little mild criticism; speeches and toasts were soon the order of the day. Mendel Mühsam loudly sang the praises of the Elmas kitchen. He himself had composed a special Elmas pie which was to be sold at thirty pfennige the piece. He regarded this as a social benefaction, and in his graceful phraseology expressed himself thus upon the subject. "It's all rot, giving the people caviare. But giving 'em pies—that's another pair of shoes. I don't mean the pig-wash that has hitherto been offered as pie, but a good clean decently flavoured thing. For thirty pfennige, you see, any poor devil can have a bit of pie for supper."

At some tables there was a little whispered gossip. . . Fräulein Matrei looked really dreadfully ill. Oh, she came of a consumptive family, did she? What a pity! Certainly the niece had a sort of transparent, transcendental look, and the brother's lungs must be seriously attacked, to judge by his appearance. . . Poor young Müllenmeister! it was a most romantic affair on his side. And old Feldbergen was following his nephew's example, and taking a wife out of the shop. . . Most of the ladies had known Mieze Meier in the days of her own shop, and nobody grudged her the excellent match she was making. At the same time it was re-

marked that in her grey Liberty dress she looked rather old and much thinner than usual. But the pretty young girl beside her excited universal interest by the remarkable charm of her appearance. "Who was she?" and they learnt that she was Fräulein Meier's adopted daughter, and an employee at Müllenmeister's. . .

The talk was growing more and more animated; and now one of the committee proposed the toast of "the Müllenmeister family."

"Do you feel ill, Agnes?" asked Friedrich, as during the clinking of glasses she suddenly put her left hand to her back with a slight groan. How plainly it recalled to him the first time he had seen her, and been struck by the gesture which so evidently was the outcome of sharp physical pain!

She answered almost impatiently. "I can't do so much walking. I'm tired, and have a little pain in my back."

He looked solicitously into her restless, gleaming eyes, but said nothing, for just then Karen, glass in hand, came to the table.

"I want to wish you luck, all to myself, Herr Müllenmeister," she said softly, her clear voice trembling a little. "May it go right well with you here, and may you be very, very happy!"

"Only my fiancé?" asked Agnes sneeringly. "Do you wish *me* no luck, Fräulein Karen?"

"You *have* your luck, Fräulein Matrei," said Karen, looking straight at Agnes. "The best one can wish you is that you may keep it."

Agnes was very angry. "Do you know that you are rather impertinent, little girl? You consider my fiancé less fortunate than I, then?"

"Thank you, Fräulein Karen," said Friedrich warmly, ignoring Agnes. "I know what you mean. Truly I may need sweet good wishes. . ."

The glasses clinked, and Karen encountered the peculiarly gentle and radiant gaze of the beautiful blue eyes. Suddenly—as often before when Friedrich looked at her—a rosy flush overswept her face, and almost hastily she turned away.

"The child is getting cheeky; she's lost her head, I suppose. Moreover, she seems to be violently in love with you," said Agnes with a curt laugh.

"Most extraordinary how you always explain everything by 'being in love'!" cried Mimi excitedly. "Nobody can look at you, or clink glasses with Friedrich, without being 'in love,' according to your diagnosis." She breathed quickly; her bitterness had broken out against her will. But she had not been able to control herself. She had come in such a joyfully stirred mood; the inaugurative ceremony, the tour of inspection, the general amazed, almost reverent, admiration had filled her with such pride. . . Pride in her father, in the name she bore, in the great building that was to be under their rule—and, not least, pride in the creator of this splendour, this "great thought" in stone, wood, and bronze. She had felt in him and with him, all the joy of the long-awaited recognition and triumph; and now this pure abounding gladness was smirched by Agnes's malicious talk. She resolved to forget it, but she caught herself looking somewhat mistrustfully at Cornelius Arfst, and when she saw that he was gazing at Agnes with that alarming intensity of his, all her pleasure in the evening disappeared.

Agnes nodded mockingly in answer to her last remark. "I have eyes in my head, child—that's all. May you long preserve your happy innocence!" she sighed. . . "I wish we could get up, Friedrich. I really feel quite bad."

"If it was only feeling!" thought Mimi, beside herself. All at once she knew that the odd instinctive dis-

like she had had for Agnes from the first, had grown into a rooted hatred. "She *is* bad," sighed Mimi. "God protect us. . ."

Agnes rose from table; and although the elderly Müllenmeister cousin was doing hostess, people took the marked action of the fiancée, so soon to be the presiding Müllenmeister lady, as a sign that they were free to rise also, and there was a general pushing back of chairs.

Coffee was served in the winter garden, where a Hungarian band, under a renowned Tzigane was playing. As the guests went down the broad staircase in couples and little groups, Agnes stood waiting until Tük and Bielefeldt—almost the last to arrive—came strolling by.

She made one step to Bielefeldt's side. "I must speak to you, Elias," she panted, taking no notice of Tük. "Come." And as he hesitated: "I *will* speak to you."

Bielefeldt still hung back, plainly much distressed. Then, as if jokingly, she took his arm and drew him along with her. "I want to show our Herr Bielefeldt something—I won't be a minute," she called to Friedrich. He nodded absently. No one but Tük and Cornelius Arfst paid any further attention to the pair.

She led Bielefeldt, still involuntarily holding back, to the millinery department—a round room, divided into many separate "trying-on" cubicles; and they were soon almost lost to sight amid the palms, mirrors, sofas, and tables that stood irregularly about.

"Why do you cut me?" asked Agnes imperiously, but with a passionately pleading undertone in her voice. "Is that your thanks for all I have done?. . . Why don't you answer my letters? I am to be thrust aside now; the slave has done her duty, the slave can go. . . For God's sake speak, man!"

"You don't give me a chance. You must be out of your senses, Agnes, here, amid the guests. . ."

"And how else am I to get hold of you? Can I ever?"

"No—because it is folly, and I'll no longer take part in it. Because I'm utterly ashamed; because it's an unparalleled indecency—you, an engaged girl, and engaged to *whom!* It's a scandal, and if you don't mind, I do. It's simply impossible, and I won't go on with it. While your fiancé was away, there was some excuse for it—"

"That's what you say now," panted the girl; "and after what I've done for you—"

"Ah, shut up; you're always at that. *I* never wanted to take anything from you. You carried the money about after me; you forced it on me—yes, *forced;* I only took it to be free of you, to escape an hysterical scene, and even then only as a loan. You can have it back at once, if that's all. . ."

Agnes gasped as if she were choking; her voice failed her; she had to make two attempts before she could speak. "Oh, Elias—then you don't love me any more?"

"No, Agnes—it must out."

She uttered a cry. "You never loved me at all?"

"I don't know. Perhaps at first, before you began to go about with young Müllenmeister. After that, I never rightly knew how I felt about you; but now it's all over. I want to remain a decent chap, and this business is simply base and detestable. I should deserve horsewhipping if I didn't give it up."

"You never ask what will become of *me*—"

"Oh, I don't think you have much to complain of in your fate, Agnes. Come, be reasonable. Think what you're risking. You're compromising yourself and the whole Müllenmeister family, and me into the bargain."

Bending back her arms, Agnes pressed both hands so hard against her back that they alone seemed to keep

her from complete collapse. Her eyes were like two dark, lowering holes in her deathly face.

"There's another woman!" she murmured between her teeth. "But wait! I'll tear you apart; I'll throw vitriol in her face, I'll scratch her eyes out—I'll—"

"You're mad, girl; there's no other woman. I've had enough of women to last me some time, I can assure you. I've something else to think of besides love-making; and I never was a petticoat-lover. I tell you, you're crazy. What will people think—what will Tük think? Why, I never knew of such indecency. At such a time, under the same roof as your fiancé, and—what's the matter with you?"

Agnes was clutching convulsively at the lace on her bodice, her bosom rose and fell in great gasping breaths, she was visibly fighting against an attack of faintness. . . The long pin of her diamond brooch tore her finger and made it bleed, and with a cry of angry pain she dragged it out and flung it on the ground.

"I can't. . . I won't. . . You're only lying, you do love me still. . ." Her voice broke, and only inarticulate sounds would come. Screaming with the effort of suppressing her sobs, she literally threw herself on the man who stood before her, flung her arms round his neck, and buried her teeth in his cheek as if she wished to fasten on him thus forever. Her slender body was shaken through and through by loud and lamentable weeping.

"Come, Agnes, do, *do* be sensible." Bielefeldt's voice took a gentler tone, for in truth he was sorry for her. "God knows it's chiefly for your sake, after all. Come, before people miss us and look for us. We'll talk of it all another time. I didn't mean to hurt you; I was only vexed at your incautiousness. . . Come, come, be quiet; you're quite ill, my poor little girl. . ."

He broke off, and almost brutally detached the throt-

tling arms, flinging the girl down on a sofa that stood near. Upon the broad central passage there fell a tall shadow; and directly afterwards Cornelius Arfst emerged. He had strolled slowly after them.

Agnes sprang up. The fear of being overheard sobered her at once. Without thinking, she went, followed by Bielefeldt, close behind the architect in the direction of the palm-garden. Cornelius Arfst once half looked back, but his eyes glanced as calmly past Agnes and her companion as if he had been looking into empty space.

About five minutes later, when these three had disappeared behind the glass walls of the winter garden, Herr Tük came the same way. He had been urged by curiosity to discover where the lovers were, and how far "the Matrei girl" would go in her passion. This rendezvous was a strong measure; and Herr Tük had not yet finished with his grudge against her for the disappointment she had once caused him. In passing, he perceived the brooch, which Agnes had forgotten to pick up, lying on the ground. He started, smiled malignly, picked up the jewel, examined it attentively, and put it in his pocket. His red-veined face shone with inward exultation.

". . . Oh ho! my pretty lady; when one withdraws for a little love idyll, one should not select a room with so many mirrors as the scene, nor should one lose diamonds. . ."

The Hungarian string music was ringing through the garden. Cornelius Arfst came behind Mimi's chair. "Are you tired, my dear lady?"

"I? Oh, no. Why do you ask? Do I look very worn out?"

"Not at all; but I want to ask you to walk about with

me a little. We shall never again have so much room in Elmas!"

Mimi stood up. "I shall like to come very much, Herr Arfst."

Through the wide-open door of the winter garden they stepped into the broad corridor, where a few couples were strolling.

"Has anything disagreeable happened to you?" asked Mimi.

"To me personally? No; or rather, I suppose—yes. . . Do you know that I have just in imagination passed sentence of death?"

"Really? One might almost have guessed it by looking at you. You have on a dreadfully sombre expression. That was what made me ask just now. Who is the unhappy person? or if, as I suspect, it has to do with a *thing,* the condemned object?"

He hesitated a moment. . . Mimi obediently followed his movement in turning to the right and entering the corridor at the end of which the vast hall of the linen department opened. This white place, in its solitude and the dazzling brilliancy of the thousands of lights which projected in rows and garlands from the mahogany panelled walls, had an almost eerie effect, which again was neutralised by the profusion of rose-coloured hangings, designed for the better display of the shimmering goods.

"Well—on what have you passed sentence of death?"

"On your future. . . on Fräulein Matrei. . ."

"On my prospective sister-in-law!" Mimi tried to laugh. "But you must tell that to my brother, not to me. What terrible crime has the poor thing committed? She was just rejoicing in her immortalisation as Saint Cecilia in the concert hall."

"Precisely. And from here I shall go to my studio and carry out the sentence—in effigy. Yes; I shall take

a sword (only a few days ago I bought a splendid old Damascus blade at a curiosity shop) and slash Saint Cecilia from head to foot. And then I shall look for a new model. The concert hall will have to do without a Gobelin tapestry for a few weeks longer. Luckily the design was not to be sent to Beauvais till next week."

"Yes—but do tell me why. What *has* my sister-in-law done? What does it mean? What suddenly puts such a perversely destructive idea into your head, Herr Arfst?"

The architect shrugged. "It came over me, all of a sudden, as they say."

Mimi really laughed now; her heart was very light, all in a minute. "What a terrible person you are! Poor Agnes! You won't easily find a more beautiful Saint Cecilia."

His face darkened again.

"Don't let us talk of it. Fräulein Müllenmeister. . . What is your real Christian name?"

"Wilhelmine. An ugly name! I'm called Mimi, as you've often heard."

"Then Fräulein Mimi. . . Let me say it this once; Fräulein Müllenmeister sounds so stiff. . . Look around you. Do you think the person who conceived this building has a future before him?"

"Can you ask? *What* a future!"

"Do you think that that person has the right to aspire to the daughter of a proud house, and ask her to be his wife?"

"Again, can you ask? Why, if she were a princess. . ." She turned crimson at his pleading look.

"But that's not all. To the music of your sweet voice I have built myself a house—a beautiful, stately house with a shining, rosy gable. Somewhere among the pines of Grünewald shall it stand. When I have earned

enough to bring a portionless maiden home. . . What troubles you?"

"Nothing," said Mimi almost inaudibly, and the colour slowly left her cheek.

"I will have only a portionless maiden—even if she happens to be the daughter of a rich man. And so I must first deserve my wife, and perhaps it will take a long time, but I should work more joyfully if I were sure that she would be mine some day. . And so, Fräulein Mimi. . . Will you . I love you very dearly—"

"Me!. . . I—My God!"

"We should perhaps have long to wait. Could you do that, Mimi? *Dear* Mimi? . ."

He kissed her hands, for she had nodded "Yes."

CHAPTER XXXIV

FOUR weeks had gone since the great new house had opened its doors to customers. On the whole, its success could so far be described as satisfactory. The ready-made trousseaux had had a great crowd of admirers and purchasers, and the sales had reached a much higher figure than had been so soon anticipated. But at present the novelty of the vast undertaking was a general "draw," so that the extraordinary traffic of these early weeks was no sort of guarantee for the later frequentation of the shop.

Nevertheless, Joshua was satisfied. Once more his calculations were thoroughly justifying themselves. The new methods of arranging for all sorts of festive gatherings had met with undreamed-of approval from the pub-l Even in this relatively dead season, that part of t ouse was kept in such activity that they could safely r on needing a tripled staff in the height of the soci ound.

Two special exhibitions in different departments of the shop were always to be kept going, so that the interest of Berlin should remain fixed on Elmas—and this because such twin exhibitions were to be as diametrically opposed to one another as might be, thus exercising an attraction on the most widely separated circles. For the moment, a show of Renaissance art was alluring the æsthetic and the connoisseurs; while one of "patent novelties" in household utensils drew h ves and those interested in the practical worka life to Elmas. Extraordinary appreciatio of the baths, the salons for "beauty

bureau for legal information, while the drug shop with its affiliated apothecary, and the undertaking department, were comparatively little used.

A week ago, the Berolina, under Rosen had also opened, but only provisionally, so as not to lose time, for the limited space admitted only a certain number of the smaller "stores," which were merely, as it were, the ornaments around the department, ruled by Rosen himself, for provisions of all kinds. It was from this camp that the fight for custom began with—as Joshua had foreseen—price-cutting in all those commodities most in demand.

As yet this could be defied without damage to business, but Joshua, who knew Rosen, was not without ground for his fears that the first skirmish was only the preliminary to a more serious attack.

At this time there appeared in the Elmas journal, which, edited and printed in the house, came out twice a month, some articles instructing lay readers in the value of many wares under the pretext of "giving away" various minor business secrets. These served the purpose of torpedo craft in the combat with the growing forces of the enemy; but in other directions this subtle, as it were, *soundless*, propaganda, whereof only the initiated reader could perceive the bent, provided an inestimable advertisement for the house. The sheet appeared in two editions, one illustrated, the other plain, and these contained, besides various announcements, just one or two short literary articles. The journals were put up gratis, with parcels.

Most of the *feuilletons* and articles were written by Friedrich himself. Between him and Hans Matrei, who was nominally responsible for the editing, there had been of late many little differences of opinion. Hans, when he learned definitely the tendency of the new sheet, had undertaken to edit it with some inward reluctance.

"I'm a fool, I think, to devote my time and my best strength to a mere advertising organ," he said again one day, when Friedrich begged him to write an article on the value of the emporiums to national economy.

"Advertising organ? Yes, of course it is. What did *you* think? That Elmas was going to bring out a party newspaper?" said Friedrich rather hotly. "The paper promotes the interests of a business undertaking, and business interests generally. A certain social tendency can easily be worked into it; as for instance, how one can, from the standpoint of national economy, achieve certain ideals, thus making one's self their spokesman. We never intended anything else."

"Oho! I seem to remember your far-reaching ideal demands, before you went over the water. According to your dreams of the future, our 'Reds' were mere reactionaries."

Friedrich shrugged impatiently. "Well, since then I've sloughed off a lot of masculine hysterics, thank goodness! Ideals which are a hundred years in advance of our time are, since they are unrealisable, of no moral or material value."

"One can make compromises."

"And that is just what I have done, my dear Matrei. I have pushed my ideal demands precisely as far as the farthest bounds of practical possibility. Castles in the air are of no use to anybody."

Hans Matrei nervously twisted his glasses between his fingers. "From your point of view, as the owner, it is possibly the logical conclusion. But I am not at my ease as an advertisement writer for Elmas. The demands which I make on the ideal emporium of the future will be very far from fulfilment by the Elmas company."

Friedrich shrugged. "The chief purpose of any undertaking is, in general, to succeed," he said coldly.

"Beneath the green, fruitful tree of a sound enterprise many can find shelter and shade. Elmas cannot afford a paper to run on the lines that you desire."

"Then do let me off. I really am not fit for the post You will find scores of others."

"If you really wish it. Naturally we shall not keep you by force. Will you carry it on till the first of July?"

"Of course."

Friedrich said a cool word of farewell and left the room. . . How had it come to pass? Plainly did he recall that beautiful day in early spring when he had visited the Matrei family for the first time, and the Utopia of the consumptive fanatic had seemed to him like the evangel of a new age—because it found an echo in his own ideas. It was on the same day that he had first realised his love for Agnes. Had he been blind, or was prejudice now blinding him? For all that had then seemed beautiful, desirable, right, ideal, now presented itself with grotesque distortions of aspect, caricatural, perverted, puerile. "Poor visionary!" he thought as he went; "weak and bloodless as your hands, are your fancies of panaceas for all ills, your plans of subversion. You Matreis have not a drop of sound blood in your veins."

Thoughtfully he went on down the stairs, through the carpet department and the Oriental Bazaar. In this division was employed the almond-eyed Hindu whom Frau Erica von Reeren had brought home from her cruise in days gone by. Friedrich said a few kind words to the bronzed fellow, and as he turned away, he saw Herr Tük standing behind him. They exchanged greetings.

Tük had always been much esteemed by the chiefs in his quality of buyer for the linen department; and they bore no grudge against him for having seized a favour-

able opportunity to become independent. Friedrich returned his obsequious bow with friendly familiarity.

"Well, Herr Tük, are you having a look round as an independent person? Or have you opened your place in Berolina yet?"

"Not till to-morrow. So I'm making use of my last free day."

As Friedrich strolled on, Tük kept by his side, talking.

"I was at a party yesterday, and as I was putting on my evening-coat for the first time since the Elmas Inauguration, I saw to my horror that I had been guilty of a 'concealment of finding.' On that evening, I mean, I found in the millinery room a piece of jewellery. I put it in my pocket for the time being, and quite forgot it ever since in the press of business. . . I suppose you don't remember having seen any lady wearing it?" He felt in his breast-pocket, and drew out a small object wrapped in tissue-paper.

"I scarcely should! There were so many ladies and so much jewellery that unless it was something very uncommon—"

"In form it certainly is."

Friedrich stopped and undid the packet. Somewhat disconcertedly he regarded the glittering contents. "Why, that belongs to my fiancée," he said. "Unless I am very much mistaken—! But no; I am not mistaken. You have been carrying it about in your pocket for a month—a brooch that cost five thousand marks, and my fiancée has never missed it!"

Tük smiled. "You *are* mistaken, all the same, Herr Müllenmeister. This brooch can't possibly belong to your fiancée. The setting deceives one as to the value; those are not brilliants but common Bohemian glass. . . Oh, beyond all doubt. Just ask the lady if such a thing belongs to her!"

Friedrich shook his head. "I may possibly be mis-

taken. But in any case it would interest me to make sure that the thing does not bear a disconcerting resemblance to her *parure*. . . Why do you conclude that it is sham?"

"I have some knowledge of jewels. Look at the poor quality of the glitter, and how the colours run into one another. Diamonds throw out single rays of clear colour from each facet. But do keep the brooch for the present. I had been going to send it to the Lost Property Office here to-day. The relative worthlessness of the stones is probably the reason that there has been no advertisement of the loss. Otherwise one would have been sure to have heard something of it by now."

"That is true; you may be right. I don't remember my fiancée's jewels—that is to say, the setting—so exactly that I can be positive." He wrapped up the brooch with would-be composure, and put it in his pocket.

Meanwhile they had reached the curtain department, and lingered awhile to discuss it. Tük was enthusiastic over the decorations. The room was pillared, and hung in Pompeian red; with its graceful lace draperies and the clouds of muslin and net that filled it, it looked like the boudoir of an extravagant woman seen through a strong magnifying glass.

"Then good-bye, Tük. Duty calls. I'll make enquiries about the brooch. I suppose you won't demand an utterly ruinous reward!"

"That depends on the fair loser," said Tük, laughing.

"Well, we'll see!"

Friedrich went straight towards the art exhibition, then suddenly bethought himself, turned aside into a recess, took out the brooch again, looked at it closely, shook his head, and went towards the ladies' ready-made department, and the French dressmaking rooms. Beyond doubt the brooch belonged to Agnes's *parure;* the peculiar design of the ornamentation, and the large pear-

shaped brilliants in the centre, forming a lily-bloom, excluded all possibility of error, or of somebody having taken it by mistake for her own.

"Is my fiancée still there?" he asked one of the superintendents who had been in the old house in Alexanderplatz. She said "Yes: Fräulein Matrei was trying on her wedding-dress"—hurried away, and came back in five minutes. "Herr Müllenmeister might come into the trying-on room. Fräulein Matrei would very much like to have his opinion on her dress."

In a miniature drawing-room between tall mirrors Agnes was holding a sort of general rehearsal of her appearance on the wedding-day. As she moved slowly up and down, the long, milk-white train of rich satin flowed behind her, and made her slim, lissom figure appear even taller than it was. Incrustations of Venetian lace decked the bodice, the front of the gown was covered with expensive and beautiful hand-embroidery. A broad, embroidered border of myrtle-leaves ran round the train also.

"Isn't it splendid—queenly?" cried the manageress in ecstasy.

Friedrich acquiesced with a nod. Certainly the gown was a lyric of the needle; impossible to imagine anything richer and more tasteful; and Agnes's pale beauty could scarcely have found a more becoming and stately setting than the long-trained, shimmering, costly garment. . . He said some words of acknowledgment, and then, to show his interest, altered a fold in the train.

"Then you like the gown?"

"Yes, I think it's wonderful. Shall you be much longer? If not, I'll wait for you outside."

"I'll be ready in a minute."

Elmas had accorded to the ladies' department a whole succession of show-rooms and little 'intimate' salons, which at this time—about one o'clock—were largely fre-

quented by a fashionable public. Friedrich seated himself on one of the palm-shaded, velvet-covered ottomans, and leaning back with folded arms, watched through amused, half-shut eyes the long procession of women. He longed to turn his thoughts, which had been for the last hour obstinately running on the same subject, into any other direction. . . Agnes was still as beautiful as of yore, perhaps even more so, but her beauty had an entirely different effect on him. To-day he had admired her as one admires a lovely picture—with pleasure, even with enthusiasm, but without personal desire or emotion.

In a short quarter of an hour she emerged. Her delight in the wondrous gown and the trying-on—she liked nothing better than trying-on—and possibly also the lavish flattery of the manageress, had put a little rosy colour in her face. That made her look younger, and, together with the deepened glow in her eyes, gave her an unusually bright, sweet expression.

"Ah, there you are!" Friedrich sprang to meet her.

"Have you much time?" she asked as she buttoned her glove. "Shall we knock about a little?"

"Sorry, Agnes, but I have no time for that."

"Since you came back from *there,* you never have time for me."

"The shop takes up nearly all my day."

"The shop—yes, the shop! Your stepmother was always complaining of the same thing; 'the shop' is for you Müllenmeisters the Alpha and Omega, and wife and children come in where they can. It's only on account of that stupid 'shop' that we're not having a proper honeymoon."

"We'll make up for it in midsummer, Agnes. And we *are* to have a fortnight or three weeks now."

"That's magnificent, isn't it? Just like a butcher's or a post-office clerk's or a bookkeeper's honeymoon!"

"Well, well, the parallel is not so frightfully degrad-

ing, dear. Those are all honourable callings. . . But I wanted to ask you something in a great hurry. Have you not noticed that you lost your brooch on the Elmas evening?"

Agnes suddenly stood still. . . she was scarlet, her eyes were staring, horror-stricken. She plainly could not answer.

"So you *have* missed it. Why in all the world did you say nothing of it? Didn't you care about getting it back again?"

"I. . . I was afraid to say anything, Friedel."

"You were afraid? Of whom, of what, and why? That is simply childish, Agnes. And on account of this singular 'fright,' you could not bring yourself to make your loss known? You preferred to let the thing slide, though the brooch belonged to your bridal jewels, and for that reason ought to have been particularly dear to you? I confess I don't understand it."

"Has it been found, Friedel?"

"Yes."

"Oh, if you only knew how I've worried about it, day and night! Every day I rushed to the Lost Property here, for I always thought it must have been found and sent there. I even knew where I had dropped it, and went to look for it the very same evening, but it was gone; and so only somebody at the party could have found it, and I always thought 'Nobody like that would *keep* the brooch'. . . Who was it, then?"

"Where had you lost it?"

She hesitated a second. "In the millinery room. I went there with Herr Bielefeldt; he's opening a hat shop, and was particularly interested in that department. We stopped a few minutes, and it must have been there. Oh, how glad I am! Have you got it with you?"

"I'll bring it out to you this evening, Agnes."

She drew a deep breath, as if some visible weight had

been lifted from her breast. "I should like so much to take it with me now, if you have it in your office?"

"No; it is not in my office; but you shall have it back this evening for certain. . . Will you excuse me now, Agnes? Have you anything more to do in the house?"

"Nothing at all. I'll take a little walk, and then go home."

"Then good-bye for now, dear, and I'll see you again this evening."

"Good-bye, and for Heaven's sake, don't forget. My goodness, how glad I'd be if I could have the brooch now!"

"I'll bring the lost child home to-night, I promise. Till then!"

She hurried into a descending lift. "Good-bye!". . .

Friedrich stood irresolute for a moment or two after she had left him. The jewel was literally burning a hole in his pocket. His first impulse had been to hand it to Agnes, but somehow—he knew not why—he had changed his mind. . . The incidents of this loss were at least singular. He was wholly unable to believe in her "fright." Little as he liked to admit it, a vague suspicion was growing in him that all was not well. Even Tük's decisive statement that the stones were false, incredible as it appeared, was matter for reflection.

That, at any rate, was only too easy to verify. The jewellery department was scarcely fifty paces away.

No longer was it, as in the old house, the "bargain-corner" which so vexed him all those years ago—but a wondrous salon in silver-grey maple with lilac inlays. The show-cases, lit from within, were filled with gold and silver services, and on long, crystal-covered tables, diamonds, diamonds, and again diamonds, clear as water-drops, diamonds fit to deck great queens, sparkled on their cushions of black velvet. When twilight fell, and the lights flamed out from the gracefully decorated ceil-

ing, their deep intense brilliance drew such colours from the gems as almost distracted the senses, and turned the stately grey hall into a treasure-room that no fairy-tale palace could have surpassed in glimmer and glitter.

The manager of the department took the brooch, on which Friedrich had asked him for his opinion, to the window, tested it awhile, and returned.

"The brooch is, if I may so express myself, half and half genuine," he said. "Apparently all the small stones in the decoration are real; and the pearls, so far as I can judge without an actual test, may be real also. But on the other hand the large pear-shaped stones, which, if they were good, would constitute the value of the jewel, are simply a wretched imitation. Plainly the original genuine stones have been taken out, and replaced by common shams."

"Are you certain of this?"

"Absolutely, Herr Müllenmeister." The manager smiled. "We experts can literally *smell* a sham, even when it's a good deal cleverer than this. But to make quite sure, I'll look again."

He returned in five minutes. "As I said: The small stones are good diamonds, the solitaires have been torn out—probably a short time ago. The setting is injured in several places; pray, convince yourself. . . In their stead, the commonest 'screamers,' such as are used for stage purposes, have been inserted."

"Thank you. That is all I wanted to know."

The offices and manager's rooms were situated in the fourth storey. Joshua was listening to some suggestions from his future son-in-law, Cornelius Arfst. A number of rooms in the right wing were as yet unfit for use—their internal architectural completion would still be a matter of some weeks, and the perfecting of the enor-

mous erection in all its details would perhaps demand several months.

Joshua had willingly given his consent to Mimi's choice. On principle, he disliked the idea of opposing his children's wishes in this respect; and his knowledge of human nature seldom failed him. In the young German-American, he prized, even more than the incontrovertible brilliancy of talent, that quiet, tenacious striving, that steady pursuance of a fixed goal, that admirable power of putting the whole personality into the appointed task, and above all those sympathetic traits of character, which were continually to be observed in him. Cornelius Arfst did not wish to marry until he had won a position for himself. As a matter of fact, this aim was already attained by virtue of the Elmas house; but the young people might well wait a while. To him—Joshua—it would be pleasing, and Mimi, who was chiefly occupied with the staff-office in the parent house, would not find the time too long. . .

They were discussing a hall with roof lights for small machines, which might be built in place of the inner court—unnecessary, in Joshua's opinion. Cornelius had drawn out a design, which he was now submitting.

Friedrich entered in the midst of this conversation. Joshua looked up in some surprise; he disliked these irregular visits, even from his sons, and Friedrich knew all his father's views, wishes, and habits. He murmured an apology.

Joshua glanced at him over the plan. "Anything particular happened, Friedel?"

"Yes—something odd, at any rate. . . but of a private nature. Don't let me disturb you just at this moment."

"Can't it wait till the evening?"

"It *could,* of course; but you would do me a kindness if you'd spare me a quarter of an hour. I've come

upon a strange occurrence—I confess I can't grasp it for the moment. I know not how and what and where. . . Perhaps a third person might see clearer—Arfst might stay."

"We've finished for the present. Say on."

Joshua took his seat at the writing-table. Arfst remained standing, with his arms on the back of a high chair. Friedrich had, directly on entering, dropped upon one of the lounges. At the touch of the cool leather he suddenly realised the glow of his hands, which were burning, like his head. . . He had been wandering about the house for a full half-hour, mechanically imagining this and that speech and answer to questioning, looking at the case from every side, and all the while with a maddening, throbbing unrest in his heart and brain—as though he were fleeing from something unexplained that crouched on the threshold of his consciousness without quite crossing it. Amid his vague speculations, the desire to speak of what was troubling him suddenly shaped itself. And now, in a few sentences, he told the eager listeners the happenings of the last hour.

The facts were: Agnes had lost the brooch and said nothing about it. And from the costly jewel, which came from the greatest of all the jewellers on Unter den Linden, the real stones were missing, and had been replaced, obviously by an unskilled hand, with worthless imitations. What was the meaning of it? To suppose that the finder had made the momentous change in the brooch would be entirely futile, since he then would have taken good care not to give it back. Agnes herself. . . The thought was too absurd to be entertained for a moment. Agnes got whatever she wanted; if the allowance she had been receiving for months was not sufficient to cover her expenditure on dress, she knew that a word from her would cause it to be increased.

"Perhaps Fräulein Matrei had friends or relations whom she wished to assist, and needed a larger sum than she liked to ask for."

"No, Arfst. Agnes has no friends at all for whom she really cares. Her half-brother, Herr Matrei, would rather die than take anything from his sister. He has so few wants that he needs very little money, and that little he earns."

Joshua said not a word. His left hand lying lightly on the arm of his chair, he was scribbling with the pencil in his right all sorts of figures and numbers on a sheet of paper. The soft scratching of the lead was for some moments the only noise in the spacious room, for the sound-proof walls and thickly padded doors shut off all disturbance from outside.

Suddenly, after his long silence, Joshua stopped his pencil and turned a little sideways in his chair, looking at Friedrich.

"Have you asked Agnes herself anything about it?"

"Only if she had noticed the loss. She was obliged to admit that she had; but said that for fear of reproofs about her carelessness from our side, she had not liked to mention it."

Joshua shrugged, and made a gesture of rejection.

"Where was the brooch found?" asked Arfst. "Was it not in the millinery room on the Elmas evening?"

"Yes—just there. What made you suppose that, Arfst?"

"And who found it? Was it not the red-haired man with the pointed beard?"

"Tük. It *was* he. Extraordinary. . . What do you know about it?"

"Hm. . . many things. Why did not Herr. . . Tük give the brooch back to Fräulein Agnes at once?"

"He didn't know whom it belonged to."

"Is that what he says? Then he's lying. He knew

perfectly whom it belonged to. I could almost conjecture that the fellow had some idea of his own in handing you the brooch and drawing your attention to the false stones. He knew whose it was, depend upon it!"

"You say that in such a peculiar tone and with such decision that one must assume that you know more about this mysterious affair. Out with it! We're all attention."

"As regards the changing of the stones, I know nothing whatever."

"But you do know something else. Again I say, out with it! Indeed, Arfst, as a member of our family, which you are soon to become, it is your duty to conceal nothing that has to do with this business."

"I am of that opinion, too," said Joshua, who had been keenly observing his future son-in-law through his *pince-nez*. "As you know precisely where Agnes lost her brooch, we must assume that you are able to give us some further information as well. I have a feeling that this odd, mysterious affair may have another interest for us than the mere loss of property."

Cornelius Arfst passed his hand over his thick black hair. "Perhaps it would have been my duty to speak to you anyhow, of my own accord; but. . ." He sighed. "It's not pleasant. I have nothing really positive to say. . . From the moment I made acquaintance with Fräulein Matrei, I conceived a great, but purely artistic admiration for her remarkable and unusual type of beauty. I intended her for the Saint Cecilia in the concert-hall tapestry. Whenever I met her in society, or was alone with her, it fascinated me to study her face. I could never make her out. And again, on the Elmas evening, I found myself forever gazing at her. I happened to hear her asking a gentleman in the party to come with her. I followed. Why? Perhaps out

of vulgar curiosity, perhaps with some sort of intuition. Another man followed, too—he with the red hair—"

"Tük?"

"Yes—Tük. Fräulein Agnes and her companion had an evidently moving interview in the millinery room. What they said I naturally did not hear—I was not near enough. I only *saw*. . ."

"What did you see?"

He was silent for a minute. "Fräulein Agnes apparently went into a sort of passionate hysteria. She caught at her bodice, and most probably loosened the brooch then, for I remember that as I went slowly by I heard something jingle. Directly afterwards, she threw herself into the man's arms. . . I don't know what one is to think, but any unprejudiced person *must* have believed that the two were lovers and had had a quarrel. . . I can tell you I wished I had suppressed my curiosity and never come after them. It was for me a terrible personal experience. How it got hold of me, you can see by the fact that I destroyed my Saint Cecilia that very night. Nevertheless, as I told myself, there is no reason why it should not have been a comparatively innocent episode." He sighed, as if freed from a burden, and mopped his damp brow with his handkerchief.

Friedrich got up and, hands crossed behind his back, walked quickly to and fro.

"Whatever sort of 'episode' it was, it is calculated to interest *me*. I cannot understand how you could have kept it from me. You must have said to yourself that the lady whom you had surprised in an at least questionable situation, was my affianced wife, and that we were very shortly to be married."

"That was the very reason that I didn't like to take the responsibility of distressing you, and perhaps bringing about Heaven knows *what* unhappiness between

you and her, when possibly it would all turn out to be a misapprehension or a mistake."

"Misapprehension. . . thank you!"

Joshua put down the pencil and pushed away the sheet of paper. "You had no idea who the man can have been, Friedel? Or you, Arfst?"

"No," said Arfst.

"But I have," Friedrich answered. "Bielefeldt—of our 'outfitting.' Agnes told me herself just now. She wanted to show him the millinery room; he's opening a hat shop, as you know."

"Yes. About a year ago—it may be a little longer—I received an anonymous letter in which my attention was drawn, in the usual way, to Agnes's constant visits to the gentlemen's outfitting department. I read the thing cursorily at the time; anonymous denunciations are to me equivalent to slanders. I am, like Arfst, inclined to think that the questionable situation in which he saw her may be capable of some innocent explanation. Ask her! *I* should say, ask Bielefeldt! We ought not to judge anyone without having heard his defence."

Friedrich stopped before the bookshelves in his wandering up and down, and one might almost have thought him lost in contemplation of the heavy carvings, and momentarily oblivious of the whole story. After a while he turned round to the others. His face was disfigured, distorted, ravaged, by some violent inward conflict.

"I see only one thing clear," he said, "and that is that my wedding does not take place in a fortnight, as we had arranged. The rest we must leave to time. I shall, as you advise, ask Agnes first of all for some explanation. . . Just one thing, Arfst. You mentioned Tük. Do you think he made the same observations as yourself?"

"Probably, but I can't say for certain."

Joshua gave his chair an audible push backward.

The word that lay on his lips he restrained. The man before him, with the gloomily knit brows and the resolute set of the mouth, needed no direction or advice; the fear that he might be weakly influenced by sentiment was plainly superfluous.

"As concerns Agnes and your personal attitude towards what Arfst has just told us, I leave it to your own decision. We can investigate the singular affair of the diamonds at any time we please."

Friedrich made a vehemently negative gesture. "That seems to me now most horribly unimportant and beside the point."

"Perhaps it is merely like the rest, an. . . attendant circumstance," thought Joshua, but did not say that either.

"I won't detain you any longer," said Friedrich. "I must digest this curious occurrence thoroughly by myself. So Tük has seen and knows. . . Devil take him! And I—" As though suddenly struck by some decision, he hurried out, and across to his own office. He bolted the door. Now to be alone. . . with nobody to see or hear!

For a while he tried, sitting quietly at his writing-table, to bring his whirling thoughts into order, and so subject them to some ordinary logic. But it was no use; he could not; his rage and strenuously suppressed excitement swept away all appeasing reflections.

Like an outcry, the long restrained consciousness spoke from the void to which he had thrust it: "This *had* to be." It was merely the natural development of things. Agnes and he were two beings who possessed no common interests or inclinations, who had no smallest intellectual contacts, who were bound together by naught but the brittle tie of a purely external sense of duty. Perhaps she was—if innocent of the worst offence—not really to be condemned. . .

He tried to work, but it was useless; he felt as if a million ants were crawling in his veins. The hours went sluggishly by. He did not wish to go to Halensee till evening, for then, as Mimi and Arfst were going out, he should find Agnes alone. . . About seven o'clock he drove there. His excitement had gradually died down; but Agnes seemed more agitated than before.

"Have you brought it?"

"What? Oh, the brooch. Yes; but let us have supper first."

As they were alone, Agnes had ordered supper to be served on the veranda. Friedrich showed little appetite; Agnes scarcely touched anything. Afterwards they went into the garden for a while, but soon returned, for it had begun to rain. Meanwhile the servants had cleared the table, and shut the doors leading into the dining-room.

"Would you fetch me your *parure?*" asked Friedrich. "I should like to take a look at it."

She turned pale. "Why?"

"Would it give you much trouble?"

"Oh, no!. . ." She moved falteringly away, and did not come back with the case for a quarter of an hour.

"I believe you're still cross with me about the brooch."

Friedrich took the case, and opened it. He saw that the colour was coming and going on her cheeks; he had also noticed her hesitation and sudden pallor. His own hands slightly trembled, as he held the various pieces of the *parure* between him and the light, which he had turned on.

"Have all the large stones been exchanged—I mean, replaced by false ones?" he asked. "Or only some? Please tell me the whole truth without delay, Agnes."

She started back, as if struck by a missile. And as though the invisible thing had hit her full on the head,

she staggered sideways, fell back in her chair, and pressed her hand to her eyes.

"Then it's so—then it's true. . . Agnes, Agnes. . . but why, tell me why. . ."

She did not answer; she could not produce a sound. Ever since she had left the city, she had felt a paralysing terror at her heart. With every hour her anguish had grown. Nevertheless, the certainty that her terror had been justified had come on her like a shattering blow.

Friedrich got up, and turned out the lights again. Only the red-shaded lamp on the table shed a little rosy glimmer in the wide, glass-roofed veranda.

"Agnes. . . Will you tell me what it all means? What have you to do with Bielefeldt? Do you love him? Won't you tell me the whole truth? We'll talk about it like two sensible people. Tell me all, all. I am prepared for everything."

He waited a few minutes for her reply. The rain was clattering against the glass roof, and rustling in the trees. . . Agnes was loudly weeping. And that helpless, mournful crying shook and appeased him; his anger passed away. Lightly and tenderly his hand slid over the weeping girl's hair, almost as in a shy caress.

"Trust me, Agnes; I am not so very angry with you now. I have seen for a long time that we do not suit one another in any way. We should never have bound ourselves. We were both so young! It was all my fault. I should not have ensnared you, and above all I should not have let you engage yourself to me. But it isn't yet too late to put it all right. I only want to know the truth. Do you love this Bielefeldt?"

She just bent her head. It seemed absurd to deny anything. She was not yet in a state to wonder how it had all come about; enough, that he knew all. . .

It was well-nigh a relief, as though a heavy burden were slipping from her. . . But she could not speak just yet.

"You sold the diamonds. But what did you want so much money for? Perhaps for—"

She bent her head again.

"Ah, so that was it. . . Did he never speak of your setting yourself free and marrying him?"

"Oh, we never thought of such a thing!" cried she, sobbing. "I had given you my word."

"And you did not like to break your word to me?. . . But the fact of betraying me with another man did not trouble you at all?. . . We will lay my personal feelings entirely aside. But that you should have had no smallest sense of duty, of faith; that, instead of bravely saying to me: 'I have made a mistake; I love another man; set me free'. . . you should have coolly pursued this relationship and been ready to—marry me. . . Such a fearful lack of all sense of decency. . . and without the slightest regard for the family and the name of the family which had accepted you. . . When I first learned all that, I was quite beside myself with anger and indignation. Agnes, Agnes! How mistaken I have been in you!. . . How I *did* love you—how many things I *did* think to see in you—"

"And I, too; I loved you, too. Yes, indeed I did. . ."

She was still sobbing, but gradually she was coming to herself, and with that retrieval there was returning the power to think and plan.

She lifted herself a little from her crouching attitude, and looked distractedly about her with her wet eyes. Friedrich had thrown himself back in one of the wide-eared cane chairs, so that his face was in shadow. In the deep evening quiet, his slow, heavy

breathing sounded like long-drawn sighs. Behind the glass walls lay the dining-room in its still, gleaming splendour, with the fine faded colours of the great Persian carpet, the artistically designed wall fixtures, the tapestries and the paintings, the softly shimmering silver on sideboard and buffet—the whole played over by a warm rosy glow from the crystal-rimmed ceiling lamp; a place of wealth and luxurious ease. Agnes had never so keenly realised how beautiful it all was, how pleasant to repose in the deep, lazy chairs amid the Liberty cushions, how wonderful the atmosphere of well-being, with its soft light and perfume.

"I did love you, too, Friedel, believe me; and everything would have been different if, when we were engaged, you had taken me away from the shop and put me in proper surroundings. It's all your father's fault. . ."

"Agnes, leave my father out of this question."

"I can't help it: I must defend myself after all. Was it the right thing to leave *your* fiancée in that stuffy place, to wait upon anybody and everybody like a common shop girl? There I stood from morning till night, moping and getting cross, and feeling lonely and unhappy. If I happened to have to go through the shop, it was a refreshment, and generally my one amusement. . . I never thought of being unfaithful to you . . . but great God! two years, and I there alone day after day. Elias Bielefeldt! Good Heavens, I liked to talk with him a little, and so we got to know one another and made friends. What is that, after all? Nothing wrong ever happened. When he wanted to buy a business and had no money, I did for him what I would have done for a woman friend just the same —I helped him. And as I had no property but the jewels you had given me, I took them to a pawnbroker, and he gave me the address of a man who bought

stones privately; and I advanced the money to Bielefeldt, and he's to pay me back again. Is it such a frightful crime, after all?"

"Don't play the innocent, Agnes; you will get no sympathy from me that way."

"It's all your father's fault. He hates me, he's had me spied on—otherwise how would you have known all this?"

"Agnes—control yourself!"

"No! All this about Bielefeldt and the diamonds is a put-up job of your father's to get rid of me, to turn me out into the streets anyhow and anywhere, so that he may have his triumph; and I may go to-morrow and get behind the first counter I can find, and earn my bread again. . ."

"Be silent! Stop this instant your base, senseless accusations. This is the end of all things!"

"I *will* speak!"

"Speak, but do not dare to say such things about my father."

She made a violent attempt to disobey, but gasped and got up. In her certainty of possession, she had often despised all that Friedrich's love had offered her, and believed that she could give it up for Bielefeldt's sake. In this moment, she was realising for the first time the range of what had happened, and the magnitude of the things that were slipping from her hands. The proud palace of her dreams was shattered like a house of cards.

"Do forgive me, Friedel."

"Oh, I forgive you all, Agnes, dreadful as it is."

"Will you forget it all, too?"

"That I cannot promise. Our roads must part, Agnes."

She uttered a loud shriek, and threw herself down before him. "You *shall* forgive me; I have done

nothing wicked. . . Then you never loved me. . . You *shall* forget, you must be able to. . ."

"Please, Agnes, do not do that to me. . ." He turned away with an involuntary gesture of disgust, and stared through the glass at the rain. "You don't really know what you're doing. . . *I*, never loved you? I can wish you nothing better than that you may ever again in your life know such a love as mine. But you. . . *you* never loved *me*. You said that first day in Tegel: 'You are the son of Joshua Müllenmeister.' And to-day I see for the first time what you really meant by it. To whom do you kneel now? To me? No—but to the millions of the Müllenmeisters, to ELMAS, to—what do I know? Fie, fie, you might have left me one memory. . . You may be easy in your mind; nobody wants to 'turn you into the streets anyhow and anywhere'; and we shall see to it that you need play the shop-girl no more. I wish you all good. . . but let me go now. . . I can bear no more. I must go."

"Go then; you're so glad to be rid of me."

"Yes; I am glad. . . I am in the highest spirits. I am so glad that for sheer joy I could put a pistol to my head this minute. The whole world, the whole of existence, disgusts me, I tell you. . . This day will be a milestone in my life; a funeral garland for my faith in woman's love and woman's goodness, and in all humanity." Almost fearfully he looked around. Agnes was still on her knees, her face buried in the silken cushions of the chair.

He tore the glass door open, and rushed out, every nerve a-quiver. But the coolness and silence outside, the soft rain-drops falling on his face and hands, the shimmering grey of the May night, the utter peace that brooded over all, gradually quieted him.

After a while he fetched his coat and hat from the vestibule, and went on foot as far as the Zoological

Gardens, meaning to take a cab thence to the city. A gentle melancholy welled up in him, and drowned the bitter feelings. On this rainy, wistful night of May, he had—he knew it well—buried the fairest part of his young idealism with its bliss and its poetry. He had done with dreaming. . . but outside there stood the clear, steadfast life of reality.

CHAPTER XXXV

Six months after the breaking off of her engagement to Friedrich Müllenmeister, Agnes married Elias Bielefeldt.

He had at first held back, but in the end had allowed his "better self" to convince him that the union was a pure matter of duty, since the engagement had been broken on his account. Possibly, too, the hundred thousand mark cheque which Agnes found in her place at the breakfast table on the morning after the momentous interview—it was signed by Joshua Müllenmeister—had had a certain power of attraction.

When the Berolina, a year after its opening, was turned into a share company, Bielefeldt left it and went to the Markgrafen-strasse. There he opened, close to his own "country business" with its extremely cheap and second-rate class of millinery, a salon for Parisian and Viennese model hats, in the name of his wife. The undertaking proved itself to be a wise speculation. Frau Agnes was nearly all day in the salon, "receiving." Her beautiful, slender figure was surrounded by a halo of the sensational, which drew many customers from the "first circles" to the new shop. Nobody knew the exact truth about the breaking of her engagement, but it was whispered that in her passionate love for her actual husband, she had voluntarily given up Friedrich Müllenmeister and his millions. Thus people came, out of curiosity, to make acquaintance with the fortunate possessor of so colossally, so refreshingly, romantic a nature—and found a lovely, elegant being upon whose fashionably dressed head

the fantastic creations of the great Parisian milliners sat so ravishingly that it really drove one to acquire for oneself some such marvel of modern "Hyper-Chic." Agnes sunned herself every day anew in the flattering looks that surrounded her. . . On the whole, she was content with her fate. Elias was proud of the universal admiration excited by his charming spouse, and delighted in her skill in "trying-on" at the salon. He treated her well, and, as their business flourished, she wanted for nothing. Her husband saw, too, that Agnes did not in any way overdo herself, for her health was still far from good. She went to a "Bad" for six weeks in summer, and took at least an hour's walk every day. She was still very fond of lounging a little in the emporiums, but Elmas was carefully avoided. Since the day she had tried on her wedding-dress there, she had never crossed the threshold.

Elias Bielefeldt was not the only one who had turned his back on the Berolina. The manifold regulations, obligations, conditions, limitations, which the contract with the *entrepreneur* imposed upon the associated businesses, made the "independence" of these a very illusory thing. Under Rosen's initiatory management there was no end to the wrangles and misunderstandings. In the end, they were all glad when the metamorphosis into a share company was decided on by the capitalist "backers," and they could decently break free from their contracts, which were to have been binding for many years. Only a few tried to stick up for their rights, but they were so beset with trickeries that they finally lost heart, and relinquished their claims for a moderate consideration. Many handed over their shops to the new share company, took shares, and went on ruling their departments as paid employees, managers, or superintendents. Tük was among the directors in his quality of head stock-taker.

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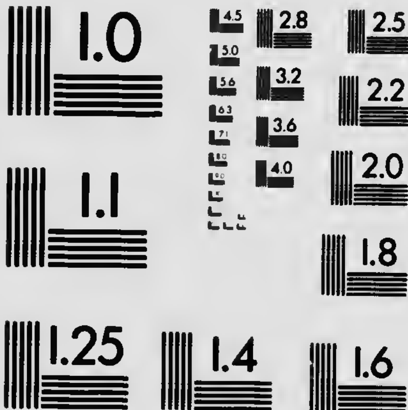
(ANSI and ISO TEST CHART No. 2)



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Rosen took the post of principal manager. He had foreseen, and intended from the beginning, the transformation into a company; but, as a first step, the new-fangled organisation as a "Co-operative Stores" had seemed not amiss to him. It removed the odium of an unfair and malicious competition with his one-time chief, and at the same time drew the attention of a wide circle to the interesting economic experiment. In the long run, the by no means excessive concessions to the other members of the co-operation had become an unendurable burden to his despotic and ambitious nature, which acknowledged no limitations to its powers. Only from the moment that he could take the business in hand with almost unrestricted authority, could his full capabilities display themselves.

First the old lure of "bargains" was brought to bear. Then the Berolina set up a "credit house," which, after the customary formalities had been gone through, would issue checks for the various goods sold by the Berolina, with a ten per cent. discount on full payment. But the great feature was undoubtedly the amazing lowness of the prices. At least twice a week, blazing advertisements announced "large consignments," which were offered "at terms hitherto unheard-of." And *tout Berlin* flocked to the Berolina, and "got bargains." Usually, it is true, the quality of the goods corresponded to the prices, and people abused the place violently—but went again on the next advertisements and . . . purchased.

In the early days, the better houses had scarcely taken Berolina seriously. Only in isolated cases were the "cut" prices followed, and then with no idea of regarding such "bluff" as the gauge of a serious combat. But gradually the thing grew to the dimensions of a calamity, a business nuisance. Let Rosen be as clever

a business man as ever lived, let him be master of every trick and dodge, of every subtlety and obscurity, in genuine and (not to mince matters) doubtful traffic, and let him use them without scruple. . . nevertheless, there were certain bounds beyond which the system could not be made to pay. Every expert knew that many of the cheap Berolina articles must be sold at a loss. Naturally that could not go on forever. It might have been harmless enough in the milder days of limited space and limited business, but it grew and grew, the dwarf had reached a man's stature in the course of a few months, and it almost seemed that the Berolina might one day develop into something monumental. Willy-nilly, the troublesome competition must be reckoned with.

The Elmas, against which the blows were chiefly directed, suffered relatively less than any other house; for it parried them by the continual attractions that it offered in its admirable exhibitions and arrangements. There was always something "on" at Elmas, something to "draw," and moreover, the directors did not disdain to include some rather American methods of advertisement among the other transatlantic business principles they had adopted. One of these was a new credit system. Everyone who could show two good references, of which one must be from a bank, could open a credit account, which entitled him to buy "on tick" to a certain fixed value. The export department, too, had done well. Altogether the enterprise was thriving, thanks to the wise and well-considered management.

It had been no easy task to steer the proud ship through the shallow waters of contemporary conditions; but its vigilant and prudent captain had managed to avoid all rocks and sand-banks, and despite the manifold difficulties which the new venture had had to encounter,

the first business year closed with a liquidation on a small scale and a four per cent. dividend.

The announcement of the small dividend was followed by a temporary but rapid fall in the quotations. Joshua Müllenmeister made use of this fall to possess himself of another lot of shares. He himself envisaged the future with unshaken confidence. The house was on the whole in advance of its time, but he knew that the time's needs would grow to the house. He saw the day come ever nearer whereon the emporiums would combine into a gigantic Trust, and only undertakings of the extent and type of Elmas would have any chance of success. *Then* Elmas, which would have long since matured, would "come out on top."

Moreover the price soon recovered; and there was no longer any doubt that Elmas would prosper. Soon after the announcement of the dividend, the attacks and libels began again. There were many sneers at the promises which had been made to the staff of Elmas. With *that* dividend there was not much chance that the employees would ever see a red cent of their "participation in the profits"! But the authors did not gain much support among the Elmas employees. In general, the staff was satisfied. Salaries were good, and demands proportioned to the capacity and intelligence of those employed. And they were all proud of belonging to Elmas, of which it was said that only first-class assistants were engaged there.

No one in the whole house was so proud and so happy as Karen. On her personal list, the year's record stood at eighteen thousand three hundred and forty marks' worth of sales; and more than eighteen thousand marks was of her own getting—a success far beyond her wildest dreams. She had quite a little set of customers of her own, habitués of the antique department—rich people who were always on the lookout for rarities,

and never liked to be served by anyone but the "sweet creature," who never got tired of explaining and displaying, no matter how lengthy and tedious the transaction.

"Where is Fräulein Nickelsen?"—"Please call Fräulein Nickelsen"—so one heard daily. "She is serving."—"Then I'll wait!"

She was loved by her superiors and colleagues, too; and the manager often entrusted her with little special commissions, which she always discreetly and skilfully carried out.

Karen was now nineteen. Her birthday fell on a Wednesday, but her old friends were coming, as of yore, to celebrate it on the Sunday. The Feldbergens, however, wanted to take their "little daughter," as a treat for the real birthday, to the opera on Wednesday night, and she had got leave to go home an hour before the shop shut. About five o'clock, the manager came to her with a request.

Customers had spoken much lately of the cheap antique pieces to be had at the Berolina. "When you leave now, could you just take a look at the things there? Examine them closely, and bring us your report in the morning."

Karen set off directly. She had never yet been in the Berolina. Since the dreadful days when she had trembled to be left alone in the old shop, because she was always afraid that Rosen would appear from somewhere to torment and terrify her with his burning looks and words, she had given him a wide berth whenever she came upon him by chance. She had not seen him now for ages, and her fears were gradually being forgotten. What could he want of her *now*—and, besides, he had been married for a year. . .

Externally the Berolina was not imposing either in size or style of architecture. Only ten windows looked

on the street, but a passage with many others ran through the considerable depth of the building.

Karen went slowly and attentively through the ground floor shops. In general, the character of the place resembled that of the Müllenmeister house on the Alexander-platz: well-stocked departments, but a good deal of rubbish, too; a mixture of the emporium and the penny bazaar, of concessions to the modern spirit of wholesale-retail dealing, and to the old-fashioned "cheap and nasty" methods.

The antiques were on the first floor behind the carpet department: three tolerably sized rooms with a wild litter of all sorts of pieces, and the first room crammed with dusty and damaged goods. . . Karen took plenty of time to look. She knew that the apparent neglect of the department was probably intentional. Many collectors, especially inexperienced ones, enter an imposing curiosity-shop with mistrust, while the disorder of a litter like this allures them and fills them with the hope of picking up a bargain. Thus here was much worthless lumber, but, amid it, a few good genuine pieces, which had their price. Again, there were many cheap but graceful things which even a half-practised eye could see to be imitations, and for whose genuineness, if it were questioned, no guarantee was given.

Among the pieces she was particularly struck by a number of almost identical Frisian sideboards. The price—from a hundred to two hundred marks—seemed at first sight most astonishingly low. Karen opened the cupboard doors, pulled out some drawers, and convinced herself that all the pieces had plainly been made up out of old Frisian chests, which were plentifully to be had, and possessed scarcely any interest for collectors, since they dated mostly from the end of the eighteenth century, and presented no unusual features.

And even so, two-fifths only were of this genuine stuff, the other three of faked "old" wood. . . She mentally reckoned: "Despite the low price, the Berolina does business to the tune of a hundred per cent., at least!" She made a sketch of the sideboards in her notebook. The rest of the pieces, partly defective, partly of little interest either in form or decoration, were offered at the same prices for which Elmas or the old house bought similar stuff.

As she turned to go, she saw Rosen standing at the door in conversation with a customer. She tried to hurry past, but he had already seen her. He stopped talking, and addressed her.

"Ah ha, Fräulein Karen. . . forgive me, I can't remember your second name at the moment. . ."

"Nickelsen."

"Thanks. How comes my poor shop to be so honoured? Oh, I see, you are interested in our old stuff. May I offer myself as cicerone?"

"You are very kind, but I have seen everything and must go now."

The gentleman who had been talking with Rosen drew back; they now stood alone, and in such a way that Rosen prevented her departure.

"You are getting on well? But one needn't ask: you look splendid! I have often thought of you. You were such a funny, frightened little girl; I really believe you were afraid of me, and heaven knows I meant well by you. Are you still afraid?"

"How should I be, Herr Rosen?"

"That's just what I mean; there is no reason. I had quite a fancy for you. When you're a little older, you will perhaps see that one ought not to reject so hastily the good will of . . . well, of not entirely unimportant people. But I always cherish my old likings. . ." He bent a little towards her, and looked into her face with

a smiling twinkle in his eyes. "We naturally do not presume to compete with Müllenmeister and Sons on any field of enterprise; but one never knows how the cat may jump. Perhaps you may still have occasion to remember that I keep my good-will towards you."

She murmured something inarticulate, and hurried by. "Do not presume to compete with Müllenmeister and Sons on *any* field of enterprise. . ." Had there been some purpose in his accentuation of the "any". . . With burning cheeks she literally ran to the door. Outside, in the clear, cool autumn air, she recovered her breath.

She had scarcely gone twenty steps before someone behind called her by name. At first she did not recognise the slim woman in the enormous feathered hat, with the thick Parisian veil over her pale face.

"Why, Fräulein Karen, I really believe you've grown since I last saw you! You did not recognise me at first?"

"I was thinking, Frau Bielefeldt—forgive me."

"Thinking?" laughed Agnes. "When young girls 'think' in broad daylight, one knows what to make of it."

Karen absently smiled. She had not seen [illegible] for the last year and a half, for after the broken engagement the latter had been little with her brother or Irmgard. She now slipped her arm into Karen's, and walked on with her. "Do tell me something about how Elmas gets on. One can't help being curious, when one had so much to do with it as I once had."

"I can only speak of my own division: we have fine things and sell a good deal."

"Is it true that Friedrich Müllenmeister, since all was over between us, has got very melancholy and unsociable? People say he has taken it very much to heart. . ."

Karen moved her shoulder; she longed to shake off the slender hand from her arm.

"I haven't noticed any melancholy or unsociability! On the contrary, he always seems to me to delight in the business."

"I shouldn't be a bit surprised, for he loved me madly," continued Agnes, as if she had not heard Karen's curt denial. "Malicious people separated us. Well, *I'm* very happy. Money isn't everything."

She chattered on, unheeding of Karen's taciturnity. In August she had been at Sylt for her holiday, and had there seen Henny Müllenmeister, Frau Lynegaard, and Ella. All three had attracted attention, and were always surrounded by a little court of ladies and gentlemen—the latter in the majority! Frau Lynegaard, though, was looking old, despite paint and exquisite clothes. Of course she was always interesting: "but men don't make love to her any more—that's over!" And then Ella! *She* was posing as a grass-widow, and had broken off her "cure" for the sake of a young lawyer from Breslau. . . "Scandalous, I tell you!"

She stopped at the next corner. "Alas! I must get home. I'm sorry; I should have liked to talk with you a little longer. Well, another time! Remember me to Frau Feldbergen; I shall come over very soon and have a look at Irmy. Remember me to Irmy, too."

"Thanks; I won't forget."

"Then *auf Wiedersehen!*"

Karen reflected that *she* had little desire for "Wiedersehen." Her dislike of Agnes dated from the hour in which she had seen the beautiful girl in that unseemly tête-à-tête with Elias Bielefeldt. She had honestly tried to regard what she had seen as a misconception or a complete mistake, but she had not really succeeded. On the other hand, she had never been sure enough of her case to speak to anybody about it.

When she recalled the moment, now about a year and a half ago, in which Aunt Mieze had told her that Friedrich's engagement was broken off, her face always glowed with a swift flush. For she had yielded, with her usual intensity, to the wonderfully glad, exultant feeling which had then thrilled her through and through, and lifted from her soul at one blow a strange recurrent sense of melancholy. The knowledge had come to her that all along she had feared for his happiness, and that that happiness of his mattered infinitely to her—more than, according to all accepted views, a man's happiness ought to matter to an unrelated maiden. She had anxiously and conscientiously asked herself if there were not some egotistic reasons for this anxiety about Friedrich Müllenmeister, but the investigation had appeased her youthful conscience. Hers was nothing but a tranquil, utterly selfless joy.

Undoubtedly she cared for him. But it was a caring which was content merely to *be,* which knew no longing, or at least was unaware of knowing any. Nevertheless, this meeting with Agnes had awakened disagreeable memories.

Had he really loved so "madly" that superficial, vain, frivolous being? Karen shook her head. The breach had not plunged him in melancholy and despair; but beyond question he was graver and stiller. From morning till night, untiringly busy, full of cordial interest for the staff, friendly and pleasant to all, but certainly more reserved than of yore, and—when it was necessary—energetically insistent on the carrying out of his demands.

CHAPTER XXXVI

NEARLY every Sunday Frau Mieze Feldbergen collected her "old guard" around her—Ribbeck, Tom, and Hans Matrei. In honour of Karen's birthday, the Schillers now came, too, and Lisa with her husband, the military tailor Selmar.

Mieze was a little broader, and correspondingly slower and more dignified in her movements. She had taken whole-heartedly to her new life; she looked after her husband and his Madonnas with equal devotion, and irradiated all the eight rooms in the house on the Schönhauser Allee with the sparkle and gaiety of her delightful nature. The external traces of her old stage life were gradually disappearing, and being replaced by a rather prim formality in dress. Like the room in which her guests were drinking their coffee—the room with its typical oak and horse-hair furniture in the taste of the seventies, Mieze in her comfortable contentment was typical of the well-to-do *bourgeoisie* of North Berlin.

Feldbergen had lots of news for the benefit of his guests. Hermann Müllenmeister was engaged to an immensely rich Viennese Jewess, and the wedding was very soon to take place. The young lady was bringing her husband a fortune of two millions "on the nail," and probably Hermann would take over the old house on Alexander-platz on his own account.

The news excited universal interest; Papa Schiller alone looked a little glum. True, his darling dream had long since been shattered. Trudchen had, from one day to another, deserted her friend Hermann, "on ac-

count of a dirty trick" (he had given her a white-fox set, instead of a chinchilla one, which she had wanted); but the Viennese engagement reminded the old man of what "would have been so splendid."

The talk then diverged to Mimi Müllenmeister's wedding on the second of December, to which the Feldbergens and Karen, who was generally regarded as their foster-daughter, had been invited. Mieze was relating that for a perfectly plain lilac velvet dress she had been asked at Müllenmeister's three hundred and fifty marks, and at Elmas, five hundred. She now reckoned on her fingers that, with fifty marks for making, it came out, "at the *very most*," at two hundred and fifty, and conferred with Lisa as to whether, with the aid of a sewing-woman, they could not make her wedding-garment at home. Lisa promised to help.

"That's right, dear wife; save for our heirs;" and Feldbergen patted her round shoulder laughingly. "But the child shan't be tailored at home. Karen shall have her wedding-frock from me. We'll buy it at Elmas, eh, little one?" He nodded gaily to the company and vanished to the next room, where, according to his old Sunday custom, he always read his newspapers.

Cornelius Arfst was shortly establishing himself in business as an architect; he had been true to his resolve not to marry until he could offer his bride a life corresponding to her acquired habits. Tom Ribbeck was to have a well-paid post in this new business.

Irma Presser, in an absurd little apron, was handing round coffee and cakes. Under Mieze's care she was visibly improving in health; her delicate constitution forbade any regular profession, but light household work suited her admirably.

The conversation drifted to emporium topics, for most of those present were connected with Müllenmeister's and Elmas in one way or another.

"Things are changing." Papa Schiller folded his arms with an air, and buried his full chin in his tall collar. "I was just thinking of our last celebration of Karen's birthday in your old house, Ribbeck. How you abused Müllenmeister that night! And see how it's come round. You don't look as if you were starving at his place!"

"I never said anyone did, Schiller, and I think you're exaggerating when you say I 'abused' him. No; I never had any reason to do that. All respect to Joshua Müllenmeister as a man and business man. I merely objected to the emporium as such, and in that respect I stick to my opinion, and maintain that a piece of poor land, only fit for potatoes, so long as it yields enough potatoes to feed me, would be dearer to me than the richest common pasture whereon I was merely one of many who might turn out their cows. Certainly, as things are. . ." A good-humoured grin spread among his wrinkles. "When one *has* staked one's existence on another man's pasture, one's undoubtedly glad when the grass crop does well. . . There are lots of compromises in life. Sometimes I actually feel that things *couldn't* have been any different, and that this form of commerce has really its essential rightness."

"One could almost weep to hear you talk so, Master Ribbeck," cried Hans Matrei, peevishly. "Till now I thought you were a man who could be true to his convictions, and only in obedience to the harshest necessity had allowed himself to be recruited by a detestable capitalist affair."

Ribbeck leaned his elbows on the table, and, shading his eyes with his hand, looked downwards for a breathing space.

"It was not necessity alone, Herr Matrei, that caused me to go to Müllenmeister's. Believe me, if I had not detected an essential change in myself, I would

rather have starved or hanged myself, than have clutched at Müllenmeister's rescuing hand against my convictions. But I have never held any conviction so stubbornly as to prevent me from coming to a better one. Joshua Müllenmeister once said to me—I believe just five years ago to-day—that a man must move with the times, for the times won't move with the man—in other words, won't arrange themselves according to the wishes and wills of individuals. Life is a great rotating machine; the wise man adapts himself to the tendencies and movements of his age. To us old folks that's bitter, but it's no good doing like the ostrich and sticking our heads in the sand so as not to see. The age of handiwork is gone by: we're outclassed. The present is all for range, grandiosity, appearance, dimensions, and so forth. And it will go on like that. After ten or twenty years we'll have other houses like Elmas in Berlin, though now that sounds like romancing. I am no champion of the emporiums, not even an adherent; on the contrary, I *deplore* this development; but I adapt myself to the inevitable, and, as it were, watch the thing through my peep-hole, with the pipe of peace in my mouth—further, as an objective observer, am obliged to admit that the monster who is swallowing us all, has nevertheless his own good points. He *has* swallowed whole classes, but on the other hand (as we must in fairness grant), he has called other industries to life; and I believe that the balance of good and evil in the effect of the emporiums upon economical conditions is fairly even. Perhaps the time may come again when people will regard the segregation of branches of trade as the ideal, instead of the 'massing' they now aim at; in any case, retail trade, even if specialised, will take other forms than those of to-day and yesterday."

"'Other forms,'" said Hans Matrei. "You express my inmost soul, Master Ribbeck. *That's* the idea I'm

forever championing. A pooling of common interests in special businesses. . ."

"Look at Berolina! No, my dear Herr Matrei, that is not the right way. But don't let us worry our heads over matters whose development and solution must be left to time."

The conversation ceased a moment, for the maid let in Trude Schiller, a belated guest. The delicious, laughing little person looked as if she had come out of a bandbox in her white ermine-bordered cloth gown; and, as she entered, she filled the room with a gush of delicate scent.

Trudchen was still "studying." Another Mæcenas had quickly succeeded Hermann, and he, too, was pleased to place the means for her training at the disposal of this "talented young artist." Papa Schiller looked radiant—he looked permanently radiant nowadays. The good business he did, the recent appointment of his son Johannes as *Rendant* of a little town in North Silesia, and Trude's "luck," had raised the thermometer of his good humour almost to boasting-point again.

His friends had long ago abandoned their attempts to induce Schiller to take another view of his daughter's "luck," and restore Trude to regular employment. Nobody could be angry with the rosy, quicksilver creature. Hers was one of those light-winged natures which seem predestined by the "World-Soul" to a butterfly existence.

"Let her go her own way," Mieze would say. "Our Lord has made her as she is, and we can't expect the useful qualities of an honest beast of burden from a butterfly or a humming-bird. But Trude won't go under, you bet! She'll do as I did, and escape in the nick of time to the dry land of sensible ways of life."

The men soon resumed the theme of the emporiums, for Hans Matrei was not so easily dismounted from his

hobby, which he unwearyingly bestrode. Lisa and Mieze discussed further the question of the dress, and the three girls got together in the window-seat and chattered.

From time to time Mieze looked across at the trio, and a triumphant smile of motherly pride gleamed in her eyes. Just as Karen overtopped both Trude and Irmgard by a head, so did she put them in the shade in other respects. Trude was certainly charming, but beside Karen's sweet loveliness she was hardly worth looking at.

Trudchen's rosy little mouth was going like a mill-wheel. "Life was lovely. . . the golden freedom of the artist. . . and oh, if she could only get an engagement next year!"

"Do you know, Karen, I can't think how you can stand being at Müllenmeister's? Oh, well! Elmas or Müllenmeister—it's all the same story; a shop is a shop. And when you *needn't*. . . You must be cracked!"

"That's your opinion, Trude. *I* wouldn't be an actress for all the world. I am really happy in my work."

"Yes—now, perhaps, though even that I can't understand. But think of later on. You're chucking away your best years, and getting nothing out of your life. And in the shops, one has so few chances of marrying well. Before one can look round, one's an old maid—and then?"

"I don't want to marry, Trude. I haven't the least desire to."

"Not the least desire to marry?" cried Trude, and shook her head till her red curls danced. "What an extraordinary girl you are. You don't deserve to be young and pretty." She laughed gaily, and turned her attention to Irmgard, who wanted to know what a theatrical school was like.

Karen sat on the broad window-seat and lost herself in her own thoughts. *Not the least desire to marry.* Was that the truth? Was she different from other girls, who all hoped for some mysterious future joy? Or was she thus undesirous only because her vishes and ideals were in the clouds, unattainable, phantoms that vanished if you tried to touch them, castles in the air, fair dreams. . . And so it would be always—always. . . No "luck" like the others, only distant rosy cloud-forms, odours of Araby, falling stars. . . And beneath, a monotonous, endless highroad, leading only to a lonely old age. . . She shut her eyes. They felt very wet under the lashes. She secretly touched them with her handkerchief.

About ten o'clock every morning, the two directors of Elmas were wont to hold a short conference in Joshua's private office.

Friedrich had grown remarkably like his father—and not alone externally. The tranquil deliberation, the sure-souled energy, the never-resting spirit of enterprise, had descended, together with the personal charm of manner, from father to son.

To-day Feldbergen was also present, to consider a business matter. Hermann was to return from Vienna within the next few days. Joshua was genuinely pleased with *his* engagement. The youthful bride belonged to a highly esteemed family, was, to judge by her photograph, a pretty, attractive girl, and assuredly the large dowry was not to be despised.

"Now it's *your* turn, Friedel," observed Feldbergen. "Take care you don't delay too long. When one lets the right moment go by, one goes on worrying and worrying, and doesn't know what's the matter with one. Old fool that I was! *I* might have had two years more if I'd had any sense—two good years that I can never

have now! Yesterday Mieze had her full circle round her again—we were celebrating Karen's birthday."

"Karen? I must congratulate her later on. How old was she?"

"Nineteen."

"Nineteen already! How the years go by. I always see her as a little girl with black plaits and short frocks. Absurd, how hard it is to get rid of an idea like that."

"A nice, sweet, clever girl!" said Joshua. "I always have a little talk with her when I pass. You may be proud of your little daughter, Feldbergen."

"Trust me! So I am. But I don't grudge her to you. . ."

Every forenoon, when he left his father, Friedrich made a round of some part of the house. To-day he had intended to inspect the ground floor, but changed his mind, and took the first floor instead.

In the carpet-room, he met a quietly, but almost elegantly, dressed woman who bowed to him as he passed. For long now Henrietta Iversen had filled the post of house detective at Elmas. She had accepted the place the more eagerly because here her activity was to be less aggressive than preventive. Her task consisted in guarding against thievery. She was to watch, and, as soon as she had made certain observations, to *hinder*, by showing plainly to those who were about to confuse the theory of Mine and Thine, that she perceived their intention; or, if something had already been appropriated, by politely but firmly requesting those concerned to allow themselves to be given a pay-docket for the "inadvertently" acquired article. The humane idea which underlay this procedure had first been promulgated by Friedrich; and ever since then, Iversen had honoured the young chief as a demi-god. The desire to "catch" had been utterly killed in her by the affair which had cost Felix Schiller his life.

From the carpet-room Friedrich passed into the art department. In a long gallery hung the newest three-colour prints—reproductions of old and modern masterpieces, at one mark each. Rubens and Raphael, Dürer and Holbein, Velasquez and Greuze, Gainsborough and Reynolds—all a shilling!

Friedrich laughed aloud to himself. "Poor Lynegaard, what a blessing you didn't live to see this day!"

Behind the gallery spread the dusky arched hall of the antique department. A scant daylight, only just enough to see by, fell obliquely from the coloured windows on the confused array of furniture, vessels, weapons, stuffs. The most valuable pieces were to be found in the adjoining rooms, where Gothic, Renaissance, rococo, and "peasant" pieces and things were arranged separately, in partitions, after the taste and style of the epoch. Karen had just finished with some customers in the large hall when Friedrich entered. She tried to pass with a greeting, but he stopped her.

"No, young lady, not so fast! Uncle Feldbergen has just been telling me that yesterday was your birthday feast. Why didn't you invite me?"

"You would have thought it a great nuisance, Herr Director."

"Do you think so? Well. . . At any rate I hope you've kept me a slice of birthday cake. Tell Aunt Mieze that I'm coming to tea this evening—that is, of course, unless you and she are already engaged?"

"No. We shall be very glad."

"And there, though a day after the feast, I shall offer you my warmest good wishes. . . So you're really nineteen already?"

"Yes, indeed, Herr Director, nineteen already!"

He shook his head as if he could not realise it. Nineteen! Just the same age as Agnes had been, at that time. . . And just as slender and lissom and beautiful

—and yet different, so different, that the comparison almost seemed an offence to the lovely girl who stood there before him with her proud, pure eyes.

He was obliged to make a great effort to tear himself from his profound reverie.

"Fräulein Karen Nickelsen, for the first time I must draw your attention to an offence committed by you against the rules of the house," he said with great solemnity, and pointed to a spray of lily-of-the-valley which she had fastened in the front of her dress.

Karen caught at the flowers nervously, and murmured an apology. Uncle Feldbergen had bought them for her on the way. . .

"Yes, but that is no excuse; whoever may have bought them, it is forbidden to wear flowers during business hours. Hand them here—I confiscate the contraband. . ." Through his mask of sanctimonious strictness there broke a laughing gleam of the eye: "Will you give me the lilies, Karen?"

She bent her head and gave them.

"Thank you. . . Then *auf Wiedersehen,* this evening in Aunt Mieze's room!"

With the spray of flowers in his hand, he left her. A little girl at the knitting counter, thinking herself unseen, had taken a big bite out of an apple, and now ducked in terror—but she might have munched gaily on, for the usually strict and watchful chief saw nothing either at his right hand or his left. From the small white bells in his hand there seemed to creep white magic. . . The sweet delicate odour reminded him of the giver, of the slender, sweet, pale child away there in the half-light of the dusky, fantastic hall. . . She was moving beside him, was she not? for quite plainly he thought to see her. . .

"Where *was* I, in the old days?" he said softly, as in a dream, drinking in the fragrance.

A curve in the gallery which shut off the japanned goods department from the outer court, made just here a little conning-tower, whence one enjoyed a picturesque bird's-eye view of a great part of the ground floor. He stopped and looked.

Like a parti-coloured, swaying sea the purchasers moved below along the broad corridors; a glowing kaleidoscope of ever new patterns and pictures filled every vein of the great building with warm, throbbing, rustling life; it coagulated at the pay-desks and packing-counters, spurted into the furthest corners of the place, and rolled again in one broad stream through the tall portals into the street. Above the glove counter there hung endless rows of tan, white, and black gloves, like garlands of mountain-ash, mistletoe, and blackberries; the thousand chains and festoons of white and coloured handkerchiefs reminded one of festal flags, as they soared flutteringly to the galleries of the first storey. . . A solemn mood fell on the man who looked down upon it all from his little tower. He alone knew the ideals of the "great Müllenmeister," and they were his own also.

After twenty years, not ELMAS any more. . . No "Emporiums, Limited". . . The first syllable discarded; the second retained. MAS: Müllenmeister and Sons—masters in the house, rulers absolute and unquestioned. It must be dared, and it could be done. . .

"Where *was* I, in the old days?" he said again to his spirit. In those early years he had seen life through the pink gelatine paper of the old notion of "making others happy by sacrificing oneself". . . Then he had worn, and was wearing still, the blue spectacles of a pessimistic quarrel with all the world. Work and the shop had filled the void that had suddenly gaped in his life, had consoled him for the disillusion he had undergone. . . But why look through either pink gelatine or

blue glasses? There below was Reality—the great, bright, cheerful, motley, uncontrolled tide of life. The daily overture was resounding—the manifold humanity and rustling of humanity, the jingling of money at the cash-desks, the endlessly complex symphony of sound. What need of spectacles and sound-conductors for the understanding of life? It needed only seeing eyes and hearing ears for joy and grief, for laughter and laments. . . Oh, no! for him who wills to do the utmost with his life, something more is needed. A good, true comrade to go with him through thick and thin—a bright young spirited companion. . .

Friedrich Müllenmeister lifted the lilies almost adoringly to his lips, and kissed them.

(1)

THE END