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presents:

Guests in the House

by Hermynia Zur Mühlen (1883-1951)

London: Frederick Muller, 1947.

No translator named. No indication that the work was translated.

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Original German title:

Nora hat eine famose Idee.

First serialized in the Vienna magazine *Bunte Woche*,
6 November 1932 - 14 May 1933.

Dr. Patrik von zur Muehlen
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Germany

Dear Mrs. Ockerbloom,

Professor Gossman asked me to inform you about the copyright problems concerning the books of Hermynia Zur Muehlen. Indeed, these problems seem to be very murky, but I can help you to clear them up.

The marriage of Hermynia and my great-uncle Viktor von zur Muehlen was dissolved in 1920, so that neither the family as a whole nor any member of it is entitled to the copyright of her novels, fairy tales, essays etc. In 1938 she married her second husband Stefan Klein, a citizen of Czechoslovakia; he died nine years after her in 1960 – as we know – without a testament. They had no children, and neither had brothers or sisters who could claim the copyright.

The Publishing House – the Malik Verlag – where most of her books were published belonged to the Communist Party; it does not exist today.

Moreover, German copyright had a validity of 50 years (now 70 years) and Hermynia Zur Muehlen died in 1951; hence no other publisher, such as S. Bermann Fischer, or anybody else, can enter a protest against any form of reprinting, re-editing or republishing of her books; the books are available for everybody.

With respect to her translated books there we have the same situation. As I know, all of her books were translated by herself anonymously or under a pseudonym (i.e. Lawrence H. Desberry), perhaps revised by a native speaker.

In the last fifty years many of her books have been reprinted or republished without any problems. In many cases the publishers asked me or relatives of mine and always we gave the same answer. I would much appreciate seeing her works published, whether printed or posted to the internet or in any other form.

Sincerely yours

Patrik von zur Muehlen

By the same Author

WE POOR SHADOWS
CAME THE STRANGER

Guests in the House

by

Countess Hermynia Zur Mühlen

LONDON

Frederick Muller Limited

29 GREAT JAMES STREET

W.C.1

FIRST PUBLISHED BY FREDERICK MULLER, LTD.
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LONDON, READING AND FAKENHAM



To My Husband



THIS BOOK IS PRODUCED IN
COMPLETE CONFORMITY WITH THE
AUTHORISED ECONOMY STANDARDS

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CHAPTER I

L YING at ease in an arm-chair, Nora Sternbach yawned and stretched herself lazily. It was much too sultry to go to bed. Even on the balcony the heat of the August night was unbearable, and the wind rustling the leaves in the garden seemed to come from a furnace.

Nora put out her hand for the paper lying on the small table and began turning over the pages. In the mellow light of the reading lamp she skimmed the news. Politics bored her; suicides—what a lot of people seemed to commit suicide nowadays; trade-news, a long and dull article on the Elster Bank; advertisements, perhaps she'd find a cook—Martha's 'cooking had been vile for the last three weeks, she would have to give her notice.

A car came up the hill, stopped before the gate, began humming again. Nora frowned and looked at her watch. Midnight; surely Ottokar could not be back already?

The car had stopped. Nora heard her husband's low voice and the louder one of the chauffeur. The man seemed to have a lot to say. After a while Nora heard his "Good night, Count Ottokar," and then the car being driven in the direction of the garage.

Nora got up, smoothed her tousled hair and stepped into the sitting-room.

As soon as her husband opened the door, she said impatiently:

"Why are you back so early?"

He went up to her and kissed her hand.

"It's past midnight, dear. I did not want to keep the poor devil of a chauffeur waiting any longer."

"The chauffeur! Ottokar, don't prevaricate, confess that you've once again forgotten to be unfaithful to me."

The tall slender, fair-haired man gazed at her in dismay.

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"Good gracious, Nora, I really did forget. You see, I met Professor Brown and we went to his house. He's discovered a most interesting fact likely to revolutionize the whole doctrine of heredity. I must tell you about it."

"I don't want to hear about congenital idiots and that kind of thing. You know it bores me to tears. You'd better think of poor Miss Grey who has been waiting for you at the Regina bar ever since ten o'clock. That's the fourth time you've planted her. How am I ever to get my divorce if you *will* forget to be unfaithful to me?"

"Heavens! Poor Miss Grey! How abominably rude of me. I must send her some flowers to-morrow."

"You won't. You'll take her up the Semmering to-morrow and trot her about all over the place. You'll dine with her and spend the night at the hotel with her. I won't let you put it off for ever."

Sitting down with a sigh, Ottokar gloomily lit a cigarette. Nora went over to her writing table and took off the telephone receiver. Her thin fingers nervously dialled the number. After a short while she heard a familiar voice.

"Nora Sternbach speaking. You really must forgive my husband, dear Miss Grey. He was unable to come. He had a most important business appointment"; making a face at her husband, she whispered: "I'm sure you've never had one in your life." She went on talking into the telephone. "What did you say? Oh no, to-morrow. He'll come and fetch you in the car. At eleven. Will that suit you? You can't? But surely it's only a formality. . . . No, he'll sit in an easy chair and read, and you can sleep all night long. . . . Dear Miss Grey. . . ." Nora began to coo. "Darling Miss Grey, you're not going to leave me in the lurch? After all, you promised. . . ."

She went on talking for another minute, then she slammed down the receiver.

"A pretty kettle of fish. The woman's got engaged and is afraid her fiancé might come to hear of it. She really might know by now how hopelessly virtuous you are. But she won't listen to reason, and the whole thing's off. What are we to do?"

Ottokar looked guilty.

"I'm so sorry, dear. You must forgive me. If only we could manage some other way. But the law . . ."

"Don't for goodness' sake deliver a lecture on the law of divorce. I'm frantic. I really believe you do it on purpose. You don't want me to divorce you."

He looked at her wistfully.

"I want you to do whatever you think best, dear. Even if it hurts me."

Her voice grew gentler.

"You're a dear. I can quite imagine another woman being happy with you. But I . . ."

She shrugged nervously.

"I know I bore you. I'm too quiet; you ought to have a live wire for a husband, not a dull fellow like me. But you'll get your divorce. I promise not to keep you waiting any longer."

"You'd better make a note of it: 10 p.m. be unfaithful to my wife."

"I wish you would not laugh, Nora. The whole thing is disgusting."

"I think so too. It would be much nicer to separate in a friendly way. Because we really are good friends, aren't we? But it can't be done. You refuse to beat me, and I suppose you don't want me to—"

He interrupted her, betraying temper for the first time.

"Certainly not. I would never allow you . . ."

She gave him a searching look.

"What makes you hate the idea so? Love for me or consideration for the family name?"

He hesitated, and she watched him with growing irritation. How she had come to hate his eternal indetermination during the two years of her married life.

"Maybe both," he said at last. "You know I don't care a hang for my title. That kind of thing is growing obsolete. But the Sternbachs were always decent, and their women never got talked about. And as we're the last of the family I really should prefer . . ."

"You'll marry again."

"No."

"Was marriage with me so odious that you don't want to try the experiment a second time?"

"On the contrary, it was so good a thing that I could never marry another woman."

"Don't say that, my dear, you make me feel a beast. Sometimes I think we might have got on beautifully if we had had less money . . . if I had had something to do."

She reached for a cigarette and burst out laughing.

"I'm talking nonsense. You would be lost without money, without servants to wait on you, without a solicitor who manages all your affairs."

He flushed a dark red.

"I certainly seem to cut a sorry figure," he said, a tinge of bitterness in his voice. "Unfortunately you're right."

"I did not mean to hurt you. Sorry."

She got up slowly.

"I'm going to bed. Good night. You may kiss me, there's no one to see us."

He stooped down to her—she hardly reached his shoulders—and gently kissed her on the forehead.

Her low laugh sounded slightly annoyed.

"That's the way you kiss a woman you pretend to love. And then you're surprised. . . ."

He opened the door for her and she left the room without another word.

Ottokar put out the light and sat down again. The room was very quiet. From time to time he heard the honk of a passing car, and once a sleepy bird woke up and twittered in the branches of an old walnut-tree. After a while he got up and went out on to the balcony. In Nora's room the light was still on.

* * *

Nora could not sleep. She tossed from side to side and even the thin silk blanket seemed too heavy. She threw it off with an impatient movement. Taking up a book she tried to read, but the book bored her; she could not get up an interest in the story. She turned off the light and closed her eyes, trying to make her mind a blank. But she was wider awake than ever. Jumping out of bed she sat down in the bow window and lit a cigarette.

In the distance summer lightning flashed across the sky. It grew stronger and black clouds hid the stars. Thunder rumbled through the peaceful night, and heavy rain-drops pattered on the leaves. A smell of damp earth came through the open window; the cool was delightful after the hot day and the sultry evening.

Nora drew a deep breath, feeling less nervous. She loved thunderstorms and all untamed things; she adored every kind of noise—barbaric music, the honking of cars, the ringing and screeching of trams, the rumbling of trucks. She had known too much quiet and calm as a girl.

Her thoughts went back to the small watering-place where her father was a doctor. Long ago, before her time, it had been full of life. Famous men and women had come there from all over the world, and the old

baroque houses proudly displayed faded inscriptions boasting of artists, statesmen and poets who had once lived there. In deserted gardens old rose-trees shed their petals on weed-choked paths. Climbing up the green hill hotels and boarding houses shrieked on immense posters for guests that never came. The big Casino-park and the once famous spring were deserted, and the forest where the baths had been was visited only by squirrels and birds.

Nora remembered the deadly dullness of her home. The small windows, looking out on an empty, narrow by-street, the cheerless rooms. Her father, taciturn and moody, her mother caring only for local events—engagements, weddings, births and the death of men and women who had been her husband's patients. Her world was a tiny one, consisting of town gossip, the price of food and the flightiness of modern maids.

Nora had wanted to leave home to go and live in Vienna and get a job. But her parents would not let her.

"You ought to thank God that you have not to earn your living like other girls," her mother used to say. "Just think if you had to work in a stuffy office. You don't know how well off you are."

Summer brought a few guests; mostly rheumatic old people who lay about in deck-chairs, and spent their time eating and sleeping.

Nora walked in the Casino-park, watching the guests rest, listening to the band and longing to get away. In winter the small town hibernated, slumbering placidly under a thick blanket of snow. Nora sat by the fire, half dazed by boredom. She read all day long, preferring novels that told her about the big world she was cut off from; about dances, shows, music and fun. Looking up she would see her father buried in a medical journal and her mother darning socks. Sometimes she felt that she would go mad; that she would be capable of committing a crime only to get away.

Two years ago—she was just nineteen—a young man had come to consult her father; a well dressed, handsome young man.

Her mother had watched him enter the house, and in the evening she assailed her husband with questions.

"Who was that young man? Is he going to stay here for some time? What is the matter with him?"

The doctor pushed up his glasses, and keeping his finger between the pages of his medical journal, replied grumpily:

"Count Sternbach, a Viennese."

Nora could still remember her mother's small blue eyes sparkling with inquisitiveness.

"Has he got money? Where is he staying?"

"At the Bristol. Why do you want to know?"

Nora's mother had only smiled slyly. Her husband had not guessed what her questions meant, but Nora had. She knew exactly what her mother was thinking: "Just the husband I want for my daughter—rich, good-looking, and a count. Nora is quite pretty enough to marry a count. I must do my best."

Thinking of the weeks that followed, Nora's smile grew grim. The young man had been an easy prey. He was touched by the maternal kindness shown by the doctor's wife, and enjoyed coming to the house. After a week Mrs. Berend knew all there was to know: that Ottokar was the only son of Count Sternbach; that he had a younger sister who was at school in Switzerland; that his parents wanted him to marry; that he was wealthy and terribly shy; that he was afraid of girls and greatly interested in medicine.

Ottokar was handsome and charming, and Nora wanted to leave home at any price. Fate had given her a chance; why should she not grasp it?

Four weeks later Ottokar proposed, stammering and

stuttering, and was accepted. The doctor's wife was blissfully happy. Neither she nor her daughter ever knew that the opposition of the Sternbach family against his marriage with a "little nobody" had driven Ottokar to propose. He had all the obstinacy proper to quiet people, and he hated class-distinctions.

They were married in August. Mrs. Berend was off her head with joy. She only opened her mouth to say: "My son-in-law, Count Sternbach . . . my daughter's mother-in-law, the Countess. . . ." She felt as though she herself had been ennobled, and thanked God on her bended knees, so she said, for the happiness of her only, dearly beloved child.

Happiness . . . ? Nora, re-living the past two years, shrugged impatiently. Marriage had given her money and a title, a fine house in Vienna, and the pleasure of being well-dressed and greatly admired. But the capital had become poverty-stricken after the Great War, and glamorous, merry, light-hearted Vienna was a thing of the past. As soon as Nora had become accustomed to being a wealthy woman—and to-day it seemed to her that this had come to pass in a very short time—the old deadly boredom that had tortured her at home returned.

Ottokar spoilt her. He left no wish of hers unfulfilled. Even her in-laws had become reconciled. But her husband bored her, and his calm irritated her. When they were alone he would read for hours without saying a word, just as her father had done. She knew that he hated everything she liked—noise, bustle, parties, dances and night clubs.

She grew peevish and discontented. It annoyed her that Ottokar always remained the same—courteous and gentle. If only he, too, would be unkind and just for once cross, unjust, like other people. If only he would not always let her have her way. If only he would sometimes fly into a temper. There were days when she even

longed for her mother, who was a master in the art of making scenes.

She wished that she could fall in love with another man; it would make a change. She would have been afraid of Ottokar finding her out. But other men bored her too. Everything bored her. She felt she would not be able to go on like this any longer.

When they had been married two years she told her husband that she wanted a divorce. He did not seem surprised. His face grew sad, but he only said:

"If you feel like that, my dear. . . . Of course I shall do what you want."

He had stared out of the window without speaking, whilst she nervously waited for him to say something, to try and make her change her mind, or at least to be angry for once.

When he turned his head, he only said gently: "I'm glad my parents are dead. They would have hated it. I shall talk to my solicitor to-morrow. Of course I shall let you divorce me."

Rather unreasonably Nora had felt hurt. He did not seem to mind losing her. After all, she was pretty, and she could be charming if she wanted to. He might have shown distress.

"We'll remain good friends all the same, won't we?" she had asked rather timidly.

"Of course, my dear."

Then he had suddenly flushed and looked uncomfortable.

"As to the alimony, you know of course that I shall allow you more than you are entitled to by law?"

Nora had been sure of it. She felt ashamed of having given money a thought; and because she felt ashamed, had said dryly:

"I should like to have the house."

"All right. I shan't remain in Vienna after the divorce."

Nora had expected to be divorced within a few weeks, but she had not reckoned with Ottokar's absent-mindedness. For the last two months he had kept forgetting to give her grounds for divorce. Remembering the unlucky incident of the evening, she frowned. Did he really forget it or was he after all hoping she would change her mind and let herself be influenced by her mother?

As soon as she had heard of the pending divorce, Mrs. Berend had rushed up to town, arriving at the house, red in the face, flustered, breathless, her hat awry, stern and angry.

"Have you taken leave of your senses, Nora? I won't have it. You're not going to be so foolish. A divorce! Just think what the people at home would say. You know how they feel about divorce."

Vaguely Nora saw in her mind's eye the "people at home," the proprietors of the big hotels, the chemist, the vicar and his fat wife, the manager of the Casino and his thin one. She almost heard them whisper:

"Have you heard the news? Doctor Berend's daughter is getting a divorce. Of course her parents pretend it's the husband's fault. But the girl always was fast. . . . No one ever understood that delightful young Count marrying her. . . ."

"I shall die with shame if my friends get to know about it," Mrs. Berend had said tearfully.

"I'm sorry, Mother, but it can't be helped."

Mrs. Berend had sighed gustily and had gone on talking till Ottokar came home. Hearing him come in, she had run to meet him in the hall.

"I've just been talking to my daughter," she had said grimly. "But she won't listen to me. No wonder, poor child. For you must admit, Ottokar, that it is a shame to be unfaithful to one's wife after so short a time. . . . I would never have thought it of you. . . ."

Ottokar had gazed helplessly at the angry woman,

"After all, you are a gentleman, Ottokar; you ought to know better. I must say I'm terribly disappointed in you."

"I'm sorry, Mama."

"But, as I told Nora, wives must learn to forgive. After all, you're young and young men do get carried away. I suppose you lost your head and the hussy tempted you. You were unable to resist her glamour."

Ottokar, thinking of Miss Grey who was forty if she were a day and who had a fearful squint, could not repress a smile.

His mother-in-law saw the smile, and felt annoyed.

"I never thought of you as a heartless cynic, Ottokar. After all the trouble your poor parents took to bring you up properly. My poor child, my poor Nora! How she must have suffered! But don't let's cry over spilt milk. Nora will forgive you. A loving wife always forgives." She lowered her voice to a whisper: "I, too, had to forgive my dear husband, fifteen years ago. It was in June; I remember perfectly. Such a rainy June. I was terribly unhappy, but I forgave him. Nora is sure to. . . ."

Ottokar interrupted her.

"Nora is not going to forgive me, Mama. Please don't worry her."

Mrs. Berend gazed at him reproachfully.

"You're the typical, frivolous aristocrat, Ottokar; the kind one reads about in novels. You don't understand the sacredness of matrimony. Only the upper middle classes lead an exemplary family-life. It would have been much better for my poor daughter had she married a doctor or a lawyer. I told her so at the time. But she was head over heels in love with you, and would not listen to me. She always was headstrong. You must have guessed, Ottokar, that I was against the marriage from the very first. Unfortunately, I was only too right."

Ottokar tried vainly to remember his mother-in-law's

opposition to their marriage. He felt miserable, and wanted to get away.

"I'm sure you are right, Mama. But we must do what Nora wants."

Mrs. Berend's small eyes grew bright with curiosity.

"Nora is so secretive; I hardly know anything. . . . Tell me, Ottokar, how often were you unfaithful to my poor child?"

Ottokar changed colour. Murmuring a few unintelligible words, he ran from the hall and fled to his study, bolting the door behind him.

After his mother-in-law had gone home, he said to his wife:

"Listen, Nora, you know that I always do what you want. But for goodness' sake don't let your mother talk to me. I'm always afraid of blurting out the truth when she has me on the carpet."

Nora looked out into the pouring rain and laughed softly, remembering the talks between Ottokar and her mother. Then she grew serious again.

What a pity that kind, charming man bores me so terribly, she mused. He's behaving so decently, poor dear. I'm sick of the whole thing. But I simply must be free to do as I like. After the divorce I shall have a good time; lots of money to spend, a title and no husband. He can have his little sister to live with him. What a blessing that Irene is seventeen and is leaving school. He'll be perfectly happy with her.

She shuddered; the storm was driving icy raindrops through the window. Looking out she saw a dark figure standing on the balcony.

Ottokar, she thought. He can't sleep, either. But what is keeping him awake? The idea of losing me, or Professor Brown's new doctrine of heredity?

She shook herself like a dog that has just come out of the water. Then she got up and stood before her mirror.

She rather liked what she saw: dark, curly hair, grey eyes, a small straight nose, a slight figure. Yes, when I'm free, quite free, I'm sure to have a good time.

She felt happy and sleepy. Getting into the low grey Empire bed she rolled herself up, turned off the light, and fell asleep at once.

CHAPTER II

HOLDING the divorce papers in her hand, Nora smiled happily. Her solicitor had just left her. She sat in her small sitting-room, making plans. What was she going to do? Travel; go away as soon as possible, so as to escape her mother who was sure to come to town, weeping and sighing and, as likely as not, offering to stay with her "poor unhappy child" for an indefinite time. There was no danger of her father coming here. He had had only one talk with her, and Nora felt rather uncomfortable when she remembered his words:

"It wasn't fair of you to marry the man. Besides, I can't believe that you really care whether he's faithful to you or not. But it's your business, not mine."

Where should she go first? To think that she could travel round the whole world if she wanted to!

The large table in the middle of the room was covered with advertisements of tourists' offices and ocean liners. Nora had decided not to go to Switzerland or Italy, as most people did; not even to Egypt or Algiers, but to the South Sea Islands, or maybe to South America—to countries gay with bright colours and sun. Perhaps California would be rather nice. . . . Hollywood. . . .

The telephone rang. Nora took up the receiver and recognized Ottokar's voice.

"May I come round? I have got to tell you something."

"Do. You can help me make up my mind where I'm to go to."

"I'll be with you in ten minutes."

The servant who announced him was visibly embarrassed, and did not know what to say. Nora hid a smile listening to his stammering words:

"The Count . . . Count Sternbach. . . ?"

Of course it *was* funny hearing Ottokar announced like any casual visitor.

She got up to meet him.

"How nice of you to come, Ottokar. I wanted to thank you for having made things so easy for me."

He kissed her hand and smiled rather wryly.

"Your man certainly painted me as black as a nigger in court," he said with an undertone of reproach. "I felt like old Casanova, *the* libertine. And your mother has written me ten pages filled with horror and reproaches: if only she had known what kind of man she had trusted her poor innocent child to . . ."

"Poor Ottokar."

"The worst is yet to come. Since the divorce has been pronounced, eight women have written to me offering me their—let's call it 'love.' As if I were a boxer or a star."

"You'd better be careful, or you'll be married again before you know where you are."

Ottokar grew serious.

"No danger of that. I've got to tell you something very unpleasant, Nora. I don't know how to do it, my dear. . . . It's terribly hard on you."

"What's happened?"

He sat down opposite to her in the small arm-chair he had always hated because, sitting in it, he had never known what to do with his legs.

"I had a letter from my solicitor this morning . . ."

He broke off and looked at her helplessly.

"Well?"

"Nora, it's simply awful to have to tell you, dear. . . . I had settled eight thousand a month on you, and . . ."

"Go on."

"The bank . . ." he hesitated. "You know, the Elster Bank, where I banked; it's failed. All my money is gone."

Nora grew pale. She remained silent for a little while, trying to make sense of what Ottokar had told her. Then she said impatiently:

"Why, for goodness' sake, didn't you look after your affairs?"

"The solicitor always did everything. I don't understand anything about it. A big concern has gone bankrupt and has ruined the bank. At least, that's what my solicitor told me. What on earth do I know about concerns? I always hated that kind of thing. I see now that it was a mistake. I ought to have kept myself informed for your sake."

He sighed.

"I'm a hopeless idiot, my dear. But it's too bad that you should suffer. . . ."

"Isn't there anything left?"

"About twenty thousand *schillinge*. They were deposited somewhere else. I thought of giving you fifteen thousand. I'd like to keep five thousand, if you don't mind. You see, I shall have to look after Irene."

Nora laughed.

"With five thousand *schillinge*. Oh, my dear!"

"Professor Brown has promised to let me work in his laboratory. Of course, at first I'll only get a tiny salary."

Nora gazed at him compassionately. How decent he was, and how absolutely helpless. How on earth was he

to get on in a world that demanded brutality, bluffing, arrogance?

"You'll never be able to earn your living."

"I'll have to manage somehow. If only you . . . You never expected to be poor. How are you going to stand it?"

"After all," she said, her smile growing gentler, "I wasn't born a millionaire. We had to do a lot of economizing at home."

"It's sweet of you not to reproach me."

She fell silent and grew thoughtful. He took a cigarette and began to smoke.

"You're so pretty, Nora," he said after a little while, looking intently at her. "You're sure to marry again. That's the one thing that comforts me. In the meantime you might go and live with your parents."

"Anything rather than that."

"Darling, we'll have to sell the house and the car too, I'm afraid."

Go home; return to the desolate dreariness she had escaped from so gladly two years ago. Back to her shabby little room with the faded wallpaper, the horrible yellow roses on the brown background she had always loathed. Back to the endless evenings, to the loud voice of her mother talking inanities, to the spitefulness of her old friends. . . . She could hear them saying: "Of course, Nora HAD to marry a count. Nothing else was good enough for her. See what's come of it. She's divorced and hasn't got a penny."

Suddenly it struck her how much the silent man sitting opposite to her had given her during their married life. What had she given in return?

"Listen!" she said. "As things have fallen out this way, we'd better remain together."

He stared at her incredulously. His eyes fell on the divorce papers lying on the table.

"But we're divorced, Nora. Luckily for you."

"One can't leave a man in the lurch when he's just lost all his money."

Why on earth, she wondered, did I say that? It's the kind of thing my father might have said; the dear old man who never went back on anyone or betrayed his principles.

Ottokar shook his head.

"That's impossible, my dear."

"It isn't. Remember twenty thousand are more than fifteen thousand and five thousand. And don't forget Irene. You'll never be able to look after her. But I . . ." She suddenly grew eager. "Believe me, Ottokar; I'll manage to make money."

"And I'm to sponge on you?"

"Oh, don't be silly."

"I might accept for Irene," he said slowly. Nora could see how much even this concession hurt his pride. "She is only seventeen, spoilt, accustomed to have everything done for her. As for me, no. . . ."

His opposition annoyed her. He had always given way to her up to now. She came and sat on the arm of his chair.

"Don't be a mule, Ottokar."

"I'm not a mule."

"Then don't be so proud. Why won't you accept my help?"

He smiled.

"Darling, you're talking as if you had already made a fortune. Remember that you have nothing but a miserable fifteen thousand."

"Seventeen thousand. I've got two thousand left from my allowance."

Stooping, she stroked his curly hair.

"Look here, you can't leave me in the lurch. It would be most unfair. I want your help."

He looked up wistfully.

"You never said that before."

"But it's true, nevertheless. I want you. Don't go away. We'll fetch Irene at Lausanne and live together all three of us."

"You keep forgetting that we're divorced."

"Don't make such a fuss just because of a divorce."

She got up and went to the 'phone.

"What are you doing?" he asked.

"Calling up your hotel and telling the manager that you are giving up your room to-morrow. We must not spend more money than necessary."

She got the connection and Ottokar, listening, was too dumbfounded to object.

Then she sat down again on the arm of his chair.

"There, that's done. You'd better go to the hotel at once and pack your things. Then come back."

"You're crazy, Nora. You'll spoil all your chances."

"Bother the chances."

He looked at her searchingly.

"Do you really mean it? Do you want to live with me again?"

"I want to stay with you. Not as your wife, just as a friend who is going to help you to make good."

"And you really think I shall be able to stand that kind of thing?"

"You've been able to stand it for months. Please, don't suddenly come the passionate lover over me. Let's try it for half a year. If we don't make good, you can leave me."

Her small, rather hard face grew softer.

"Surely you know that I'm fond of you, Ottokar? Really, I am. Excepting my father, you're the most decent man I ever met. Unfortunately also the dullest. But perhaps having to earn money will wake you up. Don't contradict me. Everything is settled. You'll come here

to-morrow morning, and next week we'll go and fetch Irene. No, you'd better go alone. It will be cheaper."

She rang the bell.

"The Count is staying for lunch," she told the servant. "And tell the maid to put his room in order. He's coming here to-morrow."

"Yes, Madam."

"Now we'll talk things over, Ottokar. We won't sell the house. Houses are cheap just now. And if we take a flat we'll have to pay rent. The car," she sighed mournfully, "we'll have to sell that."

"My poor chauffeur!"

Nora laughed rather unkindly.

"Isn't that just like you. You lose about a million and instead of being sorry for yourself you pity the chauffeur."

"You see, dear, it's on account of the baby."

"What baby? What *are* you talking about?"

"He's got a little boy of three. Such a darling. His wife died about a year ago. He's been living with a girl friend who looked after the child, but last month she ran away with another man. He wants to marry again, for the child's sake; but he says it's so hard to find a good wife. And if he has to go on the dole. . . . He has a nice little flat—two rooms and a kitchen—but he won't be able to afford it if I can't keep him on."

"How do you know all that?"

"He told me all about it. You've forgotten that we're old friends. I went to see him once, and he showed me the boy. He's awfully proud of him. If only he were married, things would be much easier for him."

Nora screwed up her eyes as was her wont when thinking intently.

"He says he'd give a month's pay, if only he could find a good wife."

Ottokar's thoughts were still with the chauffeur.

"Poor old Huber."

Nora said nothing.

"I hate having to give him notice."

"He's good looking," Nora said. "Very good looking."

Ottokar stared at her.

"What are you talking about?"

"And he really can't find a suitable wife?"

"So he says. Why do you want to know? We're talking about giving him notice, not about finding him a wife."

"Listen, Ottokar! You'll give him notice. We can't afford the car. But tell him that he can come and live in the attic rooms with the child as long as he is out of work."

"You're a darling."

"Don't take me for a lady bountiful. I know why I'm doing it."

"Why?"

"I'll tell you one of these days."

Her eyes were sparkling, her small mouth was smiling mischievously.

"We'll get on all right, you'll see. I've had an idea, a wonderful idea. No, I won't tell you yet. I've got to think it over first."

"Can I help you or shall I accept Professor Brown's offer?"

"Accept it. I know you'd be miserable if you didn't earn something too."

"Too? Nora, do tell me what you are going to do."

"Wait! You'll see."

She pushed the advertisements of the tourists' offices and the ocean liners off the table.

"The South Sea Islands can wait, and so can California. Nevertheless, I'm going to a foreign country—the country of work, maybe of poverty. As a little girl

I always wanted to go exploring. One can do it without going through the desert in a caravan. I believe there are quite enough queer creatures to be found here; no need to penetrate a virgin forest." Noticing his amazement, she added; "You're a queer creature too, and so am I. We've lived together for two years without getting to know one another. You'll see that you'll discover all kinds of nice things in my make-up, and I'll probably do the same about you."

"You really want me to stay here?"

"But, my dear, we settled that hours ago. What were you going to say?"

"We've got to find out how much we can spend a month; we must . . ."

"Oh, do leave it to me."

"But it's my duty. . . ."

"Don't be a bore. You can do something much more unpleasant."

"What?"

"You can go and see my parents this afternoon and tell them that we're going to remain together."

"Nora, darling, really. . . ."

"I don't feel up to THAT. I need my pluck for other things."

She took a railway guide from her writing table and turned over the pages.

"Lunch is at one. There's a train at three forty-five. You can take that. You can come back with the seven-ten train; we'll have late dinner. . . ."

Ottokar gave in. He was far too bewildered and wretched to put up a fight, and somehow he did not even feel that he wanted to.

Buying his ticket, he remembered that he had to economize, and for the first time in his life took a third-class ticket. And for the first time in his life he mastered his shyness and talked to the people in the compartment.

He didn't want to think about the unpleasant time in store for him.

Talking and listening to the conversations all around, he recalled Nora's words about the foreign country. This third-class with the hard wooden benches really was one, populated by men and women whose lives seemed unintelligible and even mysterious to him. The kind of thing one read about in modern books, but never really believed. The people compared the amounts they earned in a week and Ottokar blushed, discovering that he spent more money on cigarettes in a month than a family with one child on their whole budget. He tried hard doing accounts in his head, and failed miserably.

A young woman with a baby was crying because her husband, who was a builder, had fallen from the scaffolding and was lying in hospital.

"And we were so glad when he got work at last."

When she got out at a small station Ottokar hurriedly pressed all the money he had found in his purse into her hand.

He reached the small watering-place and listened patiently for two endless hours to Mrs. Berend's reproaches. The good lady was not chary of them.

"First of all you make my poor daughter unhappy by leading an immoral life—I never knew a man could be so wicked before I heard Nora's solicitor in court—and now that you're divorced you talk her over into living in sin! Not only that. You go and lose all your money! I really don't know what to say to you. But I always told my daughter: 'Nora,' I said, 'whatever you do, don't marry an aristocrat. One never knows how it will turn out.' And I was right. Living together without being married! A man who cannot even look after his bank deposit! Of course, a count is too high and mighty for that kind of thing."

Ottokar kept wondering how a human being could go on talking for so long a time without getting hoarse.

If only the doctor would come home; perhaps then his wife would grow silent for a while. His ears began to hum; he felt sick and giddy, but Mrs. Berend went on talking unceasingly and did not seem to tire.

At last the clock struck a quarter to seven. Ottokar jumped up.

"You must excuse me, Mama; I've got to go. Otherwise I shall miss my train."

When he wanted to tip the maid he discovered with dismay that he had only got ten *groscoben* left. He had to go back to the sitting-room and ask Mrs. Berend for his fare.

Laughing scornfully she gave him five *schillinge*.

"So that's the way things are! You make my poor daughter miserable and then you expect us to support you!"

"Sorry, Mama! I'll send you the money to-morrow."

"To-morrow never comes. But as I always say: 'Aristocrats and swindlers are much of a muchness'."

Ottokar hastily pocketed the money and fled.

The train was late. Ottokar, walking up and down the platform espied Mrs. Berend who had come to meet a friend. He hastily hid behind a post, but her loud voice reached him:

"Yes, my dear, I've just had a delightful visit from my son-in-law, Count Sternbach. We're great friends; he looks upon me as a mother ever since his poor mother died. He simply adores me. Of course no one can deny that those old families, with their ancient traditions. . . ."

CHAPTER III

FOUR people were standing in front of the garage, saying good-bye to the fine blue car that was to be delivered to its new owner by eleven.

Ottokar, gazing at the car, suddenly saw in his mind's eye a brown copy book into which he had long ago written one of those wise sentences school teachers love to dictate :

*"Don't cling to the things that pass away,
Beauty and happiness cannot stay."*

At the time he had written the words they had made no impression upon him, but to-day, remembering them, he suddenly began to think about them. Why not cling to the things that pass away? Did not life itself "pass away" too, and ought one not to make it as beautiful as possible? Maybe, the world would be better off, if part of humanity—Ottokar thought of the passengers he had travelled with in the third-class carriage—insisted upon having the things that passed away, including that most precious of them all—life. Had they not allowed themselves to be robbed of it during the ghastly years of the Great War, as if it had been a worthless thing, rubbish, fit only to be thrown away?

Irene's clear young voice broke in upon his musings. She too was looking at the car and saying, half laughing, half serious :

"Just the right weather for saying 'Good-bye'—grey and desolate."

Thank goodness, Ottokar thought, that she does not take it to heart. He glanced at Nora. She was a little pale, a little wistful. The only one who really seemed upset was the chauffeur. He stared at the car with wet eyes and said rebelliously :

"Our lovely car, what a shafne! And the silly idiot who bought it can't even drive properly. Besides, you sold it much too cheap, sir. If you had listened to me. . . ."

Irene looked at her watch.

"You'll have to go, Mr. Huber," she said.

The chauffeur sighed gustily.

"For the last time."

Nora forced a smile.

"In a few months' time, Huber, you'll be driving the car again," she said cheerfully.

"Please God. But when aristocrats go smash they usually take a long time to recover," and he gave his former master a compassionate smile.

They watched the car driving through the gate, down the hill that led to the city. Then they walked back to the house in the cold, drizzling autumn rain, and sat in Nora's sitting-room, huddling close to the fire.

"Huber doesn't believe in our efficiency," Irene said.

"I'm afraid he's right," Ottokar replied mournfully.

"If he thinks of you only, maybe," his sister said with a teasing smile. "But then, poor boy, you were handicapped from the very beginning. The idea of calling a baby 'Ottokar'! Of course poor Mama wanted to have a Czech name in the family, nevertheless, only kings should bear that name, and the only one I can remember—the gallant Bohemian king—was conquered by a practical Swiss Habsburg, who wasn't in the least bit romantic but knew exactly what he wanted."

Nora smiled at Irene.

"I like you," she said impulsively. "We two will be efficient for all three of us. I must admit that I was rather frightened when I saw you at the station. You're so slim, so fair, you look so delicate. I felt sure you'd cry and make an awful fuss."

"Nonsense. I only look so; I'm really as strong as a horse. I can take it. I never let anything get me down."

"What do you know of life, my child?" Ottokar said wearily. "What did you learn at your Swiss school?"

"Oh, the usual stuff, and tennis and dancing."

"You won't make a fortune that way."

"Why not? Have you never heard of tennis professionals, Ottokar? If I work hard I could be one in quite a short time. Don't make faces, my dear; you needn't be a snob."

Nora passed the cigarettes to her sister-in-law, who shook her head.

"No, thanks. Smoking is bad for tennis."

She got up and walked to the window.

"Why don't you sell the house?"

"I wanted to," her brother said, "but Nora insists upon our keeping it."

"I must have a house; I must have what people call 'elegant' rooms," Nora explained.

"Why?"

"I'll tell you later on. No, don't ask anything now. Ottokar is sure to be against my plan. He'll know all about it as soon as it's working. Of course we'll economize in other ways. We'll have to manage with two maids and a cook."

"Do you call that economizing?"

"Don't say anything, Irene, before you know what we are going to do. Otto, aren't you due at your Professor's place?"

"I thought we were going to talk things over."

"That's just what Irene and I are going to do, but without you."

Ottokar looked hurt.

"We don't want you," Nora said cruelly. "Do go."

And as always, Ottokar obeyed his wife—who was his wife no longer—and left the room.

* * *

"Now we'll work," Nora said, as soon as the door had closed behind Ottokar. "Give me the directory, please. Thank you. Sit down at the writing table; you must write addresses."

"Are we going to live by writing addresses as poor people do in novels? They never seem to make much money that way as far as I can remember."

"Don't be an idiot."

Nora was studying the directory.

"Wait, take an envelope, a blue one with a crown. Now write: Mrs. Margot Wiker, 18, Sand Street, I."

"Who is Mrs. Margot Wiker?"

"I don't know, but I see that she's a widow, and Margot sounds promising. A woman who's called Margot is sure to want to marry a second time."

"Look here, Nora, are you absolutely crackers? What business is it of ours that Margot wants to marry again?"

"You'll see. Have you written the address? Give me the envelope."

Nora took a hand-made card from a stack and slipped it into the envelope. Then she returned to the directory.

"Write: Karl von Ahler, Alser St. IV. He's got a title and no money. Otherwise he'd never live on the top floor. And Margot is rich. Have you written the address?"

"I won't write another word before you tell me what you intend to do."

"I'm sending out invitations."

"Invitations? Have you forgotten that we've got to economize?"

"That's just the reason why. Write: Miss Kicki Kater, no, wait a moment. Kicki sounds suspicious. I'm sure she's no virtuous maiden longing for a husband. On the other hand she's sure to be pretty, and we need pretty women. Yes; write, Miss Kicki Kater, c/o Grundel, Kärtner St. 10."

"Nora, you must tell me what you mean by all this nonsense."

"Promise you won't tell Ottokar."

"I promise."

"Listen! Do you ever read the matrimonial advertisements in the paper?"

"Hardly ever."

"If you did, you'd know how many people want to marry and somehow can't manage to do so. A man is searching for an AFFECTIONATE HEART, or, maybe, a LOVING ONE, fair, Aryan, fond of music. Other young men confide to the world that they are six foot two and are longing for a happy home. MERRYHEART wants to make a man happy. Divorced women—the husband being the guilty party, as in our family—want to be consoled, and a NATURE-LOVING ARYAN—the expression makes me sick—is wishing to marry. Do you think these people ever meet? Does the Aryan who loves music meet the MERRYHEART? Do they marry, and does she play the piano for him after dinner? Does the young man six foot two meet the girl who does not care for going out and only wants a happy home? Or does the Aryan nature-lover meet the right *divorcee*? Believe me, they never do. And if by chance they should get to know one another, where do they meet? How do they meet? Through a horrible uncivilized matrimonial agency. That is one of the evils of our days, and I'm going to do away with it. Look!"

She pushed over one of the hand-made cards and Irene read:

"Countess Sternbach requests the pleasure of Mr.—'s company at her party on the ——. Ladies and gentlemen with matrimonial ambitions will meet suitable partners. Pleasant company. Refreshments."

"Now, do you understand? There will always be idiots who love going to a party given by a countess. The people will come in shoals. They'll meet in a glamorous atmosphere. They will fall in love, marry, and . . ."

"But Nora, all that costs a lot of money, and what are we to get out of it?"

Nora smiled superciliously.

"A commission, my dear. I've been told that one can make a lot of money that way."

"But if the people don't come?"

"They will come. The man who wants to marry a fair-haired musical Aryan has been advertising for the last two months. He's sure to come. We'll send the invitations care of the paper."

"Where are you going to find the fair-haired Aryan?"

"Oh, there's sure to be one. And if not, aren't you fair? Aren't you an Aryan?"

"Nora! Surely you won't . . ."

"Don't be frightened. I'm not going to sell you. But you're really very pretty, thank goodness, and you can flirt with the young man till he finds the lady of his choice."

Irene burst out laughing.

"Of all the crazy ideas. . . . But perhaps you're right; perhaps we'll really make money that way. But Ottokar, he'll never . . ."

"He's not to know anything about it, at least not at first. Tell him that I've got to invite people so as to get in touch with business men and women. He'll be charming, as he always is. Besides, he'll be an excellent walking gentleman."

"Nora, your own husband!"

"He isn't my husband. Perhaps I can find a nice wife for him."

Irene grew serious.

"I was terribly angry with you when I heard about your divorce. Of course I knew that Ottokar had never been unfaithful to you. He's much too fond of you. I simply hated you. Then Ottokar came to Lausanne and told me: 'We've lost all our money. You've got to

come home and live with Nora and me.' I was absolutely dumbfounded. You're divorced and yet you're living together. As long as he was rich you wanted to leave him, and now that he's poor . . ."

"I simply could not leave him; you must admit that he would never be able to cope with life all by himself."

"Perhaps you're right. But that does not explain your change of heart. . . ."

"Never mind my heart. Write: Mr. B. Arend Schönbrunn. . . ."

* * *

"Ottokar," Nora said at breakfast about a week later. "You must stay at home after dinner to-night. I'm expecting a few people. You'll have to be here."

"Who is coming?"

"You don't know the people. They're . . . they're business people I've got to meet. They'll be most useful to us. Do stay at home and be charming."

"Darling, I don't want to preach, but having guests costs money, and we really . . ."

"Sometimes one HAS to use one's capital," Nora said grandiloquently, delighted with the business-like sound of her own words.

Ottokar shrugged.

"I don't understand anything about business. Perhaps you do."

"Anyway, you'll be here, won't you?"

"If you want me to, of course."

After breakfast Nora and Irene sat in the small sitting-room re-reading the letters that had come in answer to the invitations.

"Margot is coming, and the young man six foot two, and the Aryan nature-lover. The one fair-haired Aryan

girl unfortunately seems to have found a husband in the meantime or to have changed her mind. You'll have to play her part, Irene. Karl von Ahler is coming; he's a German officer on half-pay and sure to be odious, but you'll have to flirt with him if no other fair girl turns up. We must not lose him. Even a 'von' is precious."

She took up another letter.

"This sounds promising: a count, excellent old family, good looking. We're sure to find a wife for him."

The maid came with a wire. Nora read it and tore it into tiny shreds. She looked upset.

"What's up?" Irene asked a trifle nervously.

"Mother! She's coming this afternoon and intends to stay here for two days. What on earth are we to do?"

"Wire and ask her to come to-morrow."

"You don't know mother. Nothing in the world can make her change her mind."

Nora rested her head in both hands and said despairingly: "Just when things were going beautifully. What ARE we to do?"

"Send her to a play."

"She hates the theatre."

"Shall I take her to the pictures?"

"No, I need you here. Besides, Mother dislikes the pictures. It's simply ghastly. She'll spoil everything."

Irene considered.

"You'll have to tell your mother that you have had to invite some business people."

"I might do that. But how am I to explain mother to our guests?"

"Look here," Irene said eagerly, "there's a Mr. Kramer coming who wants to marry a widow between fifty and sixty, being desirous—so he writes—of spending his old age in peace and happiness. We'll introduce your mother as a widow."

"And you really expect the poor man to believe that

he could spend his old age in peace and happiness married to mother?"

"We'll give her a 'von' and we'll give him one too, then your mother is sure to be nice to him."

Nora sighed doubtfully.

"We'll have to manage somehow. Come along, Irene, let's go shopping. The food must be really good at the first party. I'm so glad that the chauffeur has agreed to play the footman. It looks ever so much better if a man answers the door."

* * *

After a rather sketchy dinner Nora said to her husband: "I'd rather you didn't come in before half-past nine, Ottokar. By then all the people will be here."

"I can't imagine why you allow Nora to give parties, Ottokar," Mrs. Berend said reprovingly. "That kind of thing costs a lot of money."

"Business; it's a business affair," he stammered. Nora had instructed him to say that.

"I simply can't understand you. How can you allow poor dear Nora to get mixed up with business people? After all she's a Countess Sternbach and *noblesse oblige*."

Irene came to her brother's aid.

"You can't call it a business affair in the literal sense of the word, dear Mrs. Berend," she said sweetly. "You will meet only the very best people to-night. You see, nowadays aristocrats have to work too. Just remember how many of them belong to a board of directors."

"That's true." Mrs. Berend said slightly mollified.

Nora looked at her affectionately.

"You look so tired, dearest. If you don't feel up to seeing people, just go to bed."

"No, my child. I AM tired; the journey here has

exhausted me, but of course I'll help you to do your duty as a hostess."

"Go and have a little rest now, dear Mrs. Berend," Irene said coaxingly. "You will feel all the better afterwards and look better too."

"Perhaps you're right, my child. Tell Marie to wake me up in an hour."

She left the room. Ottokar went to his study. Nora and Irene sat in the large drawing-room, feeling terribly excited. They had put on their prettiest frocks and had had their hair set. The house was brilliantly lighted, and the sideboard in the dining-room looked decidedly tempting.

The first ring came at nine.

Huber, wearing the Sternbach livery, announced:

"Mrs. Wiker."

"Oh dear," Irene whispered as a young, very pretty woman entered the room. "Black hair, black eyes. We'll never find a husband for her."

Nora received her guest with great cordiality.

"I do hope you understand my reason for coming, Countess," Mrs. Margot Wiker said. "I don't really care to marry. My husband has left me a tidy fortune, and I rather enjoy being a widow. But I wanted to make your acquaintance. That's why I came."

"Of course. I'm delighted to meet you."

Huber opened the folding door.

"Mr. Gedecke."

"The Aryan nature-lover," Irene hurriedly whispered to her sister-in-law.

Mr. Gedecke was small and rather fat. He spoke with a pronounced Prussian accent. Seeing pretty Margot he frowned, but when his eyes fell upon Irene's fair hair and blue eyes, his face grew more amiable.

"Gedecke," he introduced himself stiffly. "I am a German, although I live in Austria."

"I'm so pleased to make your acquaintance, Mr. Gedecke," Nora said. "I have heard such a lot about you."

Mr. Gedecke looked flattered.

"I'm sure, I'm greatly honoured. You must not think, Countess Sternbach, that I want to marry. But one likes to meet the best people, and unfortunately there are so few left in your country. Not as at home, in Germany. May I ask who told you about me?"

Nora flushed nervously; why had she said that? After all, she could not answer "The paper." Irene rushed into the breach.

"Do introduce Mr. Gedecke to me," she said, giving him the glad eye.

"Sorry, dear! Mr. Gedecke, Countess Sternbach, Mrs. Wiker."

Mr. Gedecke bowed twice—a deep bow meant for the fair aristocrat, a negligent one for the black-haired commoner, Mrs. Wiker. Then he drew up a chair beside Irene and began to talk about nature at once.

More guests arrived: Karl von Ahler, a squat red-faced man who looked like a butcher and who appeared fascinated by Miss Kicki Kater, who really seemed to be what Nora had imagined; a MERRYHEART, whose name was Ernestine Salt, fortyish, and looking as miserable as could be; the young man six foot two, who had an impediment in his speech and who looked round the room desperately as if wanting to find a corner in which to hide; Count Ponitzky, by no means old as Irene had expected—a tall, handsome, charming man, well-dressed, with delightful manners.

Kicki Kater suddenly seemed to grow bored with Karl von Ahler and began flirting with the Count. Watching him surreptitiously, even Ernestine Salt's unhappy face grew a little more cheerful.

Count Ponitzky studied all the women, but none of

them seemed to please him. He went and sat beside Nora, who was trying hard to make her guests feel at home. The moment Mrs. Berend entered the room, the Count seemed to lose all interest in his hostess. After a little while he retired to a corner with the elderly lady and began making love to her.

Nora could hardly prevent herself laughing as she watched the flattered expression on her mother's face. Mrs. Berend had not been flirted with for at least thirty years. But Irene frowned nervously, and the other women began to look annoyed.

At a quarter to ten Huber threw open the door with a flourish:

"Count Sternbach."

Ottokar came in, bewildered, feeling as if in a dream. Why did the chauffeur announce him in his own house? And, his glance falling upon Mr. Gedecke and Karl von Ahler, what were these awful people doing here?

Irene ran up to him and said in a whisper: "Don't look astonished, whatever happens. It's all in the day's work." Then she introduced him, stressing the words: "My brother."

Ernestine Salt blushed all over when Ottokar kissed her hand. Nobody had ever done that before. Count Ponitzky screwed up his eyes and a queer little smile twisted his lips.

Nora, frightened out of her wits at the idea that either Ottokar or her mother might say something awful, said hurriedly:

"Let's go into the dining-room. I'm sure you'd all like a drink. Take in Mrs. Wiker, Mr. Cap," she said to the young man six foot two. "She looks as if a glass of champagne might do her good."

Ottokar gave his arm to Ernestine Salt, who suddenly looked as if she really had a merry heart. The others followed and sat down at the large mahogany table. The

last to come were Mrs. Berend and Count Ponitzky. She was talking volubly, and the Count was listening with a fascinated expression on his handsome face.

Nora went up to Irene, who was pouring herself out a glass of champagne.

"Look at mother," she said nervously. "I'm sure something terrible is going to happen."

"Don't worry. I told the Count that she was a very rich widow and rather a crank. So it does not matter in the least what she says. She'll hardly talk about your father, will she?"

Nora, thinking of the quiet, taciturn man who had so little to say in his own house, nodded.

"No, she's not likely to mention him."

Then she went and sat down beside the Aryan Nature Lover.

CHAPTER IV

Now at last the guests seemed to be feeling happy. Nora gave a sigh of relief; everything was going well. Mr. Cap was chatting away to Margot Wiker, the Aryan Nature Lover was drinking hard and eating noisily, Kicki Kater was flirting with all the men, and Ernestine Salt was laughing gaily at Ottokar's harmless jokes.

Then came a ring at the door.

"That's probably the man of the peaceful old age," Irene remarked under her breath to her sister-in-law.

Huber went to open the door. He came back looking rather upset, and Irene got up and went into the adjoining room. Huber followed her.

"There's a man in the hall," Huber said icily. "He says he's been invited."

"Ask him in. It's probably Mr. Kramer."

"I said a MAN, Miss Irene; not a gentleman. He's badly dressed; he does not belong in here. What am I to do with him? Send him away?"

Irene considered an instant.

"No, we won't send anyone away."

"But, I told you, Miss Irene, he's a man, not a gentleman."

"For our purpose a man is better than a gentleman," Irene said frivolously with a little laugh.

Huber stared at her and grew red in the face. Irene went into the hall.

A little man was standing there, turning his hat nervously between his fingers. A little, shabby, timid man, visibly over-awed by the grandeur of his surroundings. He had kind brown eyes and a pleasant face which Irene liked at first sight.

"Come in, Mr. Kramer," she said gently. "We're just having supper."

The little man began to stammer.

"I never knew . . . perhaps . . . I think I'd better go."

"Why?"

"I think it would be wiser."

"No. Do come and have supper, Mr. Kramer."

The little man plucked up courage.

"Miss . . . I don't fit in here. I must tell you the truth; my name is not Kramer."

"That doesn't matter. You're welcome all the same."

"No, I'd rather go."

"Won't you tell me why?"

"You see, Miss . . ."

The little man swallowed hard. Irene could see his Adam's apple going up and down. He took out a big red handkerchief and mopped his forehead.

"I will tell you the whole truth. I'm not called Kramer. Mr. Kramer is my chief. . . ."

The little man's voice faded away mournfully.

"Yes," Irene said encouragingly.

"My name is Bite—Theodore Bite; Mr. Kramer is my chief. He's an official, a servant of the State, a great man. I'm . . . I'm only a bailiff."

Irene remembered with dismay that in Austria the tax collector also acted as bailiff. Good Lord, she thought, feeling herself turn pale, has he come on account of the income tax or has he got a warrant? For a moment she was unable to say a word. Was the little man going to cart away the furniture? Hardly; she would have heard the truck drive up. Besides neither a bailiff nor a tax collector would come after ten at night. She recovered her composure and smiled sweetly at Mr. Bite.

He drew a deep breath and went on talking:

"The invitation . . . the card . . . the invitation the gracious Countess sent Mr. Kramer. . . . He threw it into the waste-paper basket. That's to say, he wanted to, but it fell on the floor. . . . I picked it up; I hate untidiness. . . . Then I read it. . . ."

"Yes?"

"And . . . you see, I've been thinking of marrying for some years. And there was nothing about having to pay an advance, so I thought. . . . But now I see that I don't belong here; it's much too grand for the likes of me."

He gave a deep sigh.

"I'll have to try somewhere else."

"But if you want to get married?"

"I do. You see, Miss, I must tell you how things stand. I am going on for fifty-three. My birthday is next week. And as one gets older one suffers from loneliness. Always to come back to an empty room. My dog died four months ago. Such a dear dog, so clever, so affectionate. You can't imagine how pleased he always was when I came home. And then he died of old age."

"Poor darling!" Irene said, not quite sure whether she meant the dog or Mr. Bite.

"You see, I don't care for politics, and I don't drink, and I don't like reading. Ever since my Fido died—he was an Alsatian, pure breed, with a pedigree—I don't even care to listen-in any longer. He always pricked up his ears when I turned on the wireless and now, when I turn it on it makes me think of him, and that makes me feel bad."

"I quite understand."

"So you see, when Fido died, I said to myself: 'Theodore,' I said, 'you must marry. A lonely life is too sad.' A man must have a little happiness and a little comfort, don't you think so too? Especially a man who is never welcome wherever he goes. I see nothing but angry faces and tears all day long. My Fido wagged his tail as soon as he saw me. He knew that I did not mean to be cruel when I . . . Well, you see, if I had a wife and was kind to her, maybe she would be fond of me. . . . But I don't belong here; the house is much too grand. Excuse me. Sorry to have troubled you."

He made a clumsy bow, but Irene caught hold of his arm. The very man for Merryheart; anyway, one could not let the poor fellow go back to his desolate room.

"You're mistaken, Mr. Bite," she said very kindly. "Do come in. You'll feel quite happy here."

"If I had known I would at least have dressed. I have got a dinner jacket, really and truly."

"Oh never mind, come along!"

She pulled him into the dining-room. Here she introduced him, without mentioning his profession. She did not want the guests to dislike him at once.

None the less, they were stiff and reserved, and did not seem pleased to see the shabby little man. Karl von Ahler stared at him through his single eyeglass and looked haughty, then he turned his back upon him. Irene felt

annoyed. She poured champagne into Mr. Bite's glass and threw Ottokar an imploring look. Her brother had already noticed the strange manners of his guests; he got up and sat down beside the little man.

"I'm delighted to see you, Mr. Bite," he said cordially, speaking more loudly than was his wont.

Mr. Bite stammered a few incoherent words and hid his face in his tumbler.

Karl von Ahler, who up to now had hardly taken any notice of his left-hand neighbour, pretty Margot Wiker, suddenly addressed her:

"Isn't it awful to see how the lower classes find their way into our houses?" he almost yelled. He had drunk several glasses of champagne and was now drinking hock.

"Quite true," Irene snapped. "One even meets people who don't know how to behave when they're invited out."

Karl von Ahler was not the man to be intimidated by a mere girl, be she ever so fair.

"Before the revolution no one would have dared to ask a German officer together with all kinds of riff-raff."

Irene gave him a radiant smile.

"We're Austrians, Herr von Ahler, and Austrians don't make such a fuss about soldiers as you Germans do. In the good old days if a family had three sons, the cleverest usually became a priest, the second a diplomat, and the fool of the family an officer."

"That's the reason why Austria made such a mess of it in the Great War," Karl von Ahler said furiously.

Ottokar's gentle voice asked amiably:

"May we know on which front you fought in the Great War?"

Karl von Ahler grew red in the face. He seemed to puff up like an angry sparrow fighting for crumbs, and remained silent.

"Or perhaps you were busy at the home front," Ottokar went on with a genial smile.

"I belonged to the Commissariat," the German shouted.

Ottokar smiled again, and Nora watching him felt frightened. If that horrible man throws a glass at his head, I couldn't even blame him, she thought. No one in the world could look more arrogant than that husband of hers.

Kicki Kater burst out laughing. Lifting her glass, she nodded gaily to Mr. Bite.

"Your very good health, Mr. Bite; we're old friends, aren't we?"

The little man became as red as a peony, but Irene jumped up and sitting down beside Kicki Kater, said:

"I like you, Miss Kater. You're a dear. I hope we'll be friends."

Kicki Kater, accustomed to words of endearment from barons and counts, but not from their wives and sisters, smiled back slightly bewildered and forgot all about Mr. Bite.

When they returned to the drawing-room Irene made Mr. Bite sit down beside Miss Salt. After a few minutes of embarrassed silence they seemed to have found a lot to talk about. Ernestine had also lost a dearly beloved dog, a poodle, and said mournfully:

"I assure you, Mr. Bite, Cæsar was absolutely human; he understood every word I said."

Nora went and sat beside Karl von Ahler and tried to soothe his injured feelings; Irene talked to the Aryan Nature Lover about mountaineering, and minutely described a sunrise seen from the Matterhorn. She had had to write an essay on it at school! Count Ponitzky stuck like a bur to Mrs. Berend who was feeling thirty years younger and flirting like a young girl. Ottokar, absolutely nonplussed, bravely did his duty as a host, poured out brandy, talked to Kicki Kater whom he imagined to be the owner of a *Salon de Modes*, because she was so well dressed, and kept away from Karl von Ahler who was bragging about his gallantry in the Great War.

The rest of the evening was a success, and all the guests promised to come again. Mr. Bite's eyes were wet from champagne and gratitude when he kissed Nora's and Irene's hands in farewell.

"I haven't felt so happy for years," he said. "You've all been so kind to me. And Miss Salt is charming. I can't quite believe that her dog was as clever as mine, but only a good woman could talk of her dog the way she does."

"Miss Salt is coming next Sunday," Irene said smiling. "You'll come too, won't you, Mr. Bite?"

"If I may."

The guests left; only Count Ponitzky stayed on, although Mrs. Berend, feeling sleepy, had said good night and gone to her room. He made himself comfortable in an arm-chair, and said:

"Now that we're alone, let's talk. I mean, let's give up pretending."

Nora stared at him in surprise.

"I don't know what you mean," she said hesitatingly.

"Mrs. Berend must be terrifically rich."

"What makes you think so?" Ottokar asked innocently.

"A woman who talks half an hour about the price of eggs, what they cost this year, what they cost last year, what they cost the year before last, must be a millionaire."

Irene laughed, and Nora interposed quickly:

"You can go to bed, Ottokar. The Count and I have some business to talk over."

The odious word "business" drove Ottokar away, as Nora had intended. He took leave of the Count and left the room, glad that the party was over at last.

Lazily stretching his long legs, Count Ponitzky looked at the two women, his dark eyes twinkling with amusement, and lit a cigarette.

"I'm sorry to say that you have not impressed me as

good business women," he said with a charming smile that robbed his words of all impertinence. "You don't seem to have got the knack of it yet. Especially you, Miss Irene. You all seem to lack the indispensable *flair*. Why, of all the people I met to-night, only three at the utmost can be called really rich: Mrs. Berend, by the way, you can strike her off the list—I intend to marry her; Mrs. Wiker and that young fool, what's his name? Cap? The others are no good. I should also like to mention that you, my dear ladies, have not studied your part. You really must be more reserved, more—what shall I call it?—say aristocratic. Not quite so hail-fellow-well-met. You know what I mean. Having taken the name of Sternbach. . . . By the way, aren't there any real Sternbachs who could find you out and make things unpleasant for you? I believe I have heard of a Count Ottokar Sternbach. If he should ever get to know. . . ."

Nora and Irene gazed at him in consternation.

"But . . . but . . ." Nora stammered nervously. "My husband, I mean, my divorced husband. . . ."

"My dear girl, don't try and bamboozle me. I knew at once that you and our charming host were not married. As to Miss Irene. . . ."

"I don't in the least understand what you mean, Count Ponitzky," Irene said stiffly. "Ottokar really is my brother."

"That I'm quite ready to believe. There is a certain family likeness. But to come back to the name. I'm afraid you were careless in choosing it. Have you got a *Gotha*? You know, the Continental *Debrett*?"

"No," Nora said haughtily; "we don't need one. We know all about the family."

"Good! That's the way to talk. Not to me, of course; I'm not impressed, but to the other guests. I suppose you have not been working this racket for long?"

"It was our first party."

"I thought so."

He gazed at Nora reproachfully.

"Believe me, you really must go in for a different class of clients. You'll never make any money if you don't. I shudder when I think what the supper must have cost you. FRENCH champagne! My dear ladies, one serves German champagne in French bottles, and compensates for bad food by haughtiness and aristocratic airs. You understand?"

"It's very kind of you to give us such good advice," Nora said despondently. "You're quite right; we've only just started this . . . business."

"You see, we want the whole thing to look like a real party," Irene explained. "So of course we . . ."

"Rather a good idea. To go to parties given by aristocrats. . . . Luckily there are enough snobs left who enjoy that kind of thing. But as I told you before, dear ladies, you don't look born to it; no one would take you for aristocrats."

"Look here. . . ." Nora was offended and showed it.

"You must forgive my plain speaking. Of course you can't be expected to know how to behave. But I'm quite ready to teach you. Without asking for a fee either; just because you are so charming, both of you."

"Ottokar too?" Irene tried hard not to laugh.

"Ottokar too, if that's really his name. Of course I expect you not to forget my helpfulness when I marry the old lady. How much money has she got? You must know. I should say about three to four hundred thousand, perhaps even more."

Nora gave Irene an imploring look, but for once Irene too was absolutely at a loss.

"I've asked her to drive to the Semmering with me to-morrow," Count Ponitzky said. "Must I bear the cost of hiring a car alone or will you pay half?"

Nora looked at him despairingly.

"We . . . ? But . . ."

"Don't worry; I promise to come back engaged."

Irene was unable to control herself any longer; she laughed and laughed, the tears running down her cheeks. Nora felt angry. How could Irene laugh when they were in danger of losing one of their best customers, or whatever they could be called?

"I'm afraid," she said slowly, "it won't be as easy as all that. Mrs. Berend . . ."

"Surely you don't think she's going to refuse me? A Count? A handsome fellow? For I am handsome, even if I say so. Besides I must be a good bit younger than the lady."

Nora seized the opening.

"That's just it. I don't want to trifle with my . . . my customer's happiness, and I feel sure you would not be happy with her. I . . ."

"That's my funeral. How long do you think I shall remain married to the old lady? Three months or so, five at the utmost. I've been married six times, and I have always managed to get rid of my wives in a correct and decent manner."

Irene had got up and was walking towards the door.

"Where are you going?" Nora said nervously. She did not want to remain alone with the Count.

"Back at once," said her sister-in-law.

"What a pity," Count Ponitzky said with a sigh, "that that pretty girl is not a client of yours. I wouldn't at all mind marrying her."

Upstairs the "pretty girl" was hunting busily for a small green book. A strange idea had struck her. At last she found what she wanted. She began turning the pages—L, M, O, P. . . . She read the page attentively and burst out laughing. She returned to the drawing-room, the open book in her hand.

"We have got a *Gottha* after all, Nora," she said with a

mischievous smile. "Your mother gave it to you last Christmas."

"Good!" said the Count. "Look if you can find a Count Ottokar Sternbach."

"I don't need to look; I know it. But I have discovered something else. Listen: Ponitzky, Catholic, Austrian. First entry Agenor Onufrius Ponitzky, Count, born 1643, married 1666 Clementina Countess Karatsch. . . . Family became extinct 1836. Tell me, Count Ponitzky, how can the family be extinct as long as you live?"

The Count laughed.

"I've been more cautious than you, dear ladies. I chose a family that can't protest."

"But surely . . . you, you are . . . your name is . . ."

"For the time being Ponitzky, Casimir Ponitzky, at your service. By the way, Casimir really is my Christian name."

He broke off short. Looking at Irene and Nora, his face fell. Suddenly he seemed to sense the truth.

"Tell me, are you really called Sternbach? Are you by any means the real family Sternbach?"

"Of course. What DID you think?"

"What a fool I am!"

But he did not seem to mind. He burst out laughing, gaily, his fine eyes twinkling with fun.

"I really don't know what amuses you so," Nora said icily; "I think . . ." But Irene interrupted her.

"It does not matter in the least who you really are. You look like a grand duke. And if by any chance you are, shall we say, a soldier of fortune, you won't get anything out of us. We're absolutely broke. The Elster Bank. . . ."

"I see. And that's the reason why . . .!"

"It was my sister-in-law's idea," Irene said. "We can't earn anything—that's to say I shall later on, as a

tennis pro.—and Ottokar works in a laboratory for a miserable little fee. So Nora thought we might . . ."

"Of course you can," he said decidedly. "But you must be less amateurish. What about a partnership?"

Nora shook her head violently.

"Don't be frightened, Countess; I won't cheat you. I only cheat people who have got too much money. Look here, we'll work together; we'll arrange marriages and make people happy and earn money by doing it. A rare combination."

"But my husband, Ottokar. . . ."

"You need not tell him who I am. As you don't know yourself, it will be quite easy. I'll continue to be the star at your parties, the handsome, wealthy young Count, and as soon as we've got the business in working order, I'll marry the old lady."

"But she's my mother," Nora said.

"Your mother?"

"Yes. And she hasn't got any money?"

"And the woman is vain enough to believe that anyone is going to marry her without a fortune?"

Irene took Mrs. Berend's part.

"But she doesn't want to marry. She's got a husband. Nora's father is alive."

"Could I have another glass of brandy, please? I'm feeling rather upset. To think that I should have gone and made love to a poor and virtuous married woman a whole evening. It's incredible!"

"You see," Irene said teasingly, "we're not the only people who have still got something to learn."

She fetched the brandy from the small table in the corner, and all three of them drank to the success of their undertaking.

Shortly afterwards Casimir left, promising to come and see them in a day or two.

It had grown very late. Dawn was lazily invading the

night sky. The garden lay clothed in a delicate white mist. Nora walked upstairs wearily, with dragging feet and an aching head.

"We can't pretend our first party was a success," she said woefully.

Irene laughed.

"Why not? After all, we've found an efficient partner, and, if I'm not greatly mistaken, the Merryheart—why on earth did the poor soul choose that name?—and Mr. Bite will make a match of it. Nora, do you know that the little man's a bailiff? I'm rather glad he is, one never knows."

CHAPTER V

THE mist, so delicately white and pure in the residential part of the town that lay on a hill, grew more and more grey and dense as Ernestine Salt reached the lower part of the town and approached the big, dirty old house where she lived in a furnished room. Thinking of the room and her landlady, Mrs. Leger, the widow of a Councillor of State, Ernestine's steps—so light and quick at first—began to drag, and she felt dead tired. For the first time in her life she noticed the difference between the two parts of the town: the one she had just left suddenly seemed a far away fairy country of wide roads, lovely gardens and beautiful houses inhabited by happy care-free people; the other one, HER part, with its narrow streets, tumble-down houses and evil-smelling gutters, looked more dismal than ever. She did not live in a real slum, but in a borough that had to put up a desperate fight not to become one.

The carpet, shabby and faded, but yet a carpet, covered the stairs up to the third floor. From here on there was

only a torn and dirty linoleum that smelt of wax. Ernestine thought of the flowers she had seen in the drawing-room and the dining-room at the Sternbachs. They certainly had a pleasanter smell.

Softly, cautiously, she turned the key in the lock. Nevertheless, the door creaked when she opened it, and the Widow Leger poked her untidy grey head out of her bedroom door.

"You're very late, Miss Salt," she said, and her voice sounded exactly like the creaking door. "Do you know it's almost one o'clock?"

Ernestine's small figure seemed to shrink. She smiled beseechingly.

"I'm so sorry I woke you up, Mrs. Leger. I was at a party, and never noticed how late it was."

"You know perfectly well that my lodgers have to be back at eleven. Otherwise I can't bolt the door, and as long as it is not bolted I can't sleep for thinking of burglars."

"I'm so sorry," Ernestine repeated meekly.

"All right. I hope it won't happen again."

The untidy grey head disappeared, and the door closed with a bang. Ernestine tip-toed to her room. It was the smallest in the house, and the window gave on the back yard. She had moved in here after her father's death, four years ago.

The room was narrow, like a room in a cheap hotel, crammed with ugly old-fashioned furniture, uncomfortable brown plush chairs and darkened by heavy plush curtains. The wall-paper had once been a bright green, but was now a dirty grey. Hanging on the wall were a portrait of the Emperor Francis Joseph; a mournful picture of a grave, overshadowed by weeping willows, under which were written the cheerful words: "No place on earth is dearer to my heart than where sleep my best-beloved," and an enlarged, faded photo of Mrs. Leger, forty years

ago, in a wedding dress and a long veil, arm-in-arm with a shy young man who at the time had not yet risen to the rank of Councillor of State. Both were standing beside a rose bush made of papier mâché.

Ernestine began to undress. Her thoughts were busy with the delightful evening she had spent—the good food, the excellent wine, the charming people who had treated her like a lady. . . .

She got into bed. The mattress had a hard lump in the middle and Ernestine rolled over to the side, as she did every night. Then, as was her wont before putting out the light, she looked at the photograph of her dear parents, hanging over the bed. But somehow to-night she did not think of them as her "dear parents," but only as her father and brothers. The delicate little woman who had been her mother was but a faded memory. How can one remember a woman who has been dead for twenty-six years?

The pictures had been taken about thirty years ago. A shy little Ernestine with long brown plaits and big frightened eyes was standing beside her father, whose hand rested on her shoulder. Francis, the youngest boy, clung to his mother, and Joseph, aged ten, stood to attention, holding a small gun.

To-night it seemed to Ernestine as if her father's hand was pressing down heavily upon her young shoulders, as heavily as it had pressed her down as long as he had been alive.

She had been sixteen when her mother died. It would be more correct to say that the tired-out, delicate little woman, incapable of living any longer with an unkind brutal husband, had simply and gradually ceased living. After the funeral Ernestine's father had called her into the sitting-room and had said:

"You're grown-up now. You will have to be a mother to the boys. I expect you to keep house as well

as your late mother did. You have been well brought up; it ought to come easy to you."

And the young girl who had just lost her only friend, had swallowed her tears and answered timidly:

"Yes, dear father."

She had kept the house well; she had looked after her brothers; she had ceased to have a life of her own at sixteen.

Now at forty-two she asked herself, wondering why she did it: Was I ever pretty? Could I too have been admired, have had a lover and found a husband as my schoolfellows did?

She did not know. She had never had leisure for that kind of thing. She had had to keep the flat tidy, to look after the boys, to make her father comfortable. There was no time for anything else. Later on the boys went to grammar school and then Ernestine would have had time, but there was no money for pretty frocks or parties. Days and months and years, all exactly alike, succeeded each other. If the boys had not grown up, Ernestine would hardly have noticed that the years passed.

Sometimes friends of her father's came to play cards in the evening, and praised Ernestine's domestic talents.

"One can hardly believe, Mr. Salt, that you have had the misfortune to lose your dear wife. Your home is so beautifully tidy, not a speck of dust, not a single thing out of place. If I had such a nice home. . . ."

Her father always gave the same reply:

"That's as it ought to be. I believe in strict discipline, for girls as well as for boys. I would never tolerate untidiness."

At first young Ernestine had hoped for praise from her father, for a few kind, encouraging words, but he never thought of saying them; he took everything for granted. Women were made to keep house and to look after the men folk.

Ernestine sometimes wondered whether Joseph volunteered in the Great War because he wanted to escape domestic tyranny.

He was killed on the Russian front, and Mr. Salt was angry with Ernestine because she cried bitterly when the news came.

"My son died for his country," he said, and went about bragging with the boy's death.

Ernestine hid her tears and trembled at the idea that the war would also rob her of her "baby" Francis. But the boy preferred to die of 'flu in the third year of the war.

Mr. Salt was angry with his son. During a war a young man had no right to die of a foreign illness, instead of falling on the battlefield.

Then Ernestine had been alone with her father. She had never met any young people; she had had to stay at home the whole time. In the evening her father would read the reports of headquarters to her. Stopping to gaze at her disapprovingly he would frequently say:

"What a pity you're only a girl. I should have loved to have given another son to my country."

Lying in bed, Ernestine recalled the bitter hurt she used to feel on hearing the words. She used to clench her hands to prevent herself bursting into tears, or taking the cruel old man by the throat.

The war was over. Peace came. Then the inflation followed. Ernestine did not know what was going on in the world; she only knew that everything had got dearer, and that it had become impossible to satisfy her father.

She began making filet-lace; her thin long fingers were clever, and she had always found people to buy her work. Thus she had managed to make both ends meet—more or less.

Then came a time of riots, of tumultuous masses yelling

in the streets, of shots ringing out, followed by an uneasy quiet. Ernestine sat at home making lace and keeping the flat in order. The years went by. She grew older, but she did not notice it because she had never been young.

Her father had been pensioned off. He seemed to have waited for this, for three weeks afterwards he had an apoplectic fit. Not a merciful one which would have meant deliverance for him and for Ernestine, but one that according to the doctor would permit him to live on for years as a paralysed wreck.

Mr. Salt, by birth a Sudeten-German, had always been a firm believer in authority, and the doctor represented authority for him. He conscientiously lived out the span of life the doctor had allotted him, and died of a second fit when Ernestine was thirty-eight.

She had cried because one does cry when one's father dies, that too being a matter of discipline. She had given up the flat, sold the furniture, bought Cæsar the poodle, and had gone to live with the Widow Leger.

She went on making lace, and now that the father she had lived in fear of was dead, she was afraid of her landlady. She lived on without being alive. She was neither young nor old. She was not a young girl and she had never become a woman. She was a sexless thing that got up in the morning, made lace all day long, used the kitchen with fear and trembling, and had the one bath a week graciously granted by the widow. In the evening she went to bed early, tired out and sad. Her only pleasure in life was the dog. He sat beside her whilst she worked, warm, jolly and affectionate, sometimes lifting his curly head and tenderly licking Ernestine's rather long nose.

His death was a catastrophe. Ernestine cried as she had not cried since her mother died. For days she could neither eat nor sleep. Her only consolation was that the good-natured veterinary surgeon allowed her to bury Cæsar in his garden.

The dog's death seemed to have wrought a change in Ernestine. She grew restless. She was unable to sit quiet. She began dreaming and longing for something to happen. She suddenly discovered that there existed a world beyond her small room, and felt the wish to see it and to meet people. But she was much too shy to get acquainted with any one.

She began to read the widow's paper, and after having studied the advertisements for several weeks she decided to advertise in the marriage column. Perhaps there existed amongst the many people in this big town a human being as lonely as herself—a man to whom nature, maybe, had been cruel; a hunchback; or a man with a cast in his eye who was nevertheless kind and tender-hearted and longing to be loved.

Because she had wished for cheerfulness and joy during the whole of her desolate life, she chose as her pen-name MERRYHEART.

She got many answers to her advertisement, but all her correspondents wanted to marry a young girl, or a woman with a tidy fortune, or, at least, a nice flat.

She had just begun to give up hope when she had received the invitation, printed on hand-made paper. She had gone to the party given by strangers—grand people—nervous, embarrassed, fearing disappointment.

She sat up in bed.

She had not been disappointed; she had spent a delightful evening, the happiest in her whole life. How kind her hostess had been, and the Count. . . . Her cheeks began to burn. . . . The Count had said to her:

"What lovely hair you have got, Miss Salt. Like spun silk."

Ernestine lifted her hands to her head. Yes, her hair really was lovely; she ought to take more care of it. She ought to take more care of her complexion too, maybe, to make up a bit. After all she was not an old

woman. One of the women she had met at the party must have been quite eight years older than she, and she had looked about thirty. . . . And how nice Mr. Bite had been, how well she had got on with him; a kindly, clever man.

Ernestine lay back and closed her eyes, but she could not go to sleep at once. Next Sunday, she thought dreamily, next Sunday. . . .

She did not feel the cold in the small room. She never indulged in a fire before November. She did not, as usually, feel annoyed by the horrid smell of dust and dirt the plush chairs and the heavy curtains exuded. The room suddenly seemed to smell of carnations and roses, like the Sternbach's house had done. It was not autumn, it was spring. . . .

* * *

Mr. Bite would have liked to accompany Miss Salt, but he had been much too shy to say so. None the less, he was more cheerful than usual, and for the first time he did not feel the sharp stab of pain on opening the door and waiting in vain for Fido's eager greeting.

Looking at the alarm clock he smiled self-consciously. As late as all that! Theodore Bite, you are becoming a man about town.

Then he remembered Karl von Ahler, and his kindly face grew dark. How rude the man had been. He had treated him like a servant. He felt angry, then suddenly an idea struck him. He went to the board where he kept his "library," a Bible that had belonged to his mother, the collected works of Goethe, beautifully bound in red and gold, and a directory.

Mr. Bite pulled out the directory and began turning the pages. At last he found the name he was hunting for: Von Ahler, 3, Alser St. IV.

He smiled maliciously. That part of the town had been his circuit for the last three weeks. You'd better be careful, you cheeky fellow, he thought, one day I shall turn up and seize your furniture. Then you'll pipe down. . . .

* * *

Margot Wiker was smoking a last cigarette whilst the maid undressed her. She was in a good humour. Count Ottokar was charming, she thought, and—after all—Countess Sternbach DOES sound nicer than Mrs. Wiker. The late Mr. Wiker had been fat and twenty years older than his wife. . . . Why should she not marry again? But there's no hurry, she thought lazily. None of the women I met to-night is likely to prove a rival. I wonder how Countess Nora Sternbach is related to Ottokar. Probably a cousin or a relation by marriage. She's pretty and young, but the Count hardly talked to her. And the others. . . . Margot smiled superciliously; neither the old lady, nor the elderly Miss Salt, nor Kicki Kater were likely to attract the Count. If she cared to set her cap at him she would be Countess Sternbach in no time. How many per cent. did the people take? Three; rather a lot; but it did not matter. Thank goodness she did not have to be careful with money. But she'd better wait and see; she might find a better match, a prince, maybe. . . . Count Ponitzky was rather nice too; he looked more aristocratic than Ottokar. . . . But he had dark hair, and she wanted a fair husband, as a background. . . .

Next Sunday she would wear her new evening dress and her rubies, and . . .

"All right, Martha, go to bed. I don't want anything more. And don't wake me before ten. I'm tired."

* * *

Mr. Cap took Kicki Kater home in his car. The young lady seemed pleased and said enthusiastically as he helped her to get out:

"You're a gentleman. I knew it at once."

It did the shy young man, six foot two, good to hear it. He liked being appreciated.

* * *

The Aryan Nature Lover sat in the Blue Bar waiting for Count Ponitzky, who had said to him:

"I'm sure you don't feel like going to bed yet. I can see that you're a night bird. I've just got to talk over a few things with my hostess. Wait for me in the Blue Bar. We'll have a few drinks and a chat."

The Blue Bar had nothing in common with nature, but Mr. Gedecke had never gone on a spree with a Count. He promised to wait for Casimir and sat in the bar, drinking one brandy after the other, growing very cheerful and rather muddled. When Casimir came, the Aryan Nature Lover was decidedly drunk.

They chatted for a while. Casimir made jokes and told salacious anecdotes and the other man laughed uproariously. Gradually the Bar grew empty. The waiters noisily pushed tables and chairs into corners. They yawned audibly, longing for their beds.

"We'll be asked to go in a minute or two," Casimir said. "It's a shame. Just when we were enjoying ourselves. You are a delightful companion, my dear Gedecke. Your jokes are enough to make one die with laughter."

Mr. Gedecke, who had hardly spoken a word, firmly believed that he had amused this smart fellow, this man-about-town who seemed to know all the capitals and all the night clubs in Europe.

"Yes, it really is a shame," he said.

"Look here, come along to my hotel. We'll have a drink, and if you feel like it, we might have a game of cards."

"All right."

They went to the hotel where they had several drinks, or rather Mr. Gedecke had; Casimir only drank mineral

water. Then they played cards and Casimir was horrified because his dear friend Gedecke kept on losing. Although of course, lucky in love. . . . The fair little Countess had seemed badly smitten.

"Do you really think so?" the Aryan Nature Lover said. "She's just the kind of girl I admire. Fair, Teutonic, not a drop of alien blood in her veins. . . . How much do I owe you?"

"Two hundred, old man."

"Sorry, I've only got a hundred here. To-morrow morning, at ten. . . ."

"There's no hurry. I hope we'll meet often and have a little game. You're sure to be luckier next time."

Casimir accompanied his guest who was not very firm on his legs, to the lift and patted him on the shoulder.

"You're a good fellow, Gedecke; really a good fellow."

He went back to his sitting-room, a satisfied smile on his face. Quite a good evening, he thought, although he had let himself be taken in at the Sternbachs'. He felt sure that they might make money. The thing only had to be got going. If he took it in hand. . . . Anyway, two hundred was something to the good.

He went into the bathroom and let in the water. Whilst it was running and the steam was beginning to fill the room, he stripped and did his gymnastics. He had to think of his figure.

Lying in bed he took up a volume of poetry. He loved poems; besides, they always sent him to sleep.

CHAPTER VI

CASIMIR really was a gentleman. Although he knew that Mrs. Berend was not a rich widow, but the respectable wife of a poor doctor, he came at eleven to

fetch her for a drive. It must be admitted that he did not take her to the Semmering, but only to Schoenbrunn. Nevertheless, the good lady was greatly pleased by his attention.

Whilst she was listening to her new friend's conversation and laughing at his jokes, hardly giving a look to the golden autumn landscape all around, Nora and Irene were having a bad time.

After breakfast, Ottokar had declared in an unusual, energetic tone:

"I've got to talk to you."

They went into Nora's small sitting-room, and whilst the two women sat down, Ottokar walked up and down nervously. He seemed to be hunting for words. At last he said:

"I don't want to pry into your affairs, Nora, but the people who came last night were simply awful. I must say I'd rather you did not frequent them, and . . ."

"One can't choose one's business connections, Ottokar."

He shrugged impatiently.

"Don't you think you'd better tell me what the mysterious business is you've taken up?"

"Not . . . not quite yet," Nora stammered.

"Why on earth must you receive that loathsome fellow Ahler? And that vulgar little Mrs. Wiker? And the fake Count?"

Nora and Irene exchanged looks.

"Why FAKE Count?" Irene asked rather shakily.

"Why do you say fake?"

"Darling Irene, of course I saw it at once. No real aristocrat is half so aristocratic."

"But . . ."

"He's a handsome fellow, and as soon as a man is good-looking you women never notice anything. Believe me, he's a swindler. He'll cheat you."

"Not he!" Irene blurted out.

"As to the others," Ottokar went on. "They're not quite so bad. Little Miss Salt behaves like a lady, and Mr. Bite is a nice quiet fellow. The tall young man seems to be a harmless idiot. In fact he looks so idiotic he might be a politician."

"No," Nora said gently. "He's not. His father is."

"And Miss Kater?" Irene could not help laughing although she was afraid of what Ottokar might say next. "What do you think of Miss Kater?"

"A nice young woman, probably the owner of a *Salon de Modes*. You might work with her, Nora; you've got such excellent taste."

"As soon as a woman's pretty," Irene said with a mocking smile, "you men never notice anything."

Nora threw her a warning glance.

"I don't want that kind of people in my house," Ottokar said angrily.

"Your house?" Nora smiled unpleasantly. "It's MY house."

Ottokar looked dismayed.

"Sorry! I'd quite forgotten it."

"I shall receive whom I like." Nora was growing annoyed. It is always a disagreeable surprise when a man is less harmless than one expects him to be.

"Then you must not count on me for your parties."

"But you must come. My business requires it."

"I'm not going to be mixed up in a business I know nothing about."

"Ottokar!" Irene cried reproachfully. "How can you be so rude to your wife?"

"She isn't my wife."

"Oh," Irene sighed, "your family affairs! First you talk like a German husband, and then you say Nora's not your wife."

"You're right, Irene. It's no business of mine. Perhaps it would be better if I cleared out and lived in a furnished room."

Irene jumped up and ran to her sister-in-law. She bent over Nora who was looking miserable, and whispered to her:

"Cry, you idiot, cry! That's the only thing you can do. Don't wait—cry, howl!"

Nora buried her face in her hands, and because she really had been frightened by Ottokar's manners and was feeling nervous, she began to cry in earnest. Irene patted her head and threw her brother an angry look.

"I'm ashamed of you, Ottokar. You're impossible. Poor Nora! First you are unfaithful to her, then you go and lose all her money, and now you ill-treat her."

Ottokar had never seen his wife cry. The sight of her tears shocked him, and he felt like a bully. Besides, he would rather have liked consoling her himself and not having to leave it to Irene. His sister put both her arms round Nora.

"Poor little Nora, poor darling! I'd never have believed it of Ottokar."

Nora, once having begun to weep, sobbed heart-brokenly.

"I . . . I do my best to help you, and then you . . . you . . ."

"I did not mean to be unkind, Nora. Forgive me; you misunderstood me, dear."

Nora leant her head against her sister-in-law's shoulder.

"I . . . I do my best," she repeated, "and you—you leave me in the lurch."

"Don't cry, darling. Please, Nora, stop crying. I only wanted to warn you. You're so innocent, so confiding. . . ."

"All the more reason for standing by us," Irene said

crossly. She pulled out her handkerchief and ostentatiously wiped her eyes.

"To think that my brother . . . I've always been so proud of you. I . . ."

Ottokar stared helplessly at the weeping women.

"Please, do stop crying, both of you. I was wrong. Of course I was wrong. Nora darling, I'll do whatever you want, only stop crying."

Nora went on sobbing.

"You'll come to our parties even if they are pure business affairs?" Irene asked, her voice trembling ominously.

"I'll do whatever you want. Only, please, stop crying."

Irene blew her nose.

"And you'll be charming with everyone?"

"Yes, I'll be charming. Nora, dear, please. . . ."

"And you'll never again ill-treat your poor wife who isn't your wife?"

"I didn't ill-treat her." Ottokar tried to vindicate himself.

"Haven't you ever heard of mental cruelty?" Irene asked severely. "That's even worse than physical cruelty. And darling Nora is so sensitive. Everything upsets her. Do you want to kill her, Ottokar?"

Ottokar, who had never noticed Nora's extreme sensitiveness during the two years of their married life, stared at Irene. Feminine intuition really was an extraordinary thing. Irene had got to know Nora better in the course of a few weeks than he had done in two years.

"Forgive me, darling," he said, deeply moved. "I'll do everything you want."

Nora lifted a tear-stained face.

"Thank you, Ottokar. I was terribly hurt at the idea of your not trusting me."

"You'd better go," Irene said. "You've done mischief

enough for to-day. Don't come home to lunch; eat in a restaurant, but in a cheap one," she added spitefully.

Ottokar kissed Nora's hand remorsefully and left the house. He felt depressed all day long, and kept reproaching himself. How could he have misunderstood Nora so terribly, poor girl? And he had never noticed how sensitive she was. How often he must have hurt her by his brutality.

The idea worried him so much that he did not spend any money upon his lunch; he did not even go to a cheap restaurant. He had lost his appetite.

* * *

"You're a good actress," Irene praised her sister-in-law as soon as Ottokar had left the room.

"I didn't act," Nora said crossly. "I was really hurt seeing Ottokar . . ."

"But surely you don't care for Ottokar?"

"Nonsense! I'm very fond of him, as a friend."

"I see." Irene smiled a queer little smile. "Perhaps you're right. Anyway, he'll always give in now."

"Isn't it funny," Nora mused aloud, "that Ottokar guessed the truth about Casimir? I always thought he never noticed anything."

Irene frowned.

"Whatever happens, we must not lose Casimir. Do you think Ottokar is likely to look him up in the *Gotha*?"

"No. Besides we can hide the book."

"We'd better admit to Ottokar that Casimir's mother was a peasant, or a scullery maid, or something like that. It might explain his aristocrat airs."

"We ought to warn Casimir," Nora said. "We must tell him that Ottokar . . . Oh, how unpleasant. . . . How on earth am I to tell him?"

"Leave it to me, Nora; I'm less sensitive than you are," Irene added with a teasing smile.

When Casimir returned with Mrs. Berend, Irene took him to the small sitting-room and explained what had happened.

Casimir was not in the least offended.

"If I had not been sure that you were fakes too," he said with a cheerful grin, "I'd have behaved differently. Don't worry, Irene; I've learnt my lesson. I'll tell your brother as soon as possible that my late father married his cook. Then he'll feel happier about me."

He laughed.

"Rather clever of Ottokar. I should never have expected it of him. He's so quiet and hardly speaks at all. But now we'd better talk shop. The parties are a good idea, but they won't suffice. You must get a photograph album—you know, the kind real matrimonial agents have. People look at the photos, ask about the financial position of the man or woman who attracts them, and . . ."

"Where are we to get the photos?"

"I'll give you some of mine, as a cadet in the military academy, as a young officer in the Great War, as a racing driver. Excellent photos. . . . I'll also bring you a few female ones; my last three wives were lovely."

"But . . ."

"You are thinking that we have not got them in stock? That doesn't matter. We'll soon get photos of real clients. You must have your picture taken too. I know a wonderful man, a genius; he makes the ugliest woman look like a beauty. Besides," he added with disarming candour, "I get a commission from him. You can be photographed all three of you; I'll tell him to do it cheap. Now listen to me: we want a ledger in which you must write our clients' names and a photo album. You must send out more invitations. I've brought you some addresses. Please send out the invitations at once. I don't expect you to pay for the addresses, but I really think you ought to pay for the joy-ride with the old lady."

Irene sighed and paid. Casimir left her, promising to come back soon and to look after things. Before taking leave, he said:

"Mind you don't lose Gedecke. He's got a lot of money. I have found out all about him. We must have some fair-haired women for the next party. It does not matter if they get their golden hair from a bottle, but they must be fair."

Irene promised to do her best.

* * *

Ernestine Salt sat at her rickety writing-table and noted down figures on a piece of paper: If I don't have any supper for a week, if I only eat one roll for breakfast instead of two, then I can afford a new dress.

She got up and looked in the glass. Ever since the party Ernestine and her mirror had become good friends.

I've got a nice figure, she told herself. Slight and willowy; that's because I never get enough to eat. If I wore a modern frock . . . and had a perm . . . I really think I might look quite pretty. But wouldn't it be terribly extravagant? I bought the grey dress only two years ago, and it's still quite good. . . . If I had it modernized! But that costs money too, and one never knows how it will turn out. But a new frock, . . . It really would be extravagant, though why should I not be extravagant once in a while? I've squandered so much—my youth, my chances, my happiness—always for others, never for myself. I'm going to be extravagant for my own sake for a change. Yes, I'll buy a new frock.

The next morning she stood before the window of a big store, and studied the frocks. They were not expensive, yet Ernestine felt intimidated by the price. But she also felt the slight itch in her finger-tips that most women experience who want something passionately and are separated from the longed-for object by a glass pane.

Ernestine took out her shabby purse and counted her money for the tenth time. She sighed with relief to see that it had not grown less.

Standing in the door she hesitated again. Should she really . . . ? What if the shop did not order any more lace? What if she fell ill? No, it was too risky. But how lovely it would be. . . . She felt a lump in her throat. Must she always give up everything? Could she never . . . ?

"Hullo, Miss Salt!"

Irene's cheerful voice called her back to reality.

"Countess Sternbach."

"Are you shopping?"

"I don't quite know yet. . . ."

"Come along!"

Irene, who had gone out to buy the ledger and the album, took Ernestine's arm and dragged her through the door.

"What do you want to buy?"

"I thought of getting . . . I'm not quite sure . . . a frock. . . ."

Poor soul! Irene remembered that for her, buying a frock had always been an amusing but in no way important affair. Poor little thing, how excited she looked.

"Do let me help you choose it."

"Please do, Countess. But . . . it must not be dear. I saw a frock in the window, a brown frock for twenty-five *schillinge*. I only wanted to spend twenty, but perhaps . . ."

"Brown! Oh, you must not wear brown. A soft blue, or perhaps a quite pale pink."

"Do you think so?"

"Yes, brown is a loathsome colour. It always makes me think of those beastly S.A. men."

Irene had grown excited in her turn, and had raised her voice without being aware of it.

A sickly-looking young man wearing a Swastika heard her words and coming up to them, said rudely:

"If you don't like the Nazi colour you'd better go to Jerusalem!"

Ernestine grew frightened. What did the young man want? Irene turned to him, her eyes blazing.

"I wouldn't in the least mind going to Jerusalem," she said scornfully. "At least I'd meet civilized people there, not cads like you. But I'll go when I like. Understand?"

"What are you doing in our country?" yelled the young man.

People came running from all sides. A horrified shop-walker tried to drag the young man away. Irene stepped between them.

"Young man," she said condescendingly, "young man, you look like a student; that explains your bad manners. Perhaps you know what a back-hander is?"

"How dare you call me 'young man'?"

"Listen, young man! I was the best back-hand at tennis in all Lausanne, perhaps even in all Switzerland." She turned to the shop-walker and asked sweetly: "Can I wash my hands in your place?"

"Certainly, of course," stammered the man nervously, and absolutely nonplussed.

"Good! Listen, young man, if you don't take your leave right away with a polite, a very polite bow, I'll slap your face as only the best back-hand player of all Lausanne can. Do you understand?"

Ernestine was trembling all over. The shop-walker said imploringly:

"Madam, please, sir, miss . . ."

"Countess Sternbach," Irene corrected him with a smile. "Well, young man, what about having your face slapped?"

The young man seemed disconcerted.

"Perhaps, as you're a Nazi you don't know what a slap is, young man? Maybe you've lived too long in Germany to understand the Austrian expression. Ah, you do know? That's right. Now run along. You might have managed a better bow, but what can one expect of a young man who is ill-bred enough to insult strangers? 'Bye-'bye, young man."

She grinned, watching the young man depart.

"Where can we get frocks, please?" she asked the shaken shop-walker. "On the second floor? Thank you."

She drew her trembling companion towards the lift.

Ernestine felt as if she were dreaming. That a girl, a woman, had dared to talk that way to a man! If her father had heard it! And that a man should be put to flight by a mere female! Of course he had been smaller and had looked less fit than Irene, but all the same . . . how wonderful not to be afraid of anyone. What if she, Ernestine Salt, tried to be like that—tried not to be afraid of her landlady. . . . Should she ask this gallant young girl how she managed not to fear people? Not to fear life? Ernestine gave reins to her imagination: she would come home at one o'clock a.m., and her landlady would poke her untidy grey head round the open bedroom door. "You're very late, Miss Salt," she would grumble. And Ernestine would reply calmly: "I'll come home when it pleases ME, Mrs. Leger."

She felt a glow of pleasure at the thought, and repeated out loud: "I'll come home when it pleases ME, Mrs. Leger."

"What did you say?" Irene asked.

Then she noticed how upset Ernestine was.

"Come along, you poor dear. We'll go to the restaurant and have a glass of sherry. That will do you good. Sorry I frightened you, but I simply had to tell the little wretch where to get off."

Sitting in the restaurant and sipping sherry for the first time in her life, Ernestine explained her cryptic words. She told the other girl all about her landlady, her dreary life and her fears.

Irene's merry eyes grew very soft and kind. She laid her rather large but beautifully-formed hand on the thin white hand of the other girl.

"We'll change all that," she said decidedly. "I'll come and see you soon and teach the old hag manners. And now do come; we'll buy a lovely frock you will look charming in."

In all her life Ernestine had not tried on as many frocks as she had to now. After the fray with the rude young man she had given up the idea of a brown one; she, too, had begun to hate the colour. But she would certainly have taken the first frock the saleswoman showed her had Irene not been there. Irene found fault with everything—the colour, the cut. Some of the frocks would make Ernestine look older, some were too girlish. At last she discovered a pale pink one with cream-coloured lace. Ernestine looked in the mirror and had to admit that the frock suited her wonderfully. She asked the price, the words sticking in her throat.

"A hundred *schillinge*," said the saleswoman.

Ernestine grew pale. Even if she had no supper for a month and no breakfast either she could never afford it.

"No . . . no," she said sadly. "I'd better take the black one."

"We'll take the pink," Irene said. "You must make it a little tighter on the sides, just here, above the hips."

The saleswoman went to fetch the dressmaker.

Ernestine was on the verge of tears.

"I can't buy the pink one, Countess Sternbach. I really cannot afford it."

"We'll pay for it," Irene said impulsively. "Decent matrimonial agencies always do. Really and truly."

I'll pay eighty *schillinge* in advance, and you'll pay the rest when you get the frock."

On leaving the store, Irene looked at her watch.

"Goodness, how late it is. I must take a taxi. But first I'll drive you home, dear Miss Salt."

Sitting in the taxi Ernestine began to cry, partly for joy at having got the frock, partly because she was so bewildered that she hardly knew whether she was waking or sleeping. Irene comforted her and promised to come and see her soon.

The widow Leger sat at her window and saw the taxi drive up. As soon as Ernestine opened the door, the old woman came to meet her.

"Who was the elegant lady who brought you home?" she asked.

"Countess Sternbach."

The Widow Leger smiled sweetly.

"How pleasant for you to have such nice friends, dear Miss Salt. You never told me about the Countess. You are looking tired, my child. Come and have a cup of tea."

Ernestine followed her into the room. She felt as if she were sitting in a merry-go-round that would never stop.

* * *

Nora was furious when Irene came home in a taxi.

"We've got to economize, Irene."

"Dear me, I forgot all about it. Nora, you must forgive me; I've just gone and spent eighty *schillinge*. But I really couldn't help it." And she told her all about Ernestine and the frock.

Nora sighed.

"Eighty *schillinge* are a lot of money," she said reproachfully.

"I know, darling. I'll never do it again, but if you had seen how happy the poor soul was."

"Have you bought the ledger and the photograph album?" Nora asked.

"Dear me, I forgot all about them."

"Idiot! I'll buy them this afternoon. I shall never again let you have money in your purse."

Irene looked remorseful and remained silent, but not for long.

"Nora, our partner is sure to examine the ledger. Under what heading are we going to enter the eighty *schillinge*?"

"Advertising expenditure," Nora said grandiloquently. She had read the expression in the morning paper, and was very proud of knowing it.

CHAPTER VII

MR. BITE was "officiating." He never could quite make up his mind whether he liked doing it or not. Of course, as a tax collector, a representative of all-mighty State, whom no citizen dared oppose, he felt good. It was unfortunate that his country had added to this dignified office the more inglorious one of a bailiff, and Mr. Bite hated himself in that part. He was sorry for the people whose goods and chattels he had to confiscate. He loathed sticking ominous bits of paper on furniture, on pots and pans, thus declaring them to be the possession of the merchant whose instalments had not been paid. Most of the people he visited in his capacity as a bailiff belonged to a pitiable crew whose sole crime was poverty.

On looking through his papers in the morning, Mr. Bite had discovered a summons that filled Mr. Bite, the tax-

collector, with amazement. He stared hard at the name: Albert Schiro, Councillor of Commerce, Ringstrasse 2. He knew the man by name, but had never been to the house before. Nor had he ever expected to go there. But then nothing was impossible in poverty-stricken Austria. Probably one more firm had failed.

Mr. Bite took the tram. Getting out on the Ring he walked to the house and rang the bell. A well-dressed, most respectable-looking old gentleman opened the door, and Mr. Bite recognized him, having seen his picture in the illustrated papers. It was Mr. Schiro himself. The reason for Mr. Bite's visit, a small Skye-terrier, barked madly.

"I've come on account of the dog licence," Mr. Bite said rather nervously.

"The dog licence? It's been paid ages ago. There must be a mistake."

"The Inspector of Taxes never makes a mistake," said Mr. Bite rebukingly, and showed the old gentleman a paper. "See for yourself, Mr. Schiro."

"You're right," the old gentleman grumbled. He suddenly seemed to remember something, and opening a door he called out crossly:

"Miriam! Miriam!"

A boyish-looking young girl came into the hall.

"What do you want, Daddy?"

"Didn't you pay the money for the dog's licence four weeks ago?"

"Dear me, I quite forgot!"

She does not even say "sorry," Mr. Bite thought. That's modern youth.

Miriam went back to the sitting-room, and the old gentleman paid the licence, grumbling all the while.

"To have the tax-collector in my house! That's the first time it ever happened to me. But my daughter forgets everything I want her to do. Just imagine if a

business acquaintance of mine came here and saw you. The whole town would be gossiping: 'Have you heard, the Schiros are ruined? They've got the bailiff in the house. Yes, I saw him myself.' Just the kind of thing to ruin a firm's reputation. That girl can't even pay the dog's licence!"

He turned to Mr. Bite.

"Are you a family man?"

"No, sir," said Mr. Bite, and pocketed the money.

"Be glad that you aren't. Children are a terrible worry. You've seen my daughter—a pretty girl, isn't she? When I think what excellent matches she might have made! But she doesn't want to marry. She wants to fly. She wants to cross the Atlantic in a 'plane! My daughter! She spends her whole time in the air-port, and I'm always afraid of her taking off one day and flying to America. Do you call that a suitable pastime for a young girl of good family? At her age my late wife had had three children already. But if I tell Miriam that, she only laughs."

He sighed despondently.

"Never have children! It's nothing but worry, worry, all day long."

Mr. Bite felt sorry for the old gentleman. He began to like him, and his sympathy grew stronger when Mr. Schiro gave him a cigar.

"If Mr. Right comes along," he said consolingly.

"How is she to find a suitable husband as long as she only cares for flying? I've asked such nice young men to the house, sons of business friends—efficient, clever young men. She won't even look at them. I've invited artists; she can afford to marry one. She won't even look at them. The only thing she wants to do is to fly. Can you understand it?"

Mr. Bite looked thoughtful; he would have liked to help the nice old man.

"Do you know Countess Sternbach, sir?" he asked.

"Sternbach, Sternbach? Aren't they the people who have a big house in the Cottage-quarter? Very wealthy? No, I don't know them."

Mr. Bite fished the invitation printed on hand-made paper from his pocket, and gave it to the old gentleman, who read it through and shook his head.

"A matrimonial agency," he said disdainfully. "That's no good to me."

"It's not exactly a matrimonial agency, at least not as far as I know," Mr. Bite explained rather testily; "the Sternbachs give real parties. Everything is most genteel, and no one would ever guess that the object of the party was arranging marriages."

The old gentleman shrugged.

"It's no good to me," he repeated. "If my daughter wants to marry she has no need of an agency. My firm is known all over the world. What address did you say?"

"I'll leave you the card. I don't want it any longer. I've been introduced to the family. Really, sir, they're delightful people."

"Maybe. But no good to us. There's your card. Have another cigar. Good-bye."

Mr. Bite left the house feeling slightly disappointed. He would have liked to have procured a new customer for the people who had been so nice to him. But then, of course, a man who owned such a lovely house did not need the help of an agency in finding a husband for his daughter.

* * *

In the afternoon of the same day, Huber came into the drawing-room and announced:

"Mr. Schiro wants to know whether you can receive him."

"Of course," Nora said rather nervously, adding quickly: "Ask Countess Irene to come down at once, please."

Huber ushered the old gentleman into the big drawing-room. Casimir had impressed upon Nora always to receive potential customers in that room. "If the people see the Kokoschka picture hanging on the wall, they won't be astonished at our prices," he had said.

Mr. Schiro looked rather surprised when Nora rose to greet him.

"Countess Sternbach?"

"Yes."

Nora was aching with shyness. What on earth was she to say? If only Irene would come. Irene always knew what to do.

The old gentleman pushed up his glasses and looked at Nora.

"Excuse me," he said. "But you're very young, and . . ."

He broke off.

"I suppose you've come . . . you've had an invitation to my party?"

"No. A mutual friend gave me your address."

"Won't you sit down?"

"Thank you."

The old gentleman sat down and Nora looked at him expectantly.

"You're very young," he repeated almost reproachfully. "I had expected an elderly lady to whom I could have spoken freely."

"You can really speak frankly to me. We . . ." Nora racked her brains for the right expression. "We're a most respectable firm."

The old gentleman smiled.

"I'm sure you are. Though I must say I don't quite understand. . . ."

"We've got to earn money," Nora said frankly. She liked the old man. "And I never learnt anything useful. That's why . . ."

Irene came into the room.

"Irene, that's Mr. Schiro—my sister-in-law, Countess Sternbach."

"Why, she's even younger than you are!"

"We've got a partner who is older than we," Irene put in hastily. "He's a man of experience and exceedingly clever. You really can trust us."

The old gentleman gazed at her with a benevolent smile.

"All right. Let's get down to brass tacks. I've got a daughter whom I want to see married. She is twenty-two, and the women of our family have always married at eighteen or nineteen. But Miriam does not want to marry. Do you know what she wants to do?"

"What?" Nora asked politely.

"She wants to fly! To fly to America. Just imagine it. My only child."

"I can quite understand her wanting to do so," Irene burst out.

"For goodness' sake, don't tell her so. I don't want her to fly; I want her to marry. But she won't listen to me. I thought I might bring her here one day, without her knowing, of course. . . . Have you got any suitable young men? My daughter is very pretty, well brought up, well-read; she'll have two hundred thousand *schillinge* the day she marries, and when I die she'll inherit my whole fortune. . . . Mind you, there's nothing shady about her. No love affair, no baby. Miriam is very pretty, very clever. If only she had not got that unfortunate passion for flying. . . ."

He fell silent for a moment and looked at the two women searchingly. Then he said:

"Have you got any suitable young men in stock?"

Nora played nervously with the silk table-cover, plaiting

its fringes. Irene looked hard at the old man. She liked his face and decided to be absolutely frank.

"You see, dear Mr. Schiro," she said, "we've only just begun. We haven't got many customers yet. There's only one young man who might suit you; that's my brother. But we've sent out a lot of invitations, and I'm sure you and Miss Miriam will find someone suitable at our next party."

"I don't want my daughter to marry a Christian. I don't want to offend you, but our family . . ."

"Of course. We're sure to get Jewish customers too. Nora, where is the list?"

"I haven't written the names down yet," Nora admitted shamefacedly.

Mr. Schiro laughed.

"You don't seem to be exactly business-like, young ladies."

"Our partner . . ." Nora said hurriedly.

Irene laughed.

"You see, Mr. Schiro, we've never had to earn money before. But ever since the Elster Bank went smash . . ."

The old gentleman nodded.

"I see. But everyone knew it would fail. The whole thing was a beastly swindle." He looked at them compassionately. "And you really believe, you two poor innocent children . . ."

"Oh, we're sure to make a success of it. Quite sure," Irene said gaily. "It will do us a world of good to have you as a customer. Do come to the party on Sunday, and get Miss Miriam to accompany you. May we put your name on our lists?"

"How many per cent. do you ask?"

"Three," said Nora. "Our partner said . . ."

"Yes, that's the usual percentage. All right."

The old gentleman smiled.

"Even if you don't find a suitable husband for my

daughter, if you can manage to talk her out of flying I'll give you one per cent. See?"

"I'll do my best," Irene promised, "although I'm crazy about flying myself."

"We'll come on Sunday. And if you will allow me to give you a word of advice, young ladies: try and be more business-like. It's very nice to be frank, and your frankness did not put me off; rather the contrary, nevertheless. . . ."

He smiled, patted Irene's shoulder paternally, shook Nora by the hand, and left the room.

"What a dear old man," Irene said.

"I'm afraid we've behaved like a pair of fools."

"Nonsense! I sensed at once that we could afford to tell him the truth."

Irene became lost in thought. An idea seemed to come to her, for she laughed softly.

"What about marrying off the old gentleman himself, Nora . . . ? Tell me, how much are three per cent. of two hundred thousand?"

Nora took up a pencil and began to count.

"About five thousand, as far as I can make out."

"Just imagine, Nora, if we earn five thousand by a single marriage, two or three or four will bring us money enough to live in comfort for ages. You'll see, we'll soon be millionaires."

* * *

On Friday afternoon Casimir drove up in a smart blue car. Huber stared at the car, his eyes popping out of his head.

"Why, it's our car!" he cried. "The car we sold to Mr. Mann."

"It is," Casimir nodded merrily. "You'll often see me drive it, my dear Huber."

"At least," the chauffeur said with an air of resignation, "you know how to drive."

Casimir had brought along a whole stack of photos.

"Stick them into the album at once," he commanded.

Irene looked at the photos.

"Twenty," she said, "that's fine." Suddenly her face grew stony. She picked out a photo.

"Who is that?"

"The man who bought your car. Disgustingly rich; silly ass. Wants to meet the best people. He also plays cards." Casimir smiled. "At least he calls it playing cards. A delightful young man in some ways."

"I won't have him coming here," Irene said angrily.

"Why not? My best catch! Do you know who he is? The only son of old Mann, the director of the chemical works. Money to burn, and an absolute fool. He can put ten thousand *schillings* into our pockets, and I can get even more out of him for myself."

"I won't have him coming here," Irene repeated.

"Why not? I admit that he's ill-mannered and looks a guy, but just think of the money. But why do you object to him so?"

"He told me to go to Jerusalem a few days ago, and I offered to slap his face."

Casimir laughed.

"Oh, I see; he's the young man you had a row with in the stores? Never mind. I've talked to the old man; he wants the boy to marry, because he hopes he'll stop playing the fool if he has a wife to keep him steady. The boy is studying at a university in Germany—rather, he's supposed to study. But he never opens a book. He drives about in his car and sits in cafés. He's a rabid Nazi; the one thing he really enjoys is going to all the stores in town and insulting people. He thinks that's the way to greatness. The old man is quite decent, a

democrat, and horrified at his son's politics. But the boy won't listen to reason. And as he's inherited his mother's fortune, the old man can't do anything about it."

"He's sure to recognize me."

"All the better."

"But what are we to do if he insults our Jewish clients?" Nora asked nervously.

"If he insults dear old Schiro, I'll slap his silly face," Irene said angrily.

Casimir laughed.

"He will be so intimidated by the feudal surroundings that he won't dare to open his mouth. And if he does recognize you, Countess Irene . . ."

"How can I be pleasant to a man whose face I have offered to slap?"

"You simply won't remember anything. That'll be best. You must eliminate all personal feelings and only remember business."

Nora had been looking at the photos.

"What a lovely girl," she said, pushing one of them over to Irene.

"Is she one of your six wives?" Irene asked suspiciously.

"No; but perhaps my seventh. A Dutchwoman . . . Nantje van Dam. The daughter of a diamond merchant. She's staying on the Semmering with her parents. They've taken the whole first floor in the Savoy. They're travelling with two maids and a servant. Roman Catholics. The girl's twenty. There's a brother in Java. She's interested in art—music. As you can see for yourself, she's absolutely lovely. Her hair reminds one of Titian's women. She has a wonderful complexion, pink and white, like strawberries and cream, all her own, and a very good figure. She'll probably begin to get fat in four or five years, but much can happen before then. A wonderful article."

"Then why does she need the service of a matrimonial agency?" Nora said sharply.

"She knows nothing about the agency. I took the liberty of telling her that I'm a distant relation of Ottokar's, and that I'd like her to meet you."

Irene was still looking at photos.

"Who is that young man? I've often seen him sitting in a café."

"That's young Rack. I've invited him for our literary fans. He's an author, decidedly clever but a megalomaniac. An unpleasant, rather rotten chap. He goes in for politics and keeps veering from the left to the right. He's on the look-out for a rich wife. The other man, yes, the other one whose photo you are holding, is Tom Bright—a nice fellow, journalist by profession, clever, decent and, strange to say, perfectly honest."

"That would be the right thing for Miriam," Irene said.

"Miriam?"

"Yes," Nora replied condescendingly, "you must not think that you are the only one to do any work." She opened the ledger and showed it to Casimir. "Look here! Miriam Schiro, twenty-two, two hundred thousand dowry. . . ."

"Do you really mean to say that you've managed to get hold of old Schiro's daughter?" I congratulate you. You *have* delivered the goods. Which of you . . .?"

"I did it," Irene said proudly. "Nora behaved like a silly ass. But I explained everything to the old man, and they're coming here on Sunday."

Casimir began to add up.

"If they all come on Sunday, and if half of them—or even only a third part of them—finds a marriage partner, we can easily make thirty thousand *schillinge*."

Nora took a letter from her pocket.

"I want you to read that, Ponitzky. It sounds queer. I don't know what to make of it."

"Madam,

"Although you did not think it necessary to invite me to your parties, I shall nevertheless take the liberty of coming next Sunday. I have reason to think that your business-enterprise has an interest for me.

"Yours faithfully,

"Mrs. Theresia Klepper."

Casimir whistled through his teeth.

"Theresia Klepper. Do you know who that is?"

"I haven't got the haziest notion."

"A rival! You can read her firm's advertisements in all Sunday papers. What does the old hag want to come here for? Does she intend to spy? Or does she want to steal our clients?"

"How awful!" Nora cried. "Just think if she said something to Ottokar about it. It would be a catastrophe. It's hard enough to make him understand why I'm giving another party, and inviting such a lot of guests. . . ."

"Never mind, we'll manage somehow," Casimir tried to comfort her. "Though I must admit it's rather annoying. Well, you'd better stick the photos in the album and mark them with a number. And don't forget to write the names and fortunes of our new clients into the ledger. I've got to go. My young friend Mann is expecting me. I only borrowed the car for an hour. So long. I'll come to dinner on Sunday just to see that everything is all right."

* * *

"That Dutch girl is simply stunning, and she looks rather a dear," Irene said, sticking the photo into the

album. "Listen, Nora, we won't let Casimir marry her. She's just the thing for Ottokar."

"Are you mad?"

"Why?"

"For my husband?"

"But you're not married any longer, my dear. What's wrong with my idea? You can't prevent Ottokar marrying again and being happy with another woman."

Nora looked at her sister-in-law with a baneful glance.

"I must say, Irene, sometimes you're simply foul."

She got up and hurriedly left the room. Irene laughed softly. Then she looked at the clock: as late as that! I've got to go and have my tennis lesson.

She left the photos lying on the table, and went to her room to change her dress.

* * *

Huber came into the sitting-room intending to tidy up a bit. He saw the photos on the table and the open album with Nantje van Dam's picture.

Studying it attentively he scratched his head. He felt perturbed. To think that the master's wife has taken up that kind of business, he thought sadly. Of course, he had always disliked her; she had never been good enough for his master. But he never imagined she'd . . . a dirty business. . . . And if the police should get to know . . . Good Lord, what a scandal! Their good reputation would be lost. He really ought to tell the Count . . . but how could he?

Huber had grown up with Ottokar on the Sternbach estate. They had been inseparable as children, and had played many a prank together. When Ottokar married, he went to fetch Huber—who had left the estate in Czechoslovakia to become a taxi chauffeur at Prague—back to Vienna. They were good friends still—but how is one to tell even the best of friends:

"Count Ottokar, I hate telling you, but I've got to do it. You must know the truth. The Countess, your divorced wife, is in the white slave traffic!"

Huber sadly imagined Ottokar's horrified face. No, he had not got the heart to tell him. He closed the album and hid the photos under a magazine.

CHAPTER VIII

ERNESTINE SALT was dressing. She had lit not only the electric light, but also the candles in the old-fashioned candlesticks which had been one of her mother's wedding presents many years ago. The pink dress with the creamy lace lay on the bed.

Her hands trembling with excitement, Ernestine put on her new cami-knickers. She had succumbed to temptation and bought a pair of lovely silk ones. For the first time in her life she enjoyed the feeling of dressing up. Irene had advised her to make up, but there was no need for it. Ernestine's cheeks were flushed with happiness, her freshly-waved soft hair shone in the candlelight, her brown eyes were sparkling.

She looked at the frock again and again, putting off the minute of slipping into it. She was tortured by a secret fear: what if it did not suit her . . . if it was too girlish . . . if she looked ridiculous in it? An old maid masquerading as a young girl?

Ernestine breathed a prayer: "Dear God, let me look pretty, just for to-night. . . . You know, dear God, that I never cared how I looked, that I never had time for it. But if I was a dutiful daughter and sister—and I really tried to be—then let me look pretty to-night; let me be happy to-night. Only just for to-night. As happy as other women are during their whole life. Please, dear God."

She looked into the glass. I really look nice in cami-knickers, she thought; I've got long slim legs—my figure is good. Then she blushed furiously at the idea that any one might see her like this, and at the still more sinful wish that someone would. Her late father would turn in his grave if he knew what a shameless creature his daughter had become.

Out of the past, out of the shades of oblivion, a heavy hand reached for her, wanting to throttle her, trying to rob her, even now of all chances of happiness. Ernestine shuddered. Suddenly she felt utterly discouraged. I'm forty-two, she thought hopelessly, and I'm foolish enough to think that. . . . People will only laugh at me: silly old woman, they'll say, trying to look like a young girl. . . . It would be better not to go to the party at all. . . . Ernestine's spirit began to yield to her dead father's sinister influence, but her body, which had begun to have a life of its own, repelled the attack. It stiffened and seemed to cry out: "Look at me, how young I have remained, how slender, how supple. Look at my long slender legs, my pretty hands, my soft white skin. . . . I am alive; I'm stronger than your fear, stronger than the dead man who grudged me life. I demand my rights."

In the desolate silent room Ernestine burst out laughing. She felt liberated, sure of herself. She went to the bed, picked up the frock and put it on.

Then she hesitated for an instant, her eyes closed, her hands blindly stroking the soft silk, following the slender line of her hips.

Yes, she thought, my body is young . . . meant for love. . . . If only I could leave the room with closed eyes, without a single look into the glass . . . if only . . . I'm afraid to look into the mirror, to see my face . . . I don't want to know how I look.

She sat down before the old-fashioned toilette-table,

still keeping her eyes closed. Her hands had grown icy cold and her forehead was damp.

Then, plucking up courage, she opened her eyes. The candles were burning brightly, throwing a mellow light upon her face. She stared into the glass. Was that really she? In the soft candle-light the tiny wrinkles life had drawn in her face disappeared. She saw big brown eyes, a red mouth and silky hair. And the lovely line of her white shoulders.

In this instant the real Ernestine was born. No one will laugh at me, she exulted. No one will ignore me. I am a woman, I am alive; I am pretty. She shook off the dead hand that wanted to hold her back, she smiled at the faded portrait of her little dead mother: Are you pleased with me, darling? Are you proud of your pretty daughter? It seemed to her as if she was feeling not only her own passionate longing for life and happiness, but also that of the woman who had had so joyless a life and who had been so glad to die.

There was a knock at the door.

"Come in!"

The Widow Leger entered the room. She threw a disapproving glance at the burning candles and then at Ernestine.

"How smart you are," she said spitefully; "a bit too girlish for your age."

Ernestine laughed. She could hardly believe that the merry mischievous laugh was her own.

"Dear Mrs. Leger, nowadays one isn't an old woman at forty-two as one used to be when you were young."

The widow stared at her. She had never heard her lodger talk like that before.

"Perhaps, if you think so. . . ." Then, anxious not to forfeit her authority she added severely:

"Don't come home too late. You know that I can't go to sleep before having bolted the door."

The fateful minute had come. If I give in now, Ernestine thought, I'm lost for ever. But if I conquer my fear. . . .

Her voice was rather shaky as she repeated the words she had been practising for so many days:

"I shall come home when I please, Mrs. Leger."

The widow felt as if the world was coming to an end. Was it really timid, apologetic Miss Salt who dared to speak to her in that tone? The elderly spinster who sat at home making lace?

"All my lodgers," she said severely, "are respectable and well-bred people. None of them thinks of staying out late. I cannot allow you to. . . ."

The words stuck in her throat. Ernestine smiled. Ernestine did not, as she usually did, begin to stammer and to excuse herself. She said very sweetly, very placidly:

"I'm quite ready to give up my room if I'm not respectable enough for you."

The widow remembered the many furnished rooms standing empty in town. She grew frightened.

"Dear Miss Salt, you're mistaken; I never meant it like that. I am delighted to think that you will have a good time. At your age a girl must have some fun. And you are looking perfectly charming."

Ernestine was amazed. Was it so easy to overcome the enemy? Must one only be calm and firm and not let oneself be intimidated? If only she had known it years ago.

She shrugged. Why think of the past? There was the present to enjoy and, perhaps, the future too.

* * *

The first party at the Sternbach's had been a small one; the second, Casimir had decided, was to be a much more formal affair.

"For once we'll have to spend money," he had declared. "It can't be helped. But it will pay."

He came to dinner, much to Ottokar's disgust, and inspected the rooms, the sideboard, the preparations in the kitchen. Then he drove off in the well-known blue car to meet his friends who had come down from the Semmering for the evening.

He promised to return before the other guests came.

"Should I be late," he said to Nora, "mind you don't forget to be aristocratic. Amiable but reserved. Don't forget."

Nora promised not to forget, and forgot it as soon as Mr. Schiro and Miriam came into the drawing-room. She had been feeling rather ill at ease, but the sight of the kind old face gave her back her self-possession. Old Schiro knew all about everything, and Nora felt sure that he would be helpful. Besides, he really looked the business man he was, and that would please Ottokar. As to Miriam, she was a darling. At first she seemed rather sullen; probably she had not wanted to go to the party. Nora could well imagine the scene between father and daughter, but Irene went up to her at once and after a short while they were talking nineteen to the dozen; about flying, of course. We won't earn the one per cent. if Irene goes on like that, Nora thought, but perhaps we'll earn three.

Mr. Bite and Ernestine came at the same time and went and sat in a corner.

About half-past nine Casimir arrived with his new friends: Nantje van Dam, even more beautiful than her picture, and a fat father van Dam who looked as if he could buy up the whole company.

There was a moment of embarrassment when young Mann was introduced to Mr. Schiro. The boy stared at the old man, grew red in the face and opened his mouth:

"Go to . . ."

But already Irene was standing beside Mr. Schiro, her hand on his arm, an ominous little smile on her lips. The young man gave a start, flushed and stammered:

"Are you going to the south of France this year, Mr. Schiro, or to Egypt?"

Then he beat a hasty retreat and sat down beside the Aryan Nature-Lover.

Old Schiro laughed good-naturedly.

"Poor Mann," he said. "His boy is even more of a handful than my daughter. Well, youth must sow its wild oats, and nowadays wild oats frequently grow in the field of politics."

Irene laughed too, but not in the least good-naturedly. She said a few words to old Schiro and followed young Mann. Seeing her he got up nervously.

Irene looked daggers at him, turned up her nose and gave a sniff of disgust.

The boy stood to attention, as though she had been his commanding officer

"You may sit down," Irene said condescendingly. "And if you manage to behave decently, you may even stay."

"After all, Countess Sternbach, I've been invited to the party."

"Against my will. Unfortunately as you're our guest, I have to put up with you, but if I notice anything, the tiniest of tiny things"—her smile became a threat—"don't forget. The best back-hand of Lausanne!"

The boy looked uncomfortable and bowed silently.

Irene turned her back on him and went up to Nora, who was talking to a very smart woman, the wrong side of forty.

"Just a minute, Nora."

Nora got up and followed her to the other side of the room.

"What do you want?" she said impatiently. "I'm talking with ten thousand *schillinge* per cents., and you come and call me away."

"Do look after the other guests as well. I can't be everywhere at the same time."

"Casimir told me to sit here and look aristocratic."

"And if the Aryan Nature-Lover and that cad Mann . . ."

"Casimir said that all political disputes were going to be settled by him and by you."

"Just like him. Good Lord, Mann is talking to Miriam. What are we to do?"

Casimir who had come up, laughed.

"Don't worry. Austrian anti-Semites forget their anti-Semitism when they meet so rich and so pretty a Jewess. May they never change."

A very respectable looking man in black was just being announced:

"The reverend Mr. Daniel."

"Who is that?" Nora whispered.

"One of my twenty newcomers," Casimir said. "A Baptist preacher from Chicago. A charming man. It looks well to have so respectable a man at your party. You must be very nice to him, Countess Nora."

Irene put out her hand and stopped her sister-in-law.

"Nora, that man's a gangster. Take off your pearls. Put them away safely. I tell you, the man is a gangster."

"Don't be silly, Irene. Because he comes from Chicago! How absurd you are. You read too many thrillers."

"He is a gangster. Look, something's sticking out in his right trouser pocket. That's where the gangsters carry their gun. You'll see; suddenly the lights will go out, the man will call out 'Stick up your hands,' and that will be the end of our venture."

"Don't talk nonsense. Go and talk to our guests."

"He is a gangster," Irene grumbled, and went to meet Margot Wiker who was just coming in.

The Aryan Nature-Lover, Mr. van Dam and Mr. Schiro were sitting together at a small table talking eagerly. They spoke about butter, growing hot and excited about that gentle produce of a gentle animal. Ottokar, passing them on the way to the other room, overheard a few words. Butter, he thought—butter, of all things in the world! Is Nora going to start a dairy? I MUST find out who those people are, and why Nora has got to meet them. I'll ask her to-night as soon as we are alone.

He almost bumped into a plump, very blonde lady who, lifting an old-fashioned lorgnette to her eyes, said:

"Count Sternbach?"

"Yes."

"Glad to meet you, Count. My name is Theresia Klepper. You have probably heard it before."

"Sorry, you must forgive me; I never can remember names. Have I had the pleasure of meeting you before?"

"No, Count. I only thought as I am the head of a rival firm. . . ."

"I beg your pardon!"

"We're in the same business."

"Butter?" Ottokar stammered, absolutely at a loss.

The plump lady stared at him in amazement.

"Butter? What makes you think of butter?"

Casimir, who had been uneasily watching Ottokar and the plump lady, came up almost at a run.

"Mrs. Klepper, may I introduce myself, Count Ponitzky? Countess Sternbach has asked me to take you in to supper."

He offered her his arm.

Ottokar remained standing where he was. I seem to have been mistaken, he thought. It isn't butter after all. A great fear took hold of him. Perhaps the word butter was used to camouflage a much less harmless thing,

perhaps an article that could not be sold openly in the market—morphia, cocaine . . . ?

Irene came up and caught hold of his arm.

"Don't stand about like that," she said impatiently. "Do go and talk to your guests. Take Miss van Dam in to supper."

"Irene, I must know the truth. What are you trading in? Has it got to do with drugs?"

"Drugs? So I was right after all, and he is a gangster. I knew it at once. But how on earth did you find it out, Ottokar?" And she gazed at him almost admiringly.

"GANGSTER? Who on earth is a gangster?"

"We haven't got time to talk now. Miss van Dam is standing by the window all alone and looking lost. Go and take her in to supper at once."

Ottokar obeyed. Irene remained in the drawing-room for a moment. Hastily taking off her rings and a turquoise chain she thrust them into the drawer of the big Empire table. Then she too went into the dining-room.

Casimir was a genius. He had had small tables put up and had placed the guests so cleverly that none of them could be bored. Margot was sitting beside Mr. Rack, the author, who was entertaining her with the story of his success.

"The papers are simply wild about me," he was saying. "And the Radio is always bothering me to give a talk. It isn't true that genius is not recognized nowadays."

He broke off to throw a nervous glance at Mr. Bite who was sitting at the next table. Then his eyes returned to Margot's rubies.

"I don't care for money," he went on, "but I do care tremendously for fame, for an immortal name. And I know for sure that I shall not fight and suffer and work in vain."

He really sounded convincing, and Margot nodded with a dreamy smile. She rather liked the young man.

He certainly seemed different from all the other men in the room. After all, she mused, toying with her food, any pretty woman can become a countess by marriage; but to be the wife of a famous author. . . . I might have a *salon*. . . .

Miriam was seated beside the journalist. Thank goodness; Irene said, watching them, old Schiro will be pleased. If Miriam falls for the man, she won't go against the family traditions. Mr. Mann sat on Miriam's left—a tame, gentle, very shy Mr. Mann.

The Aryan Nature-Lover had been greatly attracted by Mrs. Klepper's blonde hair. He sat on her right, talking eagerly and drinking hard.

Mr. Cap and Miss Kicki Kater had not turned up, but there were so many new guests that no one missed them.

Irene's eyes roved from one table to the other. Resting on the one in the corner they grew soft: she was seeing an unusual sight—two perfectly happy people. Mr. Bite and Ernestine Salt. What a lot they had to say to each other. They hardly had time to eat. Ernestine was laughing merrily, and Mr. Bite was gazing at her with adoring eyes. They will make a match of it, Irene thought, and felt a glow of pleasure at the idea. Of course we cannot take a percentage from the poor devils; on the contrary, we shall have to give them a wedding present. I hope the others will turn out to be more profitable. . . . She looked at Ottokar and Nantje van Dam. Her brother had not been so cheertful for ages. It would be rather a good thing—Dutch *gulden* and a beautiful wife. . . . Nantje seemed a nice girl, much gentler and sweeter than Nora. . . . Irene threw a glance at her sister-in-law, who did not look as if she were enjoying herself. She looked decidedly cross, and was hardly listening to the Reverend Mr. Daniel who was doing his best to amuse her. The Reverend Mr. Daniel. . . . Of course he HAD to sit beside Nora. . . . And Nora was wearing the famous

Sternbach pearls. . . . What a temptation for a gangster from Chicago . . . ! Irene tried to catch Casimir's eyes. After all, he had introduced the gangster to them; he ought to keep an eye on him. But Casimir was talking away to the lady who represented a commission of ten thousand *schillinge* and whose name was Mrs. Ride. He never noticed Irene's imploring glances.

After they had left the dinner table Irene tried to find Casimir. At last she hunted him down in the library, but he was not alone; he was kissing the lady of the ten thousand *schillinge* who seemed rather to enjoy it.

Irene went back to the drawing-room, and helped Nora to pour out coffee.

"Why are you looking so cross, Nora?" she whispered. "Are you tired?"

"Cross? I'm not cross; what makes you think so?" Nora forced a smile.

"Everything is going beautifully. Just look what a good time the people are having."

"Just look at your brother making love to that odious Nantje van Dam. It's absolutely indecent."

"Odious? But, my dear, she's charming, and it would be such a good thing for Ottokar."

"She isn't charming at all. She's stupid and insipid, and Casimir is right—she'll be as fat as a pig in a few years' time."

* * *

The last guests left about two. Mr. Bite, fortified by love and brandy, asked Ernestine to let him accompany her. They walked slowly. A gentle breeze wafted yellow leaves at their feet. Overhead the stars were shining brightly.

"What a glorious night," Ernestine said softly.

"Yes. As a rule I hate the autumn, because winter is coming and winter is so dreary. But even winter need not be desolate if one has a nice home. . . . One comes

out of the cold, and the room is delightfully warm, and someone very dear is waiting in the hall, and a gentle voice says: 'Poor Théodore, you must be frozen. Come into the kitchen. Dinner is ready.' And after dinner we sit together in the sitting-room and . . ."

"Yes," Ernestine said dreamily, "we sit together and each of us has such a lot to tell the other; all the things that happened during the day. And one is not lonely any longer and need not be afraid of anything. Outside the window snow is falling and the streets are white with frost. But inside one is living on a tiny, cosy, warm island."

Both fell silent, but each of them knew what the other was thinking of, was hoping for: the one and only real happiness; not to be lonely any longer.

Once again the Widow Leger put out her head on hearing Ernestine come in. But she did not scold; she said kindly:

"Come in for a moment, dear Miss Salt, and tell me all about the party."

And Ernestine, feeling so happy that she loved even Mrs. Leger, accepted the invitation.

* * *

Ottokar had intended to talk things over with the two women, but it was so late that he put it off to the following day and went to bed. Irene opened the windows wide to let out the cigarette smoke. She felt tired, and was looking forward to a good long sleep.

Just as she was beginning to put out the lights, Nora rushed in, pale and upset.

"Irene, my pearls are gone!"

"Your pearls? What did I tell you? Of course, the gangster has taken them. Didn't I tell you to take them off?"

Nora sank on a chair and began to cry.

"Ottokar gave them to me as a wedding present. I loved them. . . ."

"Oh, for goodness' sake, don't be sentimental. Wedding present! You're always forgetting that you're divorced. How much do you think they were worth?"

"A lot. They're beautiful pearls. And a family heirloom! What am I to do?"

"Where is the gangster staying?"

"On the Semmering. I don't know the name of the hotel, he mentioned it, but I've forgotten."

"Just like you."

Irene ran to the telephone.

"I must ring up Casimir. He brought the man here. He's responsible. Hullo . . .! Can I speak to Count Ponitzky? Yes, at once. Never mind. Wake him up. . . . It's most important. . . ."

After a short while a sleepy voice explained that the Count was not at home.

Forgetting her weariness, Irene stayed up for hours, ringing up the hotel every ten minutes. But the answer was always the same: The Count had not come home.

Casimir had driven off with the lady of the ten thousand *schillings*, and was not to be found all next day.

CHAPTER IX

NORA passed a sleepless night. She began to feel doubtful about her idea. Up to now it had only cost money, and she had lost her pearls. . . .

She suddenly remembered plump Mrs. Klepper. Why had the woman come? Could she put a spoke in their wheel?

Nora began to count. Their capital was rapidly

dwindling. They really ought to economize; but where were they to begin? She had forgotten how to live economically during her married life.

The sadness and hopelessness of the small hours of the morning took her by the throat; the melancholy, bred by the merciless time before the dawn when everything seems lost and futile, when fear tortures those who cannot sleep, crept in on her. Everything in the room took on a hostile air—the mirror looked like an immense ghostly plain where one loses one's way; the furniture made faces; weird noises disturbed the quiet of the night with creakings, whispers and sighs. The tick-tock of the clock told of death, drawing closer and closer; of the present being swallowed up by the past.

The thought of the irrevocable past made her heart ache. In forty or fifty years she and Ottokar and Irene would be old or dead. Everything happy and beautiful would belong to the past. Did not the care-free years of her married life belong to it already? Had not even last night become its prey? And every second told by the ticking of the clock fell into the abysmal void of things that had been.

During the first year of their marriage, at a time when she had still taken the trouble to conceal how terribly his ideas bored her, Ottokar had sometimes voiced such thoughts. How strange that to-night, nervous and depressed, she should have the same. She felt like getting up and knocking at Ottokar's door, crying out: "Let me come in . . . I'm frightened. Everything is so mysterious, so uncanny: life and death. Everything passes so quickly; hold me tight, make me feel safe. . . ."

She tried to banish her fear by thinking of practical things, but they were not in the least encouraging. We shall never earn any money; we shall become really poor; we shall have to sell the house. . . . Of course, Ottokar will manage somehow with the salary the Professor pays

him. He can live practically on nothing. And Irene? I need not worry about her. She'll become a tennis pro. and make lots of money. But I . . . What am I to do? Go home, back to that dead-alive little place; live with my parents? Father would be kind, in his way, but mother . . . Of course, she does not mean to be unkind, but she would never stop reproaching me, and after all it's not my fault that the bank failed.

The bank. . . . Up to now the word had meant a big building, polite men working behind a counter, blue envelopes, letters explaining how big one's deposit was or, sometimes, asking one to sign something. But surely there must be another side to it? A bank could be something dangerous, something evil; it possessed the power to impoverish people in a single day. A bank could burst like a soap bubble. What happened to the polite men behind the counter when it did? Did they vanish in smoke and mist like ghosts, or did they lie awake at night and count, no longer the millions belonging to others, but the pennies belonging to them?

Nora remembered the nice young man who had looked tanned and well for about a fortnight a year, just after his holidays, and who was as pale as the faded wall-paper behind his back the rest of the time. Was he still sitting behind his counter, weary and polite, saying: "Please, sign here," or had he lost his job because his bank had been badly hit by the failure of the Elster Bank? She suddenly remembered that the young man had worn a wedding ring; he had to keep a wife, maybe children, poor devil. . . . She thought of him with sympathy and compassion. For the first time she understood a weakness of Ottokar's that had always annoyed her—his interest in other people. She had believed it to be a pose when he had said: "How ill our poor postman looks. I'm sure he's got something wrong with his kidneys. And he's got to walk such a lot."

Hearing Ottokar say that kind of thing, she had often felt like screaming. What business of his was it, if the postman looked ill? Ottokar was sickeningly sentimental.

But now, in this sorrowful night, harrowed by worries and anxiety, she herself fell to thinking of the young man in the bank, of the postman who looked so ill, of the innumerable men and women who could not sleep because they were worried to death, thinking of the rent, or the grocer's bill.

Strangely enough, she ceased to be afraid. She was not alone any longer; she belonged to all the people to whom life was unkind. She felt herself blushing in the dark: how could she be such a coward? She was rich in comparison with others. If she made up her mind to give up PLAYING at work, if she would take things seriously . . . then surely she would be able to make a success of this funny business of theirs.

She glanced towards the window. A pale ray of sun was gliding through the blinds, driving away the ghosts.

Suddenly she felt dead tired. She stretched herself in her comfortable bed, her thoughts began to grow confused. She saw Ottokar giving the postman a lift in their car, saw Irene playing tennis with old Schiro, saw Nantje van Dam falling from a cliff. Then the phantoms vanished and she fell asleep.

* * *

When Nora came down to breakfast in the morning, the maid handed her two notes. One was from Ottokar:

"Have had to leave town. Did not want to wake you. Back in two or three days. Best love.—Ottokar."

The second was in Irene's energetic, rather sprawling hand:

"Casimir has disappeared. Cannot get in touch with him. Am going to the Semmering to get back your pearls from the gangster. May be back late, don't worry.—Irene."

Nora felt herself growing pale. If the man REALLY was a gangster . . . She knew Irene. The girl feared nothing, and the idea of danger only lured her on. What was she to do? Ring up the police? But what was she to say? You cannot accuse a man on a mere suspicion. . . . Besides any one of the guests might have taken the pearls. It might even have been Casimir; it certainly WAS queer that he had disappeared. What on earth did Irene intend to do? And what would be the result of her folly?

Nora drank one cup of tea after the other, but was unable to eat. That dreadful girl; one never knew what she was up to. And if anything happened to Irene, Ottokar would be sure to say that it was Nora's fault. Of course he HAD to be away when she needed him. Where had he gone to? Why had he only written a short note, giving no explanations? After all, she had a right to know. . . . Nora put her hand to her aching head. Ottokar was gone, and she did not even know where to. He might at least have given her his address. . . . Irene. . . . Ought she to drive to the Semmering? It would be terribly expensive. When did the next train leave? She rang for the maid.

"When did Countess Irene go out?" she asked.

"About eight, madam."

More than two hours ago! She would be too late even if she took a taxi. A thought flashed through her brain, making her blood freeze. She jumped up and ran to Ottokar's room. Her hands trembling, she opened the

writing-table drawer. Ottokar's Browning had gone. . . . Had Irene taken it?

She was on the verge of tears. She rang once more for the maid and told her to call Huber. Of course he was not in their service any longer, but he still lived in the attic with the child, and helped in the house when they had guests. Nora knew that the chauffeur disliked her, but she remembered gratefully that he loved Ottokar and was fond of Irene. Perhaps he could advise her what to do.

Huber came in, looking severe and disapproving.

"You wanted me, madam?"

"Huber, I'm so frightened. Countess Irene has gone to the Semmering."

He stared at her, a look of amazement on his face.

"But surely, that's no reason to be frightened."

"Yes, but that's not all. Last night someone stole my pearls."

Huber shook his head.

"You must excuse the liberty I am taking, madam," he said, "but what can you expect if you go in for a disreputable business and get mixed up with that kind of people?"

"Disreputable business?"

Huber grew embarrassed.

"Of course I'm not entitled to say anything, nevertheless, I have been greatly worried by the idea that Count Ottokar's wife—excuse me, Count Ottokar's divorced wife—had taken up so dirty a business. I did not want to tell the Count, because it would have made him miserable, but really, madam, you must not forget that if ever the police . . ."

Nora stared at him. Had the man taken leave of his senses?

"The police? But surely it isn't my fault if someone steals my pearls?"

"I am not talking about the pearls, although of course they are a great loss. I am thinking of the business you have taken up. . . ."

"I really don't know what you mean. After all, lots of people are in the same business. If you read the Sunday papers. . . ."

"I only read the political part," Huber said severely. "Besides, I really don't think—you must excuse me—but I simply can't believe that this trade ever advertises. . . ."

"Of course it does. Mrs. Klepper, the fat woman who came here last night, advertises her matrimonial agency twice a week."

"Matrimonial agency . . . ?"

Huber caught his breath. "You have a matrimonial agency, madam? Thank God that it's only that!"

"What did you think?"

Huber grew red in the face and avoided meeting her eyes.

"I'd rather not say it."

"You must."

"You must excuse me, madam . . . but all those photos of young women lying about in the drawing-room. . . . I thought . . . I feared. . . . If people are keen on making money they don't always mind what . . ."

"Tell me what you thought."

"I . . . I greatly feared that you had gone into the white slave traffic, madam."

Huber hung his head, the very picture of embarrassment.

Nora burst out laughing. She could not stop, and suddenly her laughter changed to tears. She sat there, crying helplessly, tears running down her cheeks, her whole body shaken by sobs.

Huber gazed at her anxiously.

"Shall I get you a glass of water, madam? Or shall I call Marie?"

"No, wait! I'll be all right at once. But listen, Huber! You've got to help me. My husband . . . Count Ottokar is not in town, and Countess Irene. . . ."

"What has Countess Irene been up to now?"

"Listen, Huber, and don't interrupt me or I shall cry again. Last night my pearls were stolen, and Countess Irene suspects one of our guests—the American gentleman."

Huber looked incredulous.

"What do Americans want to steal our pearls for? They're rich enough as it is."

"Of course I don't know whether he really is the thief. But Countess Irene has gone to the Semmering where the American is staying, and I'm afraid. . . ."

"No wonder! Goodness alone knows what Countess Irene will do."

What a Job's comforter. Nora almost began crying anew.

"Huber, you've got a motor cycle. I wanted to go to the Semmering myself, but what good would I be? You're a man, you can tackle the gangster if it's necessary. And you'll get there much faster than by train. Huber, please, will you go, for Count Ottokar's sake?"

"All right, madam. Where does the American live?"

"I don't know. I only know that his name is Daniel, and that he comes from Chicago."

"I suppose that is the name he has given at the hotel?"

"Dear me, I never thought of that. Perhaps he calls himself by another name on the Semmering."

"Don't worry, madam. I'll hunt out the rascal. I'm off at once."

"Thank you, But, Huber, you don't know the worst yet: Countess Irene has taken my husband's revolver. . . . I'm frightened to death. Just think what might happen!"

Huber laughed.

"Don't laugh. You know her. You know how impulsive she is."

"It's not likely that she'll shoot the rascal."

"How can you be so sure of it? If he attacks her . . ."

"Don't worry, madam. I cleaned the Browning four days ago, and it's not loaded. I'll be off now."

He left the room and five minutes later Nora heard the puffing and rattling of the motor-cycle on the drive before the house.

* * *

Irene had got into the train at eight and was gazing out of the window, enjoying the lovely autumn morning. The hedges were drenched with dew, and the long white threads of an Indian summer were floating in the air. Groves of chestnut trees were a mass of gold, and in the tiny allotments Virginia creepers covering the fences looked like climbing flames. The world was beautiful, and Irene was seeking an adventure. She felt blissfully happy.

Arriving on the Semmering she considered for a moment. Of course, the gangster was sure to stay at the best hotel. She went there and asked the hall porter for the room number of the Reverend Mr. Daniel.

"Shall I announce madam?" the man asked, surprised at the early visitor.

"No, thank you. I've got an appointment."

She went up in the lift and knocked at the door of Number 48.

"Come in!"

The reverend gentleman was still dressed in his pyjamas, and looked rather embarrassed when Irene entered the room. He had been expecting the waiter with his breakfast.

"I've got to talk to you, Mr. Daniel," Irene said, and sat down unceremoniously.

"Delighted to see you, Countess. But . . . I'm not dressed for receiving visitors. If you'll excuse me just for a moment. . . ."

"Oh, I don't mind."

Surely he will not have a gun in his pyjama pocket, Irene reflected; better not let him dress.

The waiter came with the breakfast. He stared with amazement at the reverend gentleman who was receiving so pretty a girl so early in the morning—and in his pyjamas.

"You know why I've come," Irene said, as soon as the waiter had closed the door behind him.

"Of course, I'm delighted and honoured by your visit. I was just going to write to Countess Sternbach to thank her for a most pleasant evening."

"A most profitable one too, wasn't it?"

"I'm afraid I don't know what you mean."

Mr. Daniel calmly sat down at the breakfast table.

"May I eat my breakfast? I'm very hungry. The mountain air, you know. May I order breakfast for you too?"

What cheek, Irene thought; fancy the fellow asking me to breakfast with him.

"No, thank you. I'd like to settle our little business."

"Business?"

"Yes, don't pretend that you don't know what I mean."

"I really don't know," the gangster said pleasantly, pouring himself out a cup of coffee. "But if there is anything I can do for you, I'll be only too glad. . . ."

"We don't want to make a fuss," Irene said coldly.

"We'd hate to have to call the police, and I'm sure you don't want the affair to get into the papers."

She took out the Browning and laid it on her lap.

"You'd better let me have the . . ."

The gangster put down his cup and stared at the gun.

"What ARE you talking about? And why . . .?"

She interrupted him rudely:

"You'd better let me have them at once."

"What am I to let you have? Why have you come? Are you trying to blackmail me? I'll lodge a complaint with the police. I'll get the American Consul to . . ."

Irene laughed scornfully.

"Oh, give up pretending. It won't do you any good. I know what you are."

"What I am? Vicar of Trinity Church, Chicago."

"Perhaps you're that, too, in your leisure hours. I don't care if you are. But I do know what your real profession is."

"Have you taken leave of your senses?"

The gangster jumped up, red with rage.

"Don't move!"

Irene lifted the Browning from her lap and took aim.

"Good Lord!" The gangster looked alarmed for a moment. "Is this a robber's den? What are you doing?"

"Sit down!"

The gangster obeyed meekly.

"And now tell me where the pearls are. We're not going to call in the police. I only want the pearls back."

"The pearls? What pearls?"

The gangster mopped his forehead with his napkin.

"The pearls you stole last night from my sister-in-law."

The gangster jumped up again.

"Look here! That's really going too far, young lady. You come here at a time when decent people are still in bed, prevent me from having my breakfast in peace, insult me . . ."

Irene began to feel nervous. If the man attacked her. . . . She raised the Browning.

"Put away that silly toy!" the gangster yelled. He stretched out his hand and—Irene never knew how it

happened—an instant later the gun was lying on the table in front of him. He lifted it up gingerly, studied it and burst out laughing.

"Why, it's not even loaded!"

Irene changed colour and clenched her fists under the table.

"Give me back the pearls," she said.

"Look here, young lady, are you quite sane? I know nothing about the pearls you keep talking of. If you don't get out at once, I'll have the police in. . . ."

"Last night you stole my sister-in-law's pearls," Irene's voice was a trifle shaky. "Give them back to me. We don't want to send you to prison; we only want the pearls back."

The gangster went over to the telephone. Irene's heart gave a jump. What was going to happen now?

The gangster was dialling.

"Just a minute." He spoke a few words into the 'phone. Then turning to Irene, he said:

"The American Consul is on the 'phone. Come and talk to him."

Feeling dazed and shaky Irene walked over to the telephone and took up the receiver. A pleasant drawling voice came through the 'phone. The longer the pleasant voice spoke, the more dismayed Irene felt. Her temples throbbled; she could hardly make sense of what she heard:

"Yes, of course, the Reverend Mr. Daniel, a well-known preacher . . . a great philanthropist, a most honourable man. . . . A great friend of mine. . . ."

That was her gangster!

She put back the receiver with a trembling hand.

Mr. Daniel had sat down again and was eating bread and honey.

"Well?" he said.

Irene stood before him, pale, dismayed, desperately

embarrassed. If only I were Nora, she thought, I would burst out crying, and things would come right somehow. But I can't cry. And I dare not pretend. What will the man do? Can he have me convicted for blackmail?

She began stammering excuses.

"I'm terribly sorry. . . . Please, do forgive me."

Mr. Daniel looked at her with twinkling eyes and an amused smile.

"All right," he said at last. "We won't talk about it any more, You'll explain another time. But remember, if you intend to fight a gangster, you'd better make sure that your gun is loaded."

He gave her back the Browning.

"Sorry, young lady, but I must ask you to go now. I'd like to dress. It's rather chilly here. The mountain air. Besides, you Continentals can never keep your rooms properly heated, and I'm a subject to colds. I really must go and dress."

* * *

Standing aimlessly in front of the hotel Irene felt giddy and sick. Never again—she vowed—never again shall I read a book in which the hero is a gangster. I HAVE made a fool of myself. How Nora and Ottokar will laugh at me!

Walking through the grounds she met Mr. van Dam. The fat Dutchman seemed surprised to see her.

"What an early bird you are, Countess. Are you going mountaineering?"

"No. I . . . I just wanted to make the most of a lovely morning, and the Semmering is so beautiful in autumn."

"Glorious weather we're having. I'm up early, too, for once. I've just taken my daughter to the station. She's off for a few days."

"Really?" Irene said, not troubling to show any interest in Nantje van Dam's doings. What did she care

about Nantje or anything else? The only thing she could think of was the ghastly mistake she had made. Taking leave of Mr. van Dam who gazed after her with a bewildered look, she walked on slowly and reached the road. A motor-cycle came tearing round the corner. The brake creaked. Huber jumped off.

"Ah, there you are, Countess Irene. Thank goodness that I've found you. Are you all right?"

"Why shouldn't I be all right? Can't I come up here to enjoy a fine morning?"

"Countess Sternbach was terribly frightened. She was afraid that . . ."

"Oh Huber, please don't talk nonsense. Everything is all right. I'll come home with you in the side-car."

"If I had only known you were safe. I came so fast that a policeman stopped me and took down my name."

"That will cost us five *schillinge* at least."

"As long as nothing has happened to you. Countess Sternbach was afraid the gangster might have . . ."

"There's no gangster in the whole place. Don't say such things. There's only a silly ass, and that's me."

She saw that Mr. van Dam had come up and was staring at them. He must have heard her last words. Good Lord, what would the man think? Perhaps he would never come to their parties again because he believed them to be mad or something. She smiled sweetly.

"I . . . I quarrelled with my sister-in-law . . ." she said with a stammer, "and I ran off. So of course they felt anxious about me. . . ."

She saw that he did not believe her, and felt desperate. Everything was going wrong. She hastily shook Mr. van Dam's hand, and got into the side-car.

"Get a move on, Huber, and for goodness' sake don't talk to me."

Trees and hedges flew past. The sun was shining brightly, the sky was a sapphire blue, but Irene never

noticed it. She was busy calling herself names and wondering whether the van Dams would come to their next party.

* * *

Nora, who had been waiting at the window for the puffing of the motor-cycle, came to meet her.

"Have you got the pearls? Did you get the better of the gangster? Did he put up a fight?"

"He's not a gangster; he's a well-known preacher and a most respectable man. If you love me, Nora, you will never, never say another word about the whole thing. Give me something to eat. I had no breakfast, and am starving."

They went into the dining-room.

"You've certainly not lost your appetite," Nora said watching Irene eat. "But I should like to know who can have stolen my pearls if it wasn't the man from Chicago. I tried to ring up Casimir; I 'phoned his hotel five times. He hasn't come home. Don't you think he did it after all?"

"I shall never again suspect anyone as long as I live. I'd rather die than make such a fool of myself a second time. By the way, I met old van Dam. He told me that Nantje has gone away for a few days, and that he doesn't know whether she'll be back in time for our next party."

"REALLY?"

"What's up? What makes you say 'really' like that?"

Nora got up and walked to the window. Turning her back upon Irene she looked into the garden, struggling with a fit of rage.

"Nora. . . ."

"Yes."

"What is the matter?"

"Nothing. You're always imagining things. Just as you thought the man was a gangster."

She turned round and glared at her sister-in-law.

"Your brother has also left town for a few days. Like Nantje. Funny, isn't it?"

"Where has Ottokar gone to?" Irene asked innocently, pouring herself out her third cup of tea.

"How am I to know? He did not trouble to tell me. He only left a note saying that he had to leave town. That was all."

"Why are you so vexed?"

"I'm not vexed. Why should I be? I don't care what he does. I don't care where he goes to, nor how long he stays away. But I must say you Sternbachs are odious people. Yes, Irene, you're odious too. Everything goes wrong—the bank fails, my pearls get stolen, Nantje van Dam goes away for a few days, your brother disappears, and you sit there eating toast as if nothing had happened."

Irene put down the toast and stared at her sister-in-law.

"Are you mad?"

"Not yet, though I'm sure to be if I live with you any longer." She ran out of the room, banging the door behind her.

CHAPTER X

SITTING in the train, south-bound, Ottokar asked himself what had induced him to undertake the journey. He took out the letter his father's old solicitor had written him, and re-read it. The old man asked him to go to Innsbruck at once. Miss Hoper, a distant relation of his father's, wanted to see him. Ottokar tried in vain to remember her; he could not even recall having ever heard her name, but the solicitor wrote that she

was old and very ill, and longing to see her dear cousin's son.

Old Mr. Haik, the solicitor, knew Ottokar inside out, and had decided on keeping back some rather important information. He had been sure that the words "An old, sick woman" would do the trick, and the less Ottokar knew about his father's cousin, the better.

He had not been mistaken. Two hours after he had received the letter, Ottokar was travelling south. Probably the poor woman was not only old and ailing, but also in reduced circumstances. Perhaps she expected him to lend her some money! How on earth could he do so? He thought of the laboratory and his tiny salary; he would never get a rise, he would always remain the gifted amateur who owed his job to the kindness of strangers.

Suddenly he felt disgusted with himself. What was he? A man who could not even maintain his wife. If only he had enough money to study and pass an examination; but the money belonged to Nora and Irene. Money. . . . During thirty-four years of his life he had never given it a thought—one had it, one spent it; there was always some more at the bank. . . . I was a fine gentleman, he thought angrily; people flattered me—yes, even in our democratic days. . . . But what made a fine gentleman of me? A bank deposit, a big fortune. The bank has gone smash. I have suddenly ceased to be a fine gentleman, and have turned out to be a helpless fool who cannot work, who cannot get a job—at least not a job that brings in money. Now at last I am really I. Before I was money plus a title. . . . He looked down at his well-fitting suit. What shall I be when my clothes have got shabby, when I am down at heel? How will people treat me then?

A feeling of pride he had never experienced before awoke in his heart: when that happens, when I have lost the background my money gave me, I shall be what

I really am—a gentleman, not a gent, a real gentleman who does nothing shady for the sake of making money, who does not sell himself. . . .

The pleasant sensation called up by this thought vanished quickly. It will come easy to me, he thought with a wry smile; who would want to buy me?

He looked out of the window, watching the small Tyrolese villages hurry past, tiny houses huddling round the village church. They looked peaceful and happy. I wish I was a peasant, Ottokar thought; but I'd certainly be a bad farmer. I would never be any good at a profession that demands hard work. Serves me right to have lost my money. . . . There is no room in our world for idlers. But I am sorry for Nora. . . . She loves a leisurely comfortable life, loves being surrounded by beautiful things. . . . Irene is sure to get on. What a pity she isn't a boy. She's much more energetic and efficient than I am. If only I knew what the two girls are doing, what kind of business they have taken up. . . . All those queer people that come to our house. . . . I don't like it; I don't like it at all. But I have no right to interfere with my divorced wife's plans. Besides, the house belongs to her. I am living in her house; she is keeping me, up to a certain point. . . . It sounds beastly. I cannot go on like that. . . . And now there is the old lady. If we should have to maintain her too. . . . She is old and sick; I must help her.

The train stopped. Ottokar got out. The high mountains looking down upon the town were already covered with snow. He drove through rather desolate, empty, wind-swept streets. The taxi passed the old Renaissance Cathedral and the ancient Imperial palace, left the main street, turned into large and beautifully-kept grounds, and stopped before a big hotel.

Ottokar was surprised and slightly dismayed. The old lady seemed to be staying at the best hotel in town. Then

a ray of hope lit up his gloom: perhaps she was not quite so badly off after all.

He took a small room on the top floor and asked the hall porter to inform Miss Hoper that he had arrived.

After a short while a page knocked at his door and took him to the first floor, where he threw open a door.

Ottokar felt a slight shock: a sitting-room—the woman had got a suite! How terribly extravagant! He had quite forgotten that a few months ago he would never have dreamt of not taking one himself.

The room was rather dark. Ottokar looked round and saw a slight white-haired figure lying on a couch. A gentle, tired voice said:

“Ottokar?”

“Yes.”

Not knowing how to address the old lady he politely kissed her hand without saying a word.

“Sit down, my boy; but first turn on the light. I want to see how you look.”

Ottokar turned on the light and gazed at the figure on the couch. He saw a small, ivory-coloured face with big violet eyes that were looking him through and through. A thin hand pointed to a chair. He obeyed silently, feeling terribly uncomfortable.

“Do you know who I am?” the tired voice said. “Did your father ever tell you about me?”

Ottokar shook his head.

“I’m so sorry, I can’t remember.”

The small face grew wistful; then the pale lips smiled.

“We never met for forty years, your father and I. Of course, he would not remember me.”

She is talking as if my father were still alive, he thought.

“And I’ve been dead for forty years,” the tired voice went on. “The dead are forgotten so soon.”

Ottokar felt almost frightened. Why, the poor old

woman was mad! Old Haik really might have mentioned it in his letter.

“No,” the old lady said, as if she had guessed his thoughts. “I’m not mad, my dear boy. I’ve only been paralysed for forty years. I had a fall hunting. . . .”

Ottokar felt a shiver run along his spine; to be paralysed for forty years, to be as good as dead all that time. He ought to say something appropriate, but what COULD he say?

“Don’t hunt for words of sympathy, dear boy. After all, life was quite bearable. I enjoyed reading and meeting people, though I must admit that I prefer books. I enjoyed going south and staying in Italy and Spain. I’ve grown accustomed to going about in a bath chair. The only thing I never got over is that you’re my nephew and not my son.”

She fell silent for a moment, and studied Ottokar’s face.

“You remind me of your father. That’s how he looked when he begged me to marry him, a few months after I had become a cripple. But I loved him too dearly to burden his life with an invalid wife. . . . He was quite happy with your mother, but it rather comforted me to know that she was only second best after all.”

Ottokar fidgeted on his chair. He was still trying in vain to find something to say, but the old lady’s outspokenness made him feel shy.

“You do remind me of your father. He too used to get so terribly shy, unable to say a word.”

The old lady laughed. It was a strangely youthful laugh.

Ottokar forced a smile.

“You wanted to see me, dear aunt. . . .” he said, hesitatingly.

“Yes, my boy, I wanted to see you. I won’t live much longer, a few months at the utmost. No, please, don’t tell me you are sorry. Forty years of paralysis are quite

enough. I never cared for my relations; they always bored me. But a few days ago I suddenly felt I had to see someone who was related to me—who might have been a much closer relation had I not insisted upon riding that cursed chestnut mare."

She laughed again.

"Don't you think you might say something in your turn?"

"If I can help you. If there is anything I can do. . . ."

The old lady threw him a strange look.

"What did old Haik tell you?"

"That you were ill."

"Nothing else? And what did you think?"

"That . . . that you might be badly off and that I . . . that we . . ."

"And you set out at once, just to come and see an old sick woman?"

"Of course. I thought, perhaps if you cared to come and live with us, we might . . ."

"Didn't you lose all your money in the Elster Bank smash?"

"Yes, all except twenty thousand *schillinge*. But we could always manage somehow. I'm sure we could."

"You were always bad at business affairs, you Sternbachs. Don't worry about me, my boy. I've got enough money for the short span of time I shall go on cumbering the earth. Tell me, was your wife pleased at the idea of my coming to live with you?"

"Of course."

The old lady looked at him and put a rather indiscreet question:

"Do you love your wife?"

She does not know that we are divorced, Ottokar thought. I am sure it would sadden her if I told her. We never had a divorce in the family. Why grieve her, poor soul? After all, I can answer without lying.

"Yes," he said softly. "I love Nora; I love her very much indeed."

"That's right. Why didn't she come too?"

Ottokar changed colour. Would the old lady never stop asking questions?"

"She . . . she isn't feeling very well."

"You need not blush like a girl, Ottokar. It's quite a well-known fact that women have babies. I'm so glad. I was afraid the family would become extinct. You have been married for two years. . . . But now everything is all right."

The big violet-eyes sparkled in the ivory white face.

"I am so glad," she repeated. "It was wise of your wife not to travel. Tell her to take great care of herself. I do hope it will be a boy."

Ottokar felt his forehead grow moist. He lacked the courage to disillusion the old lady. Perhaps she was really going to die soon, then she need not know that he would never have a son, that he was the last of the family.

"It's . . . it's not going to be just now," he stammered.

"When do you expect the baby?"

"Oh, I don't quite know. Not for many a month."

"Well, it can't be more than seven or eight," the old lady said with a laugh. "But I can quite understand your impatience. You must be very kind to your wife, Ottokar."

"Yes."

"I should have loved to meet her. I had thought of coming to Vienna. . . ."

Good Lord, that would be a disaster!

"I don't think I shall, after all. A woman who is expecting a baby ought not to see sad things, and I'm not exactly a cheerful sight."

She said it in a matter-of-fact way, without the least

self-pity, and Ottokar silently admired her pluck. Once again she guessed his thoughts in an almost uncanny way.

"You must not think that I have been unhappy all these years. At first, of course, it was simply hell; I was eighteen at the time. And I had to hide my despair from my parents; they were miserable enough as it was, poor dears. One day old Haik surprised me when I was just having a bad breakdown. I wanted to kill myself. I begged him to procure me a revolver, or poison. Do you know what the wise old man did? He did not pity me; he said almost harshly: 'You ought to be ashamed of yourself. I'll show you something worse than your trouble.' I could not believe that something worse existed, but the next day he took me in my bath-chair to one of the poorest Vienna suburbs. Two men carried me to the top floor of a tenement. I came into a room where a young paralysed woman was lying in bed. Two small children were sitting on the floor, playing with rags. Old Haik—of course he wasn't old then—left me alone with the woman. She had worked in a factory and had been hurt by a machine. When we went home I cried bitterly, and Haik said: 'You may cry now that you're not crying for yourself.' Coming home to our lovely house, and realizing that everyone was trying hard to make my life as easy and pleasant as possible, that my people thought of nothing but me, I felt terribly ashamed—more ashamed than I have ever felt before or after. If only we knew. . . ."

Her mood changed.

"Don't look like a mute at a funeral, Ottokar. I helped the woman, and you can talk to one of her daughters later on. I adopted her as soon as she was a little older. She nurses me and bears with all my whims. And now go and dress. We'll dine in an hour."

* * *

Ottokar remained at Innsbruck for three days. He accompanied the old lady on her drives in the country; he sat in her room and chatted with her when she felt well enough. He admired her more and more. She's like steel, he mused; nothing can break her. She's learnt to bear her lot without becoming embittered, without even losing her charm. She cannot move without help, yet she knows more of what is going on in the world than I do. And she has not lost her sense of humour; she laughs at things I consider a minor tragedy. I wish I were more like her.

On their last evening she scolded him.

"You must work, Ottokar; you must pass your examinations. Don't say that you haven't got the money. Think of all the boys who work in the day time and go to night school."

"But what can I do? I might be a chauffeur; that's about the only thing I'm good for."

"Why not? Do you think that you would bemean yourself by being a good chauffeur?"

"It's not that, only . . ."

She laughed, her eyes twinkling maliciously.

"I see; there still exists an 'only' for you. Don't be a snob, my boy. After all, your people were not ennobled yesterday, and were neither beer lords nor political peers. When you're home again try and find a job, no matter what. Sometimes I feel sorry for your wife; I'm sure you must often bore her to tears. You're a dear, kind fellow, but you can be an awful bore."

Ottokar felt hurt. How often Nora had said to him "You bore me," and now the old lady was almost saying the same. Could a woman not be content with having everything she wanted, even her own way? Was it really his fault that Nora had not been able to go on living with him?

"Wake up!" the old lady said impatiently. "No, I

don't mean now, but altogether. Look at the world; see things as they are. You're very kind-hearted, but that won't help you to get on. Your son must have an energetic, efficient father. Life is getting more difficult every day. Being charming isn't enough."

She kissed him when they said good-bye.

"We shan't meet again, my boy. I'm going to Naples next week. I want to die where I can see real sun. I know it's sinful luxury and silly sentimentality, but I think I've got a right to it. Write to me sometimes. Old Haik will inform you of my death. And for goodness' sake don't order a wreath by wire. You've got too little money for that kind of thing, and it would annoy me most terribly, even after my death. Good-bye, give my love to your wife."

* * *

Ottokar arrived home in the evening. Driving up to the house, he noticed with amazement that the windows showed no light.

He let himself in. The hall was dark, the rooms were empty.

"The ladies are dining at Mr. Schiro's," the maid told him.

Schiro, was he not one of the men who came to Nora's queer parties? Ottokar could not quite remember the name. Feeling tired and dejected, he ate his solitary supper and went to his study.

About ten the 'phone rang. Ottokar took up the receiver. An excited female voice nearly burst his eardrums:

"Can I speak to Count Ponitzky?"

"Ponitzky? No, he's not here. Who is it?"

"Mrs. Klepper. Where is Count Ponitzky?"

"I haven't the slightest idea."

"But I had an appointment with him, and he did not come. Surely you know where he is."

Why on earth should I know? Ottokar thought peevishly, and who the devil is Mrs. Klepper?

"I'm so sorry, Mrs. Klepper," he said politely, "but I really don't know. . . ."

"But you MUST know. After all, I met him at your house; don't try to put me off. Tell me: where is the Count?"

"I'm not obliged to know where all the people are who come to my house. After all, I'm not my guests' keeper," Ottokar said impatiently. The ugly, vulgar voice grated on his ear.

"Guests! Guests! Don't be silly. No need to keep up appearances with me. I want an information that only Count Ponitzki can give me. . . ."

"I'm very sorry," Ottokar repeated.

"Perhaps you can tell me what I want to know. I met the young man at your party."

"Which young man?"

"Mr. Mann."

"Yes, he was here last Sunday. But I don't understand. . . ."

"Have you got him on your list? I know I ought not to ask; it's not really done. But even rival firms must sometimes help each other. At least, that's what I think. If you haven't got him for good, there's a young lady who is interested in him . . . good family, Protestant, a dowry of two hundred and thirty thousand *schillinge*. . . ."

"Quite so. But what do you expect me to do about it?"

"Then you haven't got him on your list?"

"I really don't know what you are talking about, Mrs. Klepper."

"Listen! I'm ready to meet you half way. I'll give you . . ."

"What do you want to give me?"

"Good Lord, are you an absolute idiot? Let's say a quarter per cent. . . ."

"I really don't know. . . ."

"Isn't that enough? Then let's say a half per cent."

Ottokar lost his temper.

"I really don't know what you are talking about. The whole thing must be a mistake."

"Look here, you won't get on if you behave that way. I've never met with such rudeness. How can you be so unobliging? I'd have sent you a client or two if you had been ready too. . . . Of course, I won't do it now. And don't flatter yourself that your title is any good. . . . You'll see, you'll see. . . ."

The loud voice broke off with a shrill screech, and the 'phone was silent. Still holding the receiver, Ottokar put his hand to his head. What was the meaning of it all? What the deuce had the woman wanted? He could not imagine.

Nora and Irene, coming home about midnight, were surprised to find Ottokar in the drawing-room, smoking moodily.

"Back already?" Nora said sarcastically. "Did you have a good time?"

"I wouldn't exactly call it having a good time. If you're not too tired, Nora, I'd like to tell you all about it."

"Thanks, I'm not interested."

She walked to the door. Opening it, she asked without looking round:

"Is Nantje back too?"

"Nantje? Who's Nantje?"

Nora laughed scornfully.

"You know perfectly well who Nantje is."

She left the room.

Ottokar turned to Irene.

"Tell me, for goodness' sake, is this a lunatic asylum?"

Nora talks of a Nantje I don't know, and a few hours ago a madwoman rang up and wanted to know if we had got young Mann on our list. She then offered me a half per cent. for something; I could not understand what."

"Who was the woman?"

"Wait! What was her name? Kepp? No, Klepper."

"She offered you a half per cent? Did you accept her offer?"

"What offer?"

"Idiot! The half per cent.; what else could I mean?"

"Of course not."

Irene wrung her hands dramatically and gave a heart-broken sigh.

"You've only just come back, and already you've done the most foolish thing you could possibly do. Probably you've offended the woman. You certainly are an idiot."

She threw him an angry look and left him standing helplessly in the middle of the room.

CHAPTER XI

IRENE came home from her tennis lesson feeling tired out. Never before had her teacher made her work so hard. She still seemed to hear his grumpy voice:

"Is that the way to serve a ball? A child could return it! Try again. . . . There, that's better, but not good yet. Try again. . . ."

Her hand was trembling and her legs felt like lead. She crawled upstairs, went into the bathroom and ran herself a bath.

Just as she was going to get in, Marie knocked at the door.

"Countess Irene, Mrs. Klepper wants to speak to you on the 'phone. She's called up six times this morning."

"Ask Countess Sternbach to talk to her."

"The Countess is not in town."

"What did you say?"

Irene hastily put on her dressing-gown and opened the door.

"Where is the Countess?"

"She left directly after lunch. I was to tell you that she had gone to stay with her parents for a few days. Shall I go to the phone?"

"No, thanks, I'm coming."

Without troubling to put on her slippers, Irene ran to Nora's room and took up the receiver.

"Hullo, Mrs. Klepper! Irene Sternbach speaking."

"I've already called up six times."

"I'm so sorry. I have only just come home."

"You probably know what I want to talk about. Young Mann . . ."

Of course, Ottokar had told her something last night, but what was it he had said? She was much too tired to collect her thoughts.

"Yes?" she said cautiously.

"I've found a match for him. I know he's your client, but perhaps we might come to terms. I spoke about him to your brother last night, but it was impossible to get a sensible answer out of him."

"Yes," Irene repeated.

A spirit of contradiction awoke in her. We will NOT let her have young Mann, not for a half per cent., not even for a whole one. But it might be wiser not to say so at once.

"Perhaps you'd better come here to-morrow, Mrs. Klepper," she said amiably. "One really can't talk it over on the 'phone. Can you come to-morrow, about four?"

"All right! But don't you go and believe . . ."

There was a veiled threat in the vulgar voice. Irene interrupted the head of the rival firm:

"I'm perfectly ready to meet you half way. Of course, you'd have to compensate us. But we'll be sure to come to an agreement. Excuse me if I ring off. Don't forget to-morrow, at about four."

"So long."

Mrs. Klepper's voice sounded less unpleasant, though still very decided.

Irene made a face at the 'phone. I shall not give in, she thought. That silly boy seems worth a fortune. I certainly shall not give in. She took up the telephone directory and hunted for young Mann's number. Then she rang him up only to find out that he was not at home.

"Please give him a message," she told the servant.

"He's to come round to Countess Sternbach to-day, as soon as possible. It's most important. Don't forget, please."

Then she rang up Casimir, but he was not in either.

Irene gave the porter the same message.

"Tell the Count to come to Countess Sternbach at once. It's terribly important. Don't forget, please."

She put back the receiver and returned to the bathroom. Of course, the water had got cold. Feeling annoyed, Irene turned on the hot tap. While she was lying luxuriously in her bath, she suddenly remembered what Marie had told her: Nora had gone to stay with her parents. True, they had quarrelled violently at breakfast. Nevertheless, Irene had not expected Nora to run away. Just like her to go and leave everything to me, she thought angrily. It's a beastly shame. I don't feel up to anything. But I'd better get dressed. Casimir will be turning up soon, and young Mann.

With a feeling of regret she got out of her bath and returned to her room. Just as she was putting on her frock, Marie knocked at the door once more.

"Mr. Gedecke wants to know whether you can see him?"

Irene made a moan. The Aryan Nature Lover, of all people in the world!

"Tell him to wait in the drawing-room. I'll be down at once. And make me some strong tea, please."

In the drawing-room she met a Mr. Gedecke she had never met before—not the polite Mr. Gedecke who came to Countess Sternbach's parties, but an ill-mannered man who came to the matrimonial agency. He had forgotten to be polite, and spoke to Irene like a headmaster to a lazy pupil.

"Look here, Countess," he said rudely, "your parties are quite nice, and the drinks are decent; but one does not meet the right people. I didn't meet a single woman who attracted me. The company is terribly mixed: if that is the best you can do. . . ."

"If it wasn't mixed. . . ." Irene bit her lips and fell silent. After all, one could not tell a client: "If the company were not mixed you would certainly not be invited."

"I'm sorry," she said meekly. "I'm sure at our next party. . . ."

"Haven't you got any photos, any lists, like all agencies have?"

"Of course," Irene said delightedly. "Just a moment."

She took the album with the photos out of a small rose-wood cabinet and put it in front of Mr. Gedecke. He began turning the pages, a greedy expression on his face. Marie came with the tea. Mr. Gedecke refused the proffered cup with a look of disgust, and Irene thirstily drank two cups. She still felt tired and longed to lie down on the couch with a book. But she had to sit here, to smile sweetly, to answer the questions that odious man asked. She found it up-hill work. I would hate to have him as a boss, she thought; how awful to see his face every day of one's life, Sundays excepted; to have to allow oneself to be talked to in that manner. If I could only

say to him: Oh, do get out, you bore me to death; or, If you intend to stay here, try and behave like a gentleman.

Mr. Gedecke took out a fat cigar and lit it.

He does not even ask me whether I mind; Irene was rapidly losing her temper. Of course, I must not forget that just now I'm only a saleswoman in his eyes—a shop-girl offering him articles. . . . Dear me, have I ever been as unpleasant as he is, with a saleswoman? Have I ever presumed on my financial superiority?

Mr. Gedecke's fat hand remained lying on a page of the album. He smiled.

"That's just what I'm looking for," he said. "Why haven't I met the lady at your parties? Tell me all about her—age, fortune, denomination. . . ."

He pushed the album over to Irene.

"That one," he said, "the one sitting at the steering wheel. A nice car, looks like a Rolls Royce. And a damned good-looking woman."

Irene looked at the photo and became frightened. The lady in question was one of Casimir's six wives. What was she to say? They had not got the woman "in stock," and they could not "order" her.

"This lady. . . ." she stammered. "This lady. . . ."

"Where is she?"

"We've married her off already," Irene said, desperately clutching at the first subterfuge she could think of. "She made an excellent match with the owner of a large ranch in the Argentine."

"Then why is her photo still in the album?"

The next thing he'll do, beastly headmaster that he is, will be to give me a bad mark. In an instant he will be saying: "You've not learnt your lesson once again. Sit down." She smiled apologetically.

"I'm so sorry. It's my fault. I quite forgot to take it out."

She held on to the album. If the ghastly fellow discovered another of Casimir's wives and wanted to marry her! And he was sure to. Casimir's taste in wives was excellent.

"You'd better try and find something suitable for me," Mr. Gedecke said ponderously. "If you don't I shall have to go to another agency. There are many others in town."

Irene Sternbach had never humbled herself before; she possessed the natural amiability of old families who had never had to struggle for money or a position. She had exquisite manners, but if anyone was rude to her, she gave a Roland for an Oliver. But now she had to put up with everything only because that awful cad, that German headmaster, was wealthy and they had to earn money. She could not afford to say to him: "I don't care if you go to another agency; in fact, I wish you'd go to the devil." She had to smile and say:

"I can promise you, Mr. Gedecke, that you will find a suitable wife at our parties."

She said the words, and then she suddenly felt to her dismay that she who never cried, was close to tears out of sheer rage.

Mr. Gedecke noticed the tears in her eyes and said graciously:

"All right. I hope so."

He got up slowly and put out his hand.

"Good-bye. Don't be discouraged. I know that your agency has only just been founded. One has to be lenient with you, but don't forget that a man of my standing is entitled to good service."

He bowed stiffly and left the room.

If I could only find a female devil, Irene thought, struggling with angry tears; a shrew, a hussy I could marry you to, you beastly upstart!

She rang, and Marie came to take away the tea things. Irene looked at her searchingly.

"Marie," she said. "I want you to tell me something."

"What am I tell you, Countess Irene?"

"Tell me, Marie, am I odious? Do I behave towards you like a German headmaster? Do I ever talk to you in a way that makes you want to murder me?"

Marie, who had been in service with the "best people" for more than twenty years, stared at the girl.

"I'm sure you're always very kind, Countess Irene," she said, looking bewildered and almost frightened.

"Listen, Marie! If ever I am unpleasant, if ever I don't treat you decently, just say: 'Mr. Gedecke'! Do you understand?"

Marie did not understand; nevertheless, she said:

"Yes, Countess Irene."

Then suddenly, noticing the girl's wet eyes, the correct maid became a human, kindly being.

"Don't take things to heart, Countess Irene," she said. "You will meet a lot of queer people who won't treat you decently. That's the way of the world if one has not got money."

She put the teapot on the tray and opened the door.

* * *

When Marie announced young Mann about an hour later, Irene had calmed down. Besides, the boy was so nervous, so polite, that he almost made her laugh. He could not imagine why he had been told to come in such a hurry, and was feeling terribly worried.

"Sit down!" Irene said. "Will you have a whisky and soda?"

"No, thank you, I never drink."

"Cigarette?"

"Please."

The two young people sat opposite each other, both feeling embarrassed. Irene even forgot the rules and took a cigarette, and the boy got up politely to light it for her.

"Thank you," Irene said. Then there was another painful pause.

The boy plucked up courage,

"We're having fine weather," he said as if he had made an important discovery. "A lovely autumn. . . . It makes up for the rainy summer."

"Yes."

"It's so warm one can still wear one's summer clothes."

He stopped short and looked at Irene. She smiled and said:

"Has Mrs. Klepper got in touch with you?"

"Mrs. Klepper? Oh, of course, that's the plump, fair lady I met here the other day. No. Why should she?"

Irene gave a sigh of relief.

"The plump, fair lady runs a matrimonial agency," she said frankly, "and she wants you to . . ."

"But I don't want to marry!" Young Mann grew pale at the very thought. "And if I should wish to marry, I'll choose my wife myself and not find her through an agency."

So Casimir had not told him.

"If ever I marry, I'll marry for love, and in order to give Aryan sons to my country."

Irene grinned maliciously.

"The first reason is probably your own, Mr. Mann. The second you read in a pamphlet."

The boy grew confused.

"Only the Germanic race . . ."

"Don't talk to me about the Germanic race. Look at me. I'm fair, I've got blue eyes, I'm the very ideal of a Nordic girl. Yet my father's mother was French, my mother's mother Italian, and my mother Czech." She

laughed rather unkindly: "Tell me the truth; which of the women attracted you most at our party?"

The boy flushed to the roots of his hair.

"Tell me the truth," Irene repeated inexorably. "I am always being told how courageous the true German is. Well, was it Miss van Dam, or Mrs. Wiker, or Mrs. Ride, or . . ."

"I must confess," young Mann admitted shamefacedly, "that I liked . . . I liked Miss Schiro best of all. But," he added hopefully, "perhaps she isn't old Schiro's daughter."

Irene shrugged impatiently.

"The German mania of accusing mothers of adultery with a pure Aryan. . . . You're not the only one to do it. . . . Cleverer people make use of that vile trick. No, don't run away. I did not mean to scold you. Once, when we have a lot of time, you can explain to me why the Germans, and, unfortunately, some Austrians too, think that they can save their fatherland by behaving like gangsters."

"The National Socialist Party. . . . Most Austrians are incapable of understanding its aims. They do not love their fatherland."

"I do love my country," Irene said. "It's a beautiful country, and I love its beauty and its people. But I never believed that the Austrians are a master race, and that they could teach the rest of the world what to do and how to behave. . . . Tell me, didn't you get on well with Miss Schiro the other day?"

"Yes, strange to say . . . but, after all, I comfort myself with the idea that she's only a girl . . . and we want to exterminate the men. . . ."

"Whose daughters are the very girls you fall in love with."

"I'm not; I did not. . . ."

"Of course you fell for Miss Schiro. Everyone could

see it. But perhaps you intend not to come to our next party."

"Oh no, of course I shall come."

"For the sake of my beautiful blue eyes?" Irene asked mockingly.

"Oh no! Sorry. I meant: Of course. . . . I did not mean . . ."

"Never mind." Irene suddenly remembered why she had wanted to see young Mann. "That's not my business. That's your funeral. I only wanted to tell you that the Aryan agency Klepper wants to marry you off, and to warn you."

"Thank you," the boy said gratefully. "You're awfully kind."

"You'll not have anything to do with the woman, will you?"

"No."

"Not even if she calls up and makes an appointment?"

"Certainly not."

"And you'll come to all our parties?"

"If I may."

"Good! And now you must excuse me if I ask you to go. I'm terribly tired."

Young Mann left the house in a state of bewilderment. He spent the whole evening racking his brains, trying to find out why Countess Irene had asked him to come. Perhaps she had fallen for him, he thought, feeling flattered. She was exactly the type of girl the governor would like him to marry. But he did not feel like it, even if she did look Nordic. The best back-hand in all Lausanne. . . . She had been rather nice to-day, but he had not forgotten the row at the stores. Recalling it he felt his blood run cold, and said aloud:

"No, no, a man must be master in his own house."

* * *

Ottokar rang up to say that he would not be back for dinner and Irene, depressed by the unpleasant afternoon, was delighted to see Casimir, who came at seven.

"Stay for dinner," she said. "We've got a lot of things to talk over, and Nora has left me in the lurch."

"I never say no when I'm asked to dinner," Casimir replied frankly and stayed.

After dinner they studied the ledger, and Casimir frowned.

"We really must make some money soon," he said.

"The parties are ruining us. Look here, what about a picnic next Sunday? If the weather keeps fine. All the guests must contribute something, and those who have a car can take those who have none. What do you think of it?"

"An excellent idea. You're a genius, Casimir."

"I've got to be," he said. "If one wants to earn money by swindling one has to be a genius."

"How did you . . .? I mean what made you . . .?" Irene stopped, blushing a rosy red. After all, one cannot very well ask a man why he became a swindler. But Casimir did not seem to mind.

"Do you know what I was ten years ago, Irene?" he asked, pouring himself out a glass of brandy. "A virtuous, conscientious small employee, who worked hard and always managed to satisfy his boss. A man who took everything lying down, and who never contradicted anyone."

Irene, remembering Mr. Gedecke, said:

"And one day you could not stand it any longer? The idiotic conceit of ill-bred people, the cheekiness of German headmasters? Wasn't it so? You had a brain-storm and . . ."

"Oh no, my child, it wasn't half as romantic as all that. I should probably still be a small, honest, hard-working employee, or maybe I'd have lost my job in the meantime if my wife had not fallen ill: T.B."

"Your wife?"

Casimir suddenly grew grave.

"Don't laugh, please. She was not one of the six wives I told you about. She was my real wife. Such a dear, sweet little girl, kindness and goodness incarnate. I really loved her."

"Do forgive me. I didn't know."

"Of course you didn't. Well, to make a long story short, Dita fell ill and the doctor said: 'Good air and lots of sun. Send her to some place in the mountains. Feed her well and don't let her worry. . . .' The sick fund paid for a short stay in the country, but of course that did not suffice, and . . . well, she grew worse and worse, and I HAD to have money, so I embezzled some belonging to the firm. I did it as honest, virtuous small employees do that kind of thing, so transparently, so frankly, that I was caught at once. I got off with ten months. You see, I'd been honest all my life."

"You really served a term!"

"Yes. When I came out Dita was dead, and I had been in prison. Do you know what that means? You're a branded man; you can't get a job; you can't do a thing without having the police on your heels. I have heard your question: 'So you've served a term?' a score of times. And people looked shocked and shrank from me as soon as I said 'Yes'."

"I'm not shocked."

"I never thought you would be. You're romantic; you think that kind of thing thrilling. But the heads of firms unfortunately do not. Believe me, Irene, I know our society; that imprisons the petty thief and bows down before the big one; that lets a man starve because he embezzled a small sum for a sick wife's sake. Yes, I got to know the men who represent our social system, and I have learnt to hate and despise them."

"But how did you manage to . . .?"

"I had a friend who stuck to me. He was a tailor, a smart, very expensive tailor. One day he said to me: 'Old man, you'll never get on as long as you go about with mended pants and frayed collars.' He made two suits for me and gave me three shirts, six collars and a coat. I went to a café where I had never been before, and the waiter called me 'BARON.' It was in Vienna, of course. Being called Baron gave me an idea. I went to see my friend and said: 'Lend me three thousand *schillings*; you'll get them back with interest in a year's time.' He lent me the money; I don't know whether he was really fond of me or whether he had an intuition, or whether the ten per cent. I offered tempted him. Anyway, he lent me the money and got it back ten months later. To-day I'm one of his best customers. Whenever I come to Vienna I go to that café and enjoy watching the waiter's face when I tip him. Nowadays he calls me COUNT, although titles have been abolished by the Republic."

"Do you intend to stick to your profession?"

"No, it overtaxes one's brain. I'd like to have a peaceful life, free from fear. For one DOES feel afraid sometimes. Perhaps I shall marry Mrs. Ride. She's on the right side of fifty, and I'd be kind to her. We might be quite happy."

He remained silent for a while. Lighting a cigarette, he asked:

"I suppose you won't trust me any longer?"

"On the contrary."

Irene looked at him very kindly, and her voice had grown soft.

"That's right. You're a dear little girl and I'm very fond of you. Now let's count how many cars we need for the picnic. We're not going to spend a penny of our own money. I'd be ashamed of myself if I were such a bad business man."

CHAPTER XII

THE evening had wrapped itself in a thin coat of rain. Fat dahlias hung their big heads mournfully, and only the white and yellow feathers of the chrysanthemums defied the rain and kept their curls. From time to time a horse-chestnut fell from a tree, making a sound like a tiny far-away shot. Once a sparrow, disgusted with so damp a world, chirruped angrily.

Nora looked round her old room and shuddered. Why had she run away this morning? For she HAD run away; it had been a kind of flight. In vain she tried to excuse herself, by stressing the fact how terribly Ottokar and Irene got on her nerves. "I always had to do everything," she told herself sulkily. "After all, Ottokar is a man, he ought to earn money. I really did not marry him to lead a poverty-stricken life. Oh, I quite forgot; we're not married any longer. . . . All the same . . . I DID behave decently; I stayed with him when he lost his money. Most women would have left him. I didn't."

Of course she would not have known where to go to, had she left him. She had understood it to-day: the family had not been especially pleased seeing her drive up to the house. . . . She recalled her mother's words:

"Darling Nora, how absolutely lovely to see you. You'll stay overnight, won't you? Oh, you intend to stay for some time?"

Had Nora imagined it, or had her mother's voice rested on the words "for some time" till they had sounded like eternity? She seemed afraid that her daughter was going to remain much longer than . . . than what? Longer than her love or the love of Nora's father would last? No, that was unfair; she ought not to harbour such thoughts. In this case the "longer" only meant

"longer than the old peoples' purse could stand." Her mother had sensed the unkindness contained in her exclamation, and hurriedly explained:

"We must reduce our expenses, dear. Your father isn't a panel doctor any longer, and that means less money of course. Don't mention it; he's terribly hurt and sore about it."

Nora had watched her parents during supper. Yes, poor dears, they were old, tired, worn out by work and worry. Weary old people who had no future, whose life would gradually grow more and more lonely, more and more dull. Something else had struck her: her mother had not grumbled as was her wont; she had not once complained of the maid's laziness. She had not found fault with anything. She had been gentle, kind, almost cheerful, from time to time glancing anxiously at the old man who sat at the table, his face grey, his eyes expressionless, his back bowed as if he had not got strength enough to hold himself straight.

After supper her mother sat down at the old piano and played a few easy tunes with stiff fingers. Her father, sitting beside his wife, gently nodded his head, hummed the tune under his breath and said once to his wife:

"Do you remember the first time we heard that tune? It was on a boat, when we went on the Danube."

"Yes, I remember. It was a lovely summer day, and I wore a pink cambric frock. We had been married for half a year."

"You looked sweet in the frock, perfectly sweet. I was so proud of you."

Nora kept watching them surreptitiously. She looked at her mother's work-worn hands, trying to coax music out of the old piano that was so woefully out of tune; at her grey-haired father, whose fine dark eyes had grown bright, and suddenly she told herself: Why they DO belong to one another. Buried beneath the ugly, mean,

workaday life that had changed her mother into an unceasingly nagging bad-tempered shrew and had made her father taciturn and moody, something had refused to die, something that came to life when times were hard: a mutual understanding, something immortal . . . she jibbed at the sentimental word, but seeing her father's eyes meeting those of her mother, it came back and would not be denied—love, yes tender, true love. . . . Mother would nag again and reproach her husband; she would not be able to help it, and father would again forget to show the tiniest interest in her gossip, nevertheless they knew they could trust one another, that they loved each other—after twenty-five years of marriage. That was the reason why they could stand up to whatever happened, why they never felt as desperately lonely as she did.

She thought with a sudden feeling of disgust of her "business." What was she doing? Bartering human beings. A hundred thousand *schillings* to marry fifty thousand, and she pocketing the percentages. People came to her house and she never really saw them, only their money. What did she know about them? What did she want to know of their real selves?

Her mother's finger slipped, she struck a wrong note; an ugly dissonance sounded through the peaceful room.

Her father smiled.

"That's the bit, darling," he said, and his voice was that of a young man, "where you always made the same mistake."

The voice that answered him sounded like that of a young girl:

"I simply can't span the octave, dear. My hands are too small."

Nora felt a lump in her throat. She got up, declaring that she was tired and would go to bed.

Now she was sitting in her old room, shivering. Her mother had said:

"Would you like to have a fire? It's a bit chilly." But Nora had guessed the unspoken words: "Say no, dear. We've got to be careful. Wood and coal are so expensive." And she had said with a smile:

"Oh no, I'm going to bed at once."

But she had not gone to bed. The little old clock she had known since childhood had just struck ten. I shall never be able to go to sleep, Nora thought, and sat down in the shabby old easy chair. The spring had been broken for years, and the old chair moaned dismally whenever one sat down. How ugly the room was! Yet her parents had furnished it with so much love and care when she had been fourteen. The hideous plaster angel had been a Christmas present from mother, and Nora had thought it lovely. It had made her want to be good. She used to look at it tenderly in the evening and regret all the small sins committed during the day. Poor, ugly angel, what had mother given up so as to be able to buy you? You're not really ugly; you only seem so. How could you be ugly, you who were meant to give pleasure? It was love that put you on my writing table, as a surprise. Nora suddenly remembered the picture by Kokoschka that hung in the drawing-room. She recalled the day Ottokar brought it home in the car.

"I've found something that you'll like, darling. I simply could not wait to have it sent. I had to bring it home at once."

At the time she had believed indifference to be a sign of good breeding, and had said coldly:

"It's very pretty. It will look well in the drawing-room. I'll have it hung over the mantelpiece. Thank you, Ottokar."

She still seemed to see his disappointed face and to hear his voice that had lost its happy sound:

"You're right. It will look well in the drawing-room." With a rush memories overwhelmed her—memories of

joyfully given, lovingly-chosen presents she had accepted with indifference and a polite "Thank you."

Ottokar had always been the one who gave, and she had accepted everything without showing the least pleasure, taking it for granted. Could she wonder at his trying to find another woman who would give him what she had always refused? She recalled Nantje van Dam's face: the Dutch girl was beautiful, much lovelier than she had ever been. And she had a sweet generous mouth; soft lips, meant to say kind and affectionate things. Had she ever said anything kind to Ottokar? Had she ever been affectionate?

She knew how he suffered because he could not earn enough to keep her and Irene. Had she ever tried to comfort him, encourage him? And now she had run away, had left him and Irene—who was so good and tried so hard to help on her mad scheme—in the lurch. . . . Her mother, whom she had always despised as a narrow-minded woman, would never have done so. As to her father, she hardly dared think of him. . . .

In the neighbourhood a wireless began to bray. It drowned the soft murmur of the rain. Then a woman's voice began to sing. She sang a song that was the rage just then:

"To-morrow everything will be all right again."

To-morrow? For whom will everything be all right again? Nora thought of all the people listening to the song. They were listening in drawing-rooms, in horrid boarding house sitting-rooms, in chilly attics. To-morrow! When will to-morrow come and things be all right again? When will all worries and sorrows disappear as mist in the sun? Perhaps Ottokar is hearing the words and smiling wryly. Perhaps Irene is listening in; she loves to play with the wireless. . . . To-morrow. . . . And Huber is hearing the song in the attic room and pulling the blanket over the little boy who has thrown

it off in his sleep; maybe he is thinking: To-morrow! If only to-morrow would never come. Just now I can live here with the child and need not pay rent, but if ever that comes to an end. . . .

"To-morrow everything will be all right again," the clear voice was singing. Nora stopped her ears with both hands; she could not bear to listen any longer. There were so many people in the world for whom to-morrow never came, and she was one of them.

When she took away her hands the wireless was silent; a gentle wind rustled the dry leaves, and the rain was pattering against the panes. The sleepy sparrow gave one more chirp. Then quiet fell upon the little garden, and in the house the lights went out.

* * *

Ernestine Salt had never had a date with a man in all her life. She felt almost frightened when the Widow Leger knocked at her door and said:

"A gentleman is waiting in the hall. He says he's come to take you for a walk."

Seeing Mr. Bite's good-natured face her fear vanished. He held a bunch of violets in his hand, and did not seem to know what to do with them. At last he gingerly held them out to her:

"They're for you."

Ernestine blushed.

"For me? How kind of you."

They remained standing in the hall. Ernestine did not know what to do. She could not well invite a strange man into her bedroom, and her landlady had left them, after a searching glance at the stranger, thus giving her lodger to understand that Mr. Bite was not worthy of being received in the sitting-room.

"The weather has turned fine," said Mr. Bite. "I thought we might go to the Prater."

Ernestine heaved a sigh of relief. What a splendid idea. What a blessing that there are parks and squares for people who have no sitting-rooms, kindly parks and squares who never shut the door in one's face, as humans do.

"Oh yes, do let's go," she said eagerly. "I'll just fetch my coat and put the flowers into water."

She left Mr. Bite still standing in the hall, and ran to her room. For the first time since she had come to live here, she noticed that she did not possess a flower-vase. But of course she had never had money to spend on flowers, and the Widow Leger did not think it necessary to put a flower vase in her cheapest room. Ernestine took a glass from her washing-stand and untied the string that held the violets. Her hands were trembling. Someone had brought her flowers as if she were a young girl. . . . She gently stroked the tiny violet blooms and lifting the glass to her face inhaled the sweet scent. Then she remembered that Mr. Bite was waiting for her. She put on her hat and slipped into her coat.

Leaving the house Ernestine felt as if she were going to a foreign country. The familiar streets looked different, and she herself walked along with an easy stride, feeling stronger and more sure of herself than usual; perhaps because someone kept step with her. She listened with secret joy to the sound of the steps that joined her own.

All her life Ernestine had been frightened of crossings. Sometimes she stood waiting for minutes at a time till others crossed the street and she could follow them. Everything seemed so dangerous, so threatening: the motor-cars, the trams, the cyclists—and she could never remember what the different traffic lights meant: When she had to wait, when she could safely cross the street.

To-day all was different. Mr. Bite said: "Allow me" and took her arm. Mr. Bite knew exactly when to cross the street and led her to the other side as if there were

nothing to fear. Ernestine recalled going out with her father. He had always grown impatient. "Get going! What are you waiting for?" And then he would pull and drag her into the street, right in between honking cars, ringing trams and wildly racing bicycles. To-day no one dragged or pushed her. To-day she was led across gently, firmly; it was simply wonderful.

They got into the tram and drove to the Prater. From the lazily flowing Danube a soft blue haze drifted inland, veiling a pale golden sun.

They walked slowly along one of the avenues bordered by high old trees, shedding their last leaves in a shower of yellow rain.

Suddenly the sun came out, and now the Danube was as blue as it was in the old waltz, with tiny waves bathing the banks in silvery ripples.

"Let's sit down," said the kind voice. "It's quite warm."

They sat on a bench. The avenue was deserted. From time to time black crows flew past creaking hoarsely.

"Doesn't the river look like the sea?" Mr. Bite said dreamily. "I often come here and sit on this bench. It makes me think of the Mediterranean."

Ernestine remembered a picture postcard a friend of her father's had sent them from Nice: palm trees, a very blue sky and a very blue sea. She had been ten at the time, and had promised herself: When I'm grown up, I shall go to Nice. The picture postcard had fallen to pieces long ago, but the picture had lived on in Ernestine's mind; the sapphire blue, the unknown, miraculous, happy beauty of the south.

"Nice," she said, speaking as in a dream. "I always wanted to go to Nice."

"You will one day," said the kind voice beside her. "Not only to Nice, but further still, to Italy, to Naples, to Sicily. . . ."

"What makes you think so?"

Mr. Bite hardly paid any attention to her words. Watching the gentle flow of the river, he confided a secret to her—a secret no one knew although it shed a glamour over his whole life. In the evening, alone in his quiet room, Mr. Bite spread a map on the table and took several old *Badekers* he had bought second-hand from a shelf. In the mellow light of the lamp, enveloped in the smoke of his pipe, he set out on a journey. He went south, or, if he felt like it, he travelled as far as the North Cape. As he studied the sober passages in the guide books they seemed to burst into flower. The scent of oranges and pepper-trees wafted through the room, the icy waters of the Norwegian Fjords rushed and roared, at midnight the sun shone red in the sky. Mr. Bite sauntered through the streets of Granada, and stood entranced in front of the Alhambra. He sat in a boat, riding the blue waves of the grotto of Capri and marvelled at their colour. He climbed the hill leading to the Acropolis and saw Athens lying at his feet. He crossed the ocean on his way to New York, and watched the Statue of Liberty emerging on the horizon.

Mr. Bite had been buying *Badekers* as a birthday present for himself during the last fifteen years, and he knew the whole world. Delighted to talk of his hobby, he took Ernestine to the Côte d'Azure; they drove in a car along the white Corniche, the blue sea on their right, orange and olive groves on their left. Ernestine closed her eyes. The Danube had miraculously become the Mediterranean. The sun was shining so brightly that she unbuttoned her coat; she was feeling hot.

"And then," Mr. Bite said gaily, "we go to a small restaurant on the beach—they call it a *reserve*—and eat shrimps, delicious *crevettes* that have only just been caught."

Ernestine smelt the salty tang of the sea.

"Do *crevettes* taste good?" she asked.

"You'll see," said Mr. Bite, who had never eaten any, but who had read about them in the guide book.

They remained silent for a while, enjoying their meal in the small restaurant on the beach.

"What are we going to do now?" Ernestine asked eagerly.

"We'll go back to our new PENSION. It's called PENSION RÜETLI, and belongs to a Swiss lady. It's cheap, and the food and the service are excellent. When we get to our room we'll lower the blinds. There, now the room is filled with a soft green light. You are sitting in an arm-chair looking very sweet, and I am stooping over you and kissing you."

Ernestine opened her eyes quickly. It had begun to grow dark, pale twilight brooded over the grey river and the old trees. They were not at Nice, but Ernestine felt on her lips a pair of lips, warm and tender. . . . She returned the kiss as in a dream. Of course, it must be a dream; except her father no man had ever kissed her.

She felt an arm go round her, and then a second kiss. . . .

Suddenly she grew frightened. She was sitting in a dark avenue letting a stranger kiss her as if she were a kitchen wench. Her father . . . his voice seemed to come from the grave: "Never forget that you are the daughter of an official, Ernestine. Behave according to my position." What had she done? What would Mr. Bite think of her? He would take her for a hussy, a light woman. . . .

"I . . . I think I'd like to go home," she said in a trembling voice. "I'm cold."

Mr. Bite returned to the banks of the Danube.

"You're cold?" he said solicitously. "Why didn't you say so before? I'm so sorry. I do hope you haven't caught cold."

On the way home both were taciturn and depressed.

Mr. Bite already regretted having betrayed his secret, and Ernestine felt miserable. She kept thinking: He does not say a word. He despises me . . . he really thinks I'm a wanton If only he knew, if I could only tell him for how long a time no one has been kind to me. It's so long ago I can hardly remember it. How well he talks, and what a lot he knows. We might have been such good friends. . . . Now, of course . . . now, of course, everything is at an end.

She held herself very straight, and tried not to keep in step. He must not believe that she was setting her cap at him. How absurd, at her age.

When they reached the crossing Mr. Bite did not again take Ernestine's arm, he only said coldly:

"I think we'd better cross now," and she obeyed without a word. She did not care whether she was going to be run over; she did not seem able to care about anything.

Standing in the house door she said timidly:

"Thank you so much for the lovely walk."

"Don't mention it."

Ernestine waited for an instant, hoping passionately that he would say:

"When may I fetch you for another one?"

But he did not say it. He bowed stiffly and said, without looking at her:

"Good night, Miss Salt. I hope you have not caught cold."

"Good night."

How many steps, Ernestine thought, woefully climbing to the top floor. I shall have to go on climbing them all my life—and always alone. I shall always come back to an empty room, and never, never in all my life shall I be happy even for an hour or so without my happiness being destroyed before I really had time to enjoy it.

She undressed in the dark. She did not want to see her face in the glass.

Lying in bed, tired out and cold, she pulled the blanket up to her chin and suddenly she felt a wild despair, a mad revolt against her destiny. She buried her head in the pillows so as not to give way to wild weeping and to be heard by the widow Leger. Overcome by misery and sorrow, she murmured, silly futile words:

"I shall never, never eat *crevettes* in a small restaurant on the beach. I shall never, never know how they taste. . . ."

She cried herself to sleep.

Once she woke with a start. The clock in the neighbouring church tower struck five. The room was quite dark. Ernestine counted the strokes. She felt bewildered and still half asleep. She seemed to hear the rush of water. The room was filled with a sweet fragrance. Where did it come from? Was she still dreaming? Had her dream wafted her to southern lands?

Trying to shake off her drowsiness she sat up in bed. But she still smelt the sweet scent. Suddenly she knew it came from the glass beside her into which she had put Mr. Bite's violets.

She groped for them in the dark. The flowers were soft and cool. Ernestine lifted them to her lips and kissed them.

Even if I'm never happy again in all my life, thought Ernestine, who had been brought up never to want anything for herself; even if these flowers and this evening in the Prater are all I am ever going to enjoy—yes, even if I never again know happiness—my life will not have been quite desolate.

She put down the glass with the flowers. To-morrow I must give them fresh water. As long as they do not fade, I shall not be miserable. I shall still be just a tiny bit happy. . . . She lay back with a sigh. How long do violets live?

CHAPTER XIII

ERNESTINE SALT was the first to arrive, half an hour before the time. The word picnic had filled her with joyous anticipation. She never had been at a picnic. Of course, she had made excursions—she remembered them with secret horror—terrible hours with her father marching in front, the children rushing after him unable to keep step with his long stride, and mother bringing up the rear, carrying the basket with sandwiches and lemonade. When she recalled these excursions Ernestine never saw green meadows, waving golden cornfields, soft hills, their slopes covered with flowers, and babbling brooks; in her mind's eye she saw only an endless white, dusty road leading nowhere, along which one had to march, on and on, with weary feet and parched throat.

But a picnic sounded different; it made one think of pleasant hours spent in the country, of a long and lovely drive, and of—she was, after all, the daughter of a small official—elegance and wealth. One drove past pedestrians, one sat in a car, one was better than other people. Perhaps she would drive in the same car with Mr. Bite, and then, maybe, she would be able to explain. . . . She did not quite know what it was she wanted to explain, but she had begun hoping anew, and the glorious autumn morning fitted in with this mood of hers.

Casimir had done all he could to make the picnic a success: Irene had proposed to drive to the Vienna Forest and to picnic in the wood. He had argued her out of it.

"That's one of those idiotic romantic ideas people will cling to," he had said. "Nature, pure and unadulterated! And then they sit down on an ants' hill or get stung by wasps. The ground is damp and the flies crawl

over the food and the bottles tumble over and break. It's not the least bit romantic and most irritating. The women get headaches and the men are bored to death. The best place to have a picnic in is the garden of a big hotel where you can get hot water to wash your hands. We can't do it that way, unfortunately, because all those silly people are keen on 'enjoying nature.' We'll go to Baden where there is a lovely old park and where we'll get enough 'nature' to satisfy our clients and enough civilization to make feeding out of doors—always an odious and rather disgusting thing—more or less bearable. And if it should come to rain we'll have a place to go to."

"If we go to Baden I can get Nora to join us," Irene had said.

"That's an idea. Is your brother coming too?"

"Yes, I talked him round."

Casimir smiled. "I'm rather sorry for the poor fellow. He really doesn't fit in with the rest. But then no decent human being fits into our world."

Irene had felt slightly annoyed.

"Do you mean to say that I'm not decent?"

"Unfortunately you are. That's why I'm always afraid of your making a mess of things."

The car drove up. Miriam had come with the journalist who did not even get out. He seemed afraid of someone taking his seat.

"May I come with you?" Irene, who had become great friends with the other girl, said.

"Do. Who else is coming in our car?"

Mr. Mann strode up.

"I've offered my car to your brother, Countess Irene."

Irene smiled spitefully.

"Oh well, come along if you must."

Ernestine Salt, Mr. Bite, the Aryan Nature Lover and Nantje van Dam got into Mr. Mann's car. Margot asked

Mr. Rack and Karl von Ahler to drive with her. Casimir drove in Mrs. Ride's car.

Huber was to follow in Mr. Gedecke's car, together with Ottokar and the provisions. Just as they were getting ready to start, old Schiro turned up and asked whether he might come too.

For Ernestine the drive was much too short. She wanted it to last for ever. Everything was so wonderful: the speed, the fresh autumn air, the bright sun. She gazed at the red berries of the ash-trees bordering the road, she inhaled the delicious air, she nodded with a dreamy smile when someone talked to her, but she hardly heard the words. She was as a child for whom a fairy tale has come true. She forgot all about the desolate grey days in the ugly narrow street, the eternal lace-making that tired her eyes, the landlady and the dreary furnished room. Had she been able to talk at all she would only have repeated: "How lovely, how lovely!"

Mr. Gedecke talked to Nantje van Dam about shares and dividends; he had quite forgotten that he was a Nature Lover. The fair-haired girl spoke in a desultory way about tulips and Dutch painters; she disliked the German who bored her to death, and consoled herself with the thought that the drive would be over soon.

Mr. Bite kept silent out of sheer rapture. He had never driven in a motor-car before. He had never left the town he had been born in, and his many journeys had never taken him through real country. How lovely the landscape was in the diamond air, how dainty and slender the young birch trees over there looked; what a pity that one had to seize people's furniture and things in such a beautiful country that was surely meant to be happy and prosperous.

Old Mr. Schiro remained silent, leaning back in the cushions of the car. He neither wanted to talk, nor to think. For one short day he wanted to forget every-

thing—secret worries and fears connected with the trend of politics—that kept him awake many a night; Miriam's unfortunate passion for flying, and the sadness he still felt when he remembered his two sons who had died at an early age, and who would have been such a help to him had they lived to grow up. He listened absently to what Ottokar and the chauffeur were talking about. They spoke of the old estate of the Sternbachs in Bohemia, and recalled things that had happened in their childhood. Mr. Schiro dimly recollected his own youth. It had been a hard time of grinding poverty and unceasing work. He saw himself as he had been then—a shabby, eternally hungry boy, his head filled with plans. If one of them went wrong, another one might succeed. Then, one day, he found himself a rich man. But the many plans had devoured old Schiro's youth like rats. He had gradually become almost indecently rich, and Miriam had had a happy childhood. But all the money could not give him back his boys or his wife who had been his best friend. How he missed her, perhaps now more than ever. He seemed to see a pair of dark eyes look at him tenderly, then he heard Ottokar say:

"Do you remember the big pond the dogs used to swim in?"

Huber nodded.

"And we too, when there was nobody by."

A big pond, barking dogs, laughing boys, the sun reflected in the green waters. . . . How far more beautiful a memory than the stock exchange, excited men yelling at the top of their voices; money, shares, dividends, and again money—always money. Old Schiro closed his eyes and let the two low voices carry him away into an alien, lovely, care-free world.

Karl von Ahler felt annoyed. Margot Wiker never took her eyes off young Rack and seemed deaf to whatever the older man said. Margot never noticed that in

all the writer's stories he always was the most important person—he, and his genius, and his success. She was musing: How many years am I older than he? Four years? Six years? But I don't look my age. And if he should learn to love me? He does not care for money, he told me so himself; if he should . . . I would grow young again, living with a man who loves me. She thought of the late Mr. Wiker, of his paunch, his jealousy, of the way he used to gobble his food, of his always finding fault with everything. And there was Alexander Rack saying:

"The only thing I care for is my writing. When I am working I hardly know where I am. Sometimes I eat nothing for days at a time. My friends keep telling me that I simply must have a wife to look after me. Else I'm sure to die young. . . ."

Margot felt a thrill listening to these confessions of a poet; at the same time, being a true Austrian, she remembered with a glow of pleasure how excellent her cook was, and thought how delightful it would be to look after a genius. Perhaps. . . . Who could tell . . . ?

Casimir and Mrs. Ride chatted cheerfully about pleasant, unimportant things. They got on well. Casimir saw rising before his eyes the picture of a peaceful, quiet life. How restful it would be not to have to dye one's hair any longer, not to have to do gymnastics however tired one felt. He would take life easy; he would give up fasting two days a week; he would not even mind getting a little fatter round the waist. Yes, he might even grant himself a tiny paunch—a friendly, good-natured little paunch—denoting good living and contentment. The sensible, kindly woman sitting beside him would not mind.

Irene watched Miriam and the journalist and felt good. Surely, dear old Schiro would have to pay up soon, and Miriam would give up flying. I would not do it, Irene

thought, but it would be better for Miriam to do so. . . . Poor Mann, he looks like a fish out of water. He has suddenly turned into a harmless boy, who feels worried by something not included in the Nazi programme. She felt sorry for him and said, almost kindly:

"We have got a lovely country, haven't we, Mr. Mann?"

He looked at her with bewildered, unhappy eyes.

"A lovely country. . . . Yes, you're right, Countess Irene. Somehow I never noticed it before. You see, I love Germany best."

"Really? But, after all, you're an Austrian."

"A *German* Austrian. Germany, the National Socialist Party. . . ."

But the slogans he was going to dish up seemed silly all of a sudden, and the boy fell silent. He was miserable, and not even the huge black Swastika, gleaming darkly on a white wall they were just driving past, was able to comfort him.

* * *

They reached the funny little old station—a wooden building rather like a Swiss chalet—and drove on, along the straight road leading to the small town. On one side of the road a merrily babbling brook accompanied them part of the way. The town, beginning in the valley, climbs up a hill called the Harzberg, that shelters it from the north wind. Mr. Bite looked longingly at the peaceful green hill. He felt adventurous and wanted to climb it to see what was on the other side. But Casimir had decided otherwise. They drove on, past the hot spring that gushed forth like a fountain, past the bath, lying in the middle of the wood, till they reached the Casino Park.

The deserted park with its old elms and gnarled alder trees had a mysterious look. It called up pictures from the past, bringing back far-away times when ladies in

crinolines walked on the gravel paths, carrying tiny sunshades, and gentlemen—elegant sticks in their hands—bowed deeply on meeting them, and paid the most elaborate compliments whilst they listened to the band, or sauntered slowly towards the hot spring. The old trees had witnessed many a strange scene and seen many queer people, at a time when the spa had still been the fashion. In the shade of the majestic elms many a man had rested whose name was famous, even to-day.

Mr. Rack showed off to Margot, talking easily of Beethoven and Grillparzer, of Schubert and Count Metternich who had followed the cure, and sought healing in the hot spring. He had read it all up in the morning, but Margot did not know it. She listened entranced to the vivid picture he drew, and smiled delightedly on hearing him say:

"Perhaps I too shall add to the celebrity of this place, and children will read in their history of literature: 'It was at Baden that the famous writer Alexander Rack spent one of the happiest days of his life'."

Casimir, who had come up to them, grinned maliciously and said:

"Let's hope so. But in the meantime you'd better help unpack the hampers."

Casimir ordered them about like a commander-in-chief. Everyone had to work. Meeting Irene he whispered to her:

"What do you think of my idea? If we had to pay for all this!"

"Do you think I could slip away and fetch Nora?" Irene asked.

"Yes, but be quick, please."

Irene left the park and hurried along the narrow street that led to the doctor's house. She felt uncomfortable at the idea of meeting her sister-in-law. Had Nora left them for good? Would she refuse to come back and help

her? Had she given up the "business"? Of course, she was free to do as she liked; no one could make her return to town, to the house where Irene and Ottokar lived as her guests. Ought she to have sent Ottokar? She had not dared to do it. Her brother had not commented on Nora's absence with a single word; he had seemed to take it for granted. He had only grown more taciturn and moody during the last few days.

She found Nora in the garden.

"Irene! Where on earth do you come from? What are you doing here?"

Irene was glad that Nora did not mention their quarrel.

"I've come to fetch you. We're here with the whole gang. Having a picnic in the Casino Park. It was Casimir's idea. It costs us nothing, and perhaps some of the clients will grow sentimental: trees and flowers, and the spirit of the past—all that kind of thing, you know. Maybe some will get engaged, and . . ."

She stopped short and gazed at her sister-in-law.

"What's wrong with you? Why are you so pale? Why do you look so tragic? Won't you come along and help with the picnic? And won't you come home with us afterwards?"

"Do you think Ottokar wants me to come?"

"Ottokar? You forget that it's YOUR house. If you wanted to get rid of us you need not have run away."

"Come here, Irene."

Nora took her sister-in-law's arm and pulled her into the small summer-house.

"It was beastly of me to run away," she said remorsefully. "And if you want me to come back I'll do so. But listen, Irene! I've been thinking things over. We are doing something wrong, something abominable. We are playing with souls, bartering human lives for the sake of filthy money. I'd much rather take up something else."

"Nora! Just now when everything is going so beautifully. In a few months' time you can indulge in remorse if you want to. Do come along, else your mother will see me and want to come too."

Nora hesitated.

"Don't be so obstinate. Get your hat and coat."

"I . . . I've got to pack my things."

"Nonsense! You hardly took anything along. You can ask your mother to send on your things. Do come."

"I don't really know. . . . Perhaps it would be better . . ."

"Look here! I can't sit here for ever waiting for you to decide what you really want to do. Anyhow, we want another woman. Ahler has got to share Nantje with Ottokar."

"Oh, so Nantje has come too?"

"Of course."

"Just a moment, Irene; I'll be back at once."

"Good! Hurry up. And what about your coming home?"

"Of course I'm coming; you might have known it. I only want to say good-bye to my people."

Nora ran into the house, and Irene gazed after her, an amused smile on her lips. I knew Nantje's name would do the trick, she thought.

She idly picked one of the flaming leaves of the Virginia creeper that covered the summer-house, and shrugged. It's a queer world, a mad world, she mused. As long as she was sure of Ottokar he bored her. Now that she imagines that another woman. . . .

Nora came hurrying back.

"Let's go, Irene. We must help with the picnic."

She has quite forgotten that we are "playing with souls," Irene thought maliciously, but she was careful not to say so. She took her sister-in-law's hand and

pulled her out of the garden. On the way to the Casino Park she suddenly burst out laughing.

Nora looked slightly bewildered.

"What makes you laugh, Irene?"

But Irene did not answer. She had been tickled by the idea that perhaps only one match would come off: Nora's and Ottokar's. And that marriage would not put money in their pockets.

* * *

Nora felt nervous at the idea of meeting Ottokar, but she might have spared herself this fear. Reaching the park they heard loud and not exactly amiable voices. The Aryan Nature Lover, annoyed by the dull drive, had begun to talk politics, and was telling old Schiro exactly what he thought about Jewish capitalists. The old man repaid his insolence in kind. Ottokar—Nora had never known that he was interested in politics—had joined the two men and was upholding left wing views that made both their hair stand on end. Young Mann listened in silence. He longed to come to the Aryan Nature Lover's aid, but dared not do it because Miriam was sitting close by and might have heard his words.

Casimir had tried in vain to appease the politicians by a joke or two. Now he was standing apart, looking furious and cursing under his breath. Seeing Nora, he went up to her hurriedly.

"Thank goodness you've come. Perhaps you can do something. I don't know what's come to Ottokar and those two old fools. . . . You'd better stress the Countess, and be as haughty as you can be. But be quick about it. Those idiots are spoiling everything."

Nora walked up to the excited group.

Ottokar was just declaring:

"Capitalism is immoral in whatever form . . ."

Mr. Gedecke interrupted him rudely:

"The only immoral thing is the stock exchange, and that is in the hands of the Jews."

Ottokar looked at him as if he were some noisome insect.

"And what about the large Aryan concerns in Germany? And what about the huge estates?"

"Good morning," Nora said icily. "I see that you are having a most interesting conversation. I'm so glad you're enjoying yourselves. But don't you think that politics are rather out of place here? I'm not used to my guests yelling at the top of their voices, and I must admit that I don't like it."

Ottokar stared at her.

"Nora!"

She smiled charmingly.

"Of course I came as soon as I knew you were here."

The way he looked at her made her feel shy. She forgot to be haughty.

Irene put her hand on Mr. Schiro's arm.

"Don't mind that horrid fellow," she whispered. "Be a dear. The whole picnic will be spoilt if you go on quarrelling."

Turning to Mr. Gedecke she said, much more arrogantly than Nora could ever have done:

"Don't you see that Countess Sternbach has arrived, Mr. Gedecke?"

The Aryan Nature Lover was struck dumb. He bowed stiffly and walked off in a huff. Irene, not knowing what had really happened, vented her rage on young Mann.

"You're a beastly cad," she said loudly. "Didn't I tell you to behave properly? You'd better go at once. We've had enough of you."

"But I . . . really and truly . . . I didn't . . ."

Old Schiro took the boy's part.

"He did not say a word, Countess Irene? Why are you scolding him?"

"He might have," Irene said, angrier still because she had wronged an innocent man. Besides, she disliked the idea of young Mann having behaved decently. The Aryan Nature Lover had come back; he and old Schiro seemed to calm down. Strange to say, it was Ottokar who took up the cudgels again.

"The whole system is wrong," he said. "Call it by whatever name you like. Our whole economical system is absurd and criminal and unfair, and . . ."

"Ottokar, please," Nora said imploringly.

Irene caught hold of her brother's arm and pinched it violently.

"Do shut up! Do you intend to make a speech? You're not in Parliament, nor is this a meeting. Come along, there's a dear! Let's eat and drink. At least the people won't be able to talk politics as long as they are masticating."

Mr. Bite and Ernestine had already sat down at one of the small folding tables.

Ernestine looked dismayed and said in a horrified whisper:

"What a revolutionary the count seems to be. How can an aristocrat say such awful things? Surely tradition alone ought to prevent him from doing so."

Mr. Bite nodded rather uncertainly.

"I'm not interested in politics, Miss Salt. But maybe there's some truth in what the count said. You see, when one has to seize furniture belonging to people who have worked hard all their lives and have only been unlucky, illness or depression and so on, well, I must admit, one really begins to feel doubtful. And I can tell you, Miss Salt, it is a terrible thing to doubt the authority of the State."

"I quite understand," Ernestine said eagerly. "The

State must exist, and the State can do no wrong. My late father used to say: 'God and the State.' That was after the war. Before the war he said: 'God and the Emperor'."

"I'm a Republican," Mr. Bite declared reprovingly.

And Ernestine replied:

"Of course, I'm a Republican too."

"That's right. You see we have the same views."

Ernestine felt a glow of tenderness for the Republic; it had given her a chance to please Mr. Bite.

They both ate very little, and afterwards slipped away and went for a walk.

The clients had brought a lot of good things to eat and to drink. Casimir gazed at the plates, delighted at the idea that the agency had not got to pay for the salmon and caviare. Yet somehow the picnic did not go well. Nora had sat down beside the Aryan Nature Lover, and Irene kept an eye on old Schiro and young Mann. Casimir walked about, rushing up whenever one of the guests raised his voice. He was growing terribly annoyed, and cursed his idea of a picnic. In the Sternbach's drawing-rooms the people somehow felt that they had to behave. Here, surrounded by trees and flowers, they let themselves go and revealed their real nature; and that was always a dangerous thing. He noticed angrily that Mr. Rack was making up to Mrs. Ride. He was sitting at her left and telling her all about his genius and his wonderful future. Ottokar sat between Nantje van Dam and Margot, trying hard to amuse them. But he was absent-minded and kept glancing at Nora.

A sudden gust of wind made the tablecloths soar into the air, and the sky began to grow dark.

"It's raining," Margot cried out. "I felt a drop on my nose."

Many drops followed. Cold rain pattered through the branches of the trees. The company jumped up.

"There's a hotel close by," young Mann said. "Let's go there."

"An excellent idea," Ottokar said kindly. "We'll have to wait till the rain stops. We can't drive home in the open cars."

They hurried to the big hotel in the main street, and sat down in the lounge.

"Thank goodness," Irene said to Casimir. "At least the brutes will have to behave themselves, and I can rest for a while. A lion tamer's not in it. Really, Casimir, only very well-bred people seem able to stand nature pure and unadulterated."

Casimir hardly noticed that she was talking to him; he was listening to the Aryan Nature Lover ordering a glass of brandy, and frowned. The frown grew heavier as he watched the others follow Mr. Gedecke's lead. An alarming question was worrying him: would the clients pay for their drinks or would they imagine themselves the Sternbach's guests as soon as they had a roof over their head?

Every order he overheard cut him to the quick. If at least the people had been satisfied with drinking tea or coffee, but they ordered whisky and soda, beer, sandwiches and cake as if they had not eaten a copious lunch hardly an hour ago. Mrs. Ride alone ordered tea, not even a pot, only a cup; and Casimir felt that he loved her. He walked up to her table and pushed young Rack aside unceremoniously.

"It's my turn. You've been enjoying Mrs. Ride's company for an unconscionable time."

The rain was coming down in sheets. It might go on raining for hours, and the longer they sat here, the more people would order drinks and food. If it rained till evening they would begin eating dinner! Casimir glared at Mr. Gedecke who was drinking beer and eating cheese. The whole picnic had been a beastly flop. Boredom,

damp clothes, the prospect of driving home in the rain. How could one expect people to fall in love with one another in such circumstances? A tiny gleam of hope comforted Casimir; Miriam Schiro and the journalist were sitting apart in a window-seat and seemed to notice neither the downpour nor the cheerless mood that reigned in the lounge. Casimir was just going to give a sigh of relief when he saw Ottokar, always the perfect host, go up to the couple and sit down beside them.

"The only ones," Casimir moaned under his breath, "the only ones who might have made up their minds to marry, and of course, Ottokar has got to rush in like the proverbial fool."

But he was mistaken; Miriam and the journalist were not the only ones. About an hour later Ernestine and Mr. Bite turned up. No one had missed them. Now they suddenly stood in the hall, drenched to the skin, looking frightfully embarrassed.

"We lost our way," Ernestine tried to explain, "and we did not know what had become of you. At last we found Count Sternbach's chauffeur who told us that you were here."

Irene glanced at Ernestine's face, then she got up with a smile and shook her and Mr. Bite by the hand.

Mr. Bite grew very red.

"Yes, Countess Irene, you've guessed it. Wish us luck."

Irene did, gladly and cordially. She was really pleased to see the two looking so happy. Nevertheless, try as hard as she could, it was impossible to banish the thought: of course it had to be those two, the only "clients" from whom they could not take a penny. They would even have to give them a wedding present. As to the others. . . . She looked round moodily. Ottokar was still sitting with Miriam and the journalist, chatting gaily. The rest of the company was evidently trying to drown boredom in drink.

At last the sky grew clear and the rain stopped.

"Let's go," said Casimir, who had kept looking out of the window.

The waiter came, but he did not bring the bill to the guests; he put it down in front of Ottokar.

Ottokar studied it with a frown, got up and beckoned to Casimir.

"Look here, Ponitzky, I haven't got so much on me. Can you lend me something?"

Casimir reached for the bill.

"Those wretched people have been eating and drinking as if they had been starved for days," he said grimly, and pushed over his wallet to Ottokar.

"Is all this connected with the business my wife—I mean Countess Sternbach—has taken up?" Ottokar asked, a bewildered expression on his face.

"Yes," Casimir replied angrily.

"Don't you think, Ponitzky, that she is sinking rather a lot of money in the business? Perhaps you don't know how small our means are, and that . . ."

"I know everything. Please, pay the bill, and let's go before they begin ordering more food and drinks."

They drove home. Ernestine and Mr. Bite held hands all the way; the Aryan Nature Lover who watched them with a sneer on his face was more than half drunk. On saying good night, he turned to Ottokar:

"I really can't help thinking, Count Sternbach, that your agency suffers from a lack of organization. I'm sure you will understand if I ask you to strike my name off your list. Your agency does not deliver the goods. Besides, your chauffeur has just told me that my car has been damaged on the way home. I'll send you the bill for the repairs."

He bowed slightly and went off in his car.

"What DID the fellow want?" Ottokar asked his sister, who had heard Mr. Gedecke's querulous words.

"He's dead drunk," she replied irritably. "Please don't ask me to explain anything. I'm wet through and tired out, and I hate everybody. And Nora is an idiot. And of course you had to spoil our best, and maybe only chance. What induced you to go and sit with Miriam and her young man?"

"I don't know what you're grumbling at. They are both charming, and after all it was my duty as their host to see that they were enjoying themselves."

He did not know why Irene began to laugh almost hysterically. But then he felt as if he would never understand either Nora nor his sister as long as he lived.

CHAPTER XIV

NORA was studying the ledger, a worried look on her face.

"Irene," she said sadly, "if things go on that way, if we keep on spending money and never earning any, we'll have to sell the family jewels."

"You can't do that!"

Irene gave her sister-in-law a strange look.

"Why not? We want the money badly."

"But one does not sell family jewels."

"Why?"

"Because they've been heirlooms for centuries, because they are connected with memories one cannot replace, because . . ." Her voice grew so supercilious and haughty that Nora stared at her in amazement. "It's not done."

"I always thought you did not care for that kind of thing."

Irene blushed. She swallowed hard once or twice, then she smiled disarmingly:

"You're right, Nora. I really don't know what came over me all of a sudden. A kind of subconscious reaction, I suppose. Somehow one does seem to cling to the past, to one's personal past."

"When I think of what Ottokar said at that unfortunate picnic, I can't quite believe it."

Irene had taken up the pencil Nora had been doing accounts with and was playing with it absent-mindedly.

"Ottokar, my dear, is a crank. I always thought he was a bit dumb, because he was so quiet, so taciturn, but . . ."

"I did too." Nora had the grace to blush. "But now . . . He seems different somehow. Or was he always like that, and I never noticed it? Perhaps that's one of the worst things in life—that we never see people as they really are."

Irene shrugged.

"Don't philosophize. It suffices to know that there are decent people and cads in the world, stupid people and clever people."

"White or black, you mean? I believe the most usual colour is an opaque grey, which we cannot see through."

"Maybe."

"Take yourself, Irene. Who'd have expected you to be shocked at the idea of my selling the family jewels?"

"I told you it was a silly reaction, a feeling that dates from another century and was allowed to live on in me, because I had never noticed it and therefore did not weed it out. Speaking of jewels, Nora, we've forgotten all about your pearls. You ran away after they had been stolen, and I never gave them another thought."

"Of course, the pearls! If only we had them. They're worth a lot of money."

"Don't you think Mr. Gedecke stole them?"

Irene tended to accuse people she disliked with all the sins in the decalogue.

"But, Irene, he's a rich man. Why should he?"

"Perhaps he's a kleptomaniac. We really ought to . . ."

"Don't go in for private detective work again. Remember your gangster."

"How mean of you to remind me of him. Ah well, let Gedecke keep the pearls."

Marie came into the room and said rather nervously:

"A gentleman from the revenue office has called. He wants to see Countess Sternbach."

"The revenue office? What does he want? Irene, you filled out the assessment, didn't you?"

"Yes. I drew a line all over the paper, as we have got neither an estate nor a firm, nor anything like it."

The gentleman from the revenue office was polite but reserved.

"I wanted to see Count Sternbach," he said. "But as he is not at home, perhaps you could explain matters to me, madam."

"Yes?" Nora said timidly.

"There seems to have been a mistake in your last assessment," the gentleman from the revenue office declared. His voice registered a gentle reproof.

"Surely not," Irene said hastily. "You must be mistaken."

"We never make a mistake."

The gentleman from the revenue office seemed hurt and deeply shocked at the insult offered to a State institution.

"Won't you tell us what is wrong?" Nora asked nervously.

The gentleman from the revenue office took the paper with the assessment from his pocket, and, putting it on the table, pointed with a reproachful finger at a column in which a long line had been drawn.

"You did not assess your business?" he said reprovingly.

"Business?"

"Yes. The revenue office has been informed that you have a matrimonial agency. You have to pay taxes on the profit made by the agency. . . . Failing which . . ."

Nora and Irene exchanged a quick glance. The words "failing which" had an ominous sound. Nora had visions of being convicted, of prison. . . . Irene was the first to regain her self-possession.

"It's quite true that we have a matrimonial agency," she said. "But I did not know that one had to fill in the profit made; besides . . ."

"Ignorance of the law is no valid excuse."

"Look here! How can I be punished for doing a thing when I don't know it's against the law?" Irene was beginning to lose her temper.

The gentleman from the revenue office did not seem accustomed to be treated so cavalierly. He frowned.

"I think you'd better. . . . Besides, may I ask if you are entitled to interfere in this affair?"

"Of course." Irene forgot to be cautious. "I belong to the firm."

"Ah, I see. You have just admitted that the firm exists."

Irene bit her lips and remembered how often her mother had said to her: "Do try and think before speaking, darling."

The gentleman from the revenue office turned to Nora, ignoring Irene rather ostentatiously.

"Will you kindly tell me the amount of profit made by the agency up to the year 1932?"

"But . . . we haven't . . . there was no profit."

The gentleman from the revenue did not look convinced.

"No profit? Excuse me, but that sounds rather incredible."

"On the contrary," Irene interposed, "we've done nothing but spend money on the idiotic business."

"Perhaps," Nora said ingratiatingly, "you would like to see our ledger?"

The gentleman from the revenue office looked mollified.

"So you do keep accounts? That's right. Yes, I'd like to see the ledger, please."

Nora fetched the ledger from a shelf and put it in front of the gentleman from the revenue office. He studied it; his face grew dark.

"I am sorry to say that this cannot possibly be considered a correctly kept ledger," he said, and his voice sounded both grieved and angry. "There are caricatures drawn in the margins, and letters scribbled beneath. I suppose that is a kind of cipher. That kind of thing is not permitted. A ledger has to be easy to survey, and lucid. What, for instance, do the two letters B. C. written under Mr. Michael Gedecke's name mean?"

Irene stared at the man in dismay. Then she smiled charmingly.

"So sorry, my mistake. It ought to be I. C., of course. Iron Cross, you know. Of course, it's important to know that a man has been decorated, isn't it?"

"Quite so, quite so," said the gentleman from the revenue office looking almost human. "Of course I know Mr. Gedecke's name; I have had the honour of making his acquaintance. But I never knew he had distinguished himself in the war. I must congratulate him when we meet again."

Irene drew a deep breath, and carefully avoided meeting Nora's eyes. Her sister-in-law knew that the letters in question meant "beastly cad." She had written them after her conversation with the Aryan Nature Lover, still fuming with anger at the rudeness the man had shown.

The gentleman from the revenue office was still turning the pages of the ledger.

"Your advertising expenditure seems to be unusually high," he said, rather doubtfully.

"Look here," Irene replied arrogantly. "We can't do things as they are done by other matrimonial agencies. Everything has to be first class and dignified. After all, *noblesse oblige*."

"Besides," Nora added with a winning smile, "our firm has only just been founded."

"I know. Nevertheless, it was your duty to fill in an assessment. . . ."

"I'm terribly sorry. Next time . . ."

"Oh, it's not as simple as all that. You have been guilty of a fraudulent assessment."

"Dear me. What happens in such a case?" Nora could not hide her perturbation any longer.

Seeing her frightened face the gentleman from the revenue office grew kinder. That was the way people who had tried to cheat the inland revenue had to look.

"As you have not made any profit, and I can see by the ledger that that really is the case, you need not fear too severe a punishment. Count Sternbach will have to come to the office this week."

"But he does not know. . . ."

Irene hastily interrupted her sister-in-law:

"All right, we'll tell him. He'll come to the revenue office to-morrow or the day after."

The gentleman from the revenue office got up.

"We shall expect to see him shortly. I hope you appreciate my leniency. If you had had the misfortune of dealing with any other of our gentlemen you would not have got off so easily."

He bowed ponderously and left the room.

* * *

"Irene," Nora said desperately, "why didn't you let me tell the man that Ottokar knows nothing about the whole business?"

"Because he's got to go to that beastly office and talk to the people. He's sure to make a good impression."

"But now we'll have to tell him," Nora wailed. "And he'll be ever so angry. Perhaps he'll be sent to prison? We don't even know what crime we have committed. Have we forged a document, or have we tried to cheat the State? We don't even know what we have done. Irene, I'm sure something awful is going to happen."

"Smoke a cigarette and calm yourself. It won't be as bad as all that."

"That's what you always say. And then things turn out even worse. How am I to tell Ottokar? Listen, Irene darling! You're his sister; you'd better tell him."

"Certainly not. It was your idea. Tell him yourself."

"I can't, I really can't."

There was a ring at the door, and Nora gave a start.

"Who is coming now? I'm sure it's something or somebody odious."

But it was only Mr. Rack wanting some information. He wanted to know whether Mrs. Ride was richer than Margot Wiker.

"The woman might be your mother," Irene said crossly. Mrs. Ride belonged to Casimir.

"As long as she has enough money, I don't mind."

"You ought to be ashamed of yourself!" Nora burst out.

Mr. Rack gazed at her in amazement.

"Why? It's purely a business affair. I want money, lots of money. As I am a genius I simply must be rich."

"Does being a genius exempt a man from being decent?" Irene said sharply.

"I really cannot imagine what you mean."

Irene turned away in disgust. Nora, still intimidated

by the visit of the gentleman from the revenue office, hurriedly told Mr. Rack how much money Mrs. Ride possessed.

Mr. Rack took out a note-book, the same into which he jotted down his ideas—sometimes also those of other writers—and began doing a sum.

"All right," he said, drawing a line under the figures. "I've decided to marry Mrs. Ride."

"Are you quite sure she'll have you?" Irene asked spitefully. "After all, she's got to have her say too."

Mr. Rack smiled superciliously.

"You were so kind as to tell me a few minutes ago that the woman might be my mother. And it isn't as if I were an unknown writer. She ought to feel honoured. . . ."

He turned to Nora.

"I want to ask you something, Countess. Your parties are delightful, of course. But such a lot of people come to them. There is no privacy. I haven't got the money to invite Mrs. Ride to a decent restaurant, so I wanted to ask you. . . . You know what I want to say?"

"No," Nora replied helplessly. "I really don't. I'm sorry."

"I want you to ask me to dinner with Mrs. Ride. Only just the two of us. It would give me a chance of . . ."

"Certainly not," Irene said decidedly.

"I know the firm is not bound to do that kind of thing. But I thought, I hoped. . . . After all, you'll surely be glad of a chance of helping a gifted author. And in the evening, by the pretty mellow light in your drawing-room, it will be less hard for me. . . . you see, in the evening the woman still looks quite presentable."

Nora kept silent. Irene muttered under her breath: "Dirty little brute." Luckily Mr. Rack did not hear her.

He gazed expectantly at the two women.

"When I've written my great novel, ladies, you'll be

saw in her mind's eye lovely Nantje van Dam holding a baby boy in her arms, a boy who looked exactly like Ottokar, and standing beside her Ottokar, smiling happily. Somehow she did not like the picture; she did not like it at all.

When Ottokar came home she met him in the hall, holding the note in her hand.

"What does that mean?" she asked angrily. "Why on earth does an Aunt Yetta I never heard of, send me a layette? Why does she think that . . .?"

Ottokar grew mortally embarrassed.

"I . . . I wanted to tell you all about it when I came back from Innsbruck. But you would not listen to me."

"When you came back from INNSBRUCK?"

"Yes. I had been to see Aunt Yetta whom I had never met before. And she—she's very ill and very old. And somehow she imagined, I must have given her the impression. . . . And, Nora dear, she's paralysed and so ill. . . . I simply could not bear to disappoint her."

"You went to see an old aunt?"

"Yes."

"You did not go away with Nantje van Dam?"

"Nantje van Dam? What are you talking about? Why on earth should I have gone away with Nantje van Dam?"

Nora laughed a trifle shakily.

"And the poor old lady really believes that I—that we will soon have a child? Ottokar, you poor idiot, she's bound to find out that you lied to her."

"She won't live to find out," Ottokar said sadly. Then he followed Nora into her sitting-room and told her about his visit to the paralysed old woman.

She listened without saying a word.

"Are you angry, dear?" he asked at last.

"No. But now I've got to confess, Ottokar, and you must not be angry either. Promise! Make yourself

comfortable, light a cigarette and don't interrupt me. Listen . . .!"

* * *

Ottokar did not interrupt her; but he threw away the unsmoked cigarette, put his hand to his head and his face grew red. As soon as Nora ceased talking, he said:

"A matrimonial agency? You . . . in our house? That's why those awful people come here? Nora, how COULD you?"

"Are you very angry?"

"No. Of course, you can do whatever you like. But what a crazy idea."

"Wait! There's more to come. To-day a man from the revenue office called. Something's wrong with our assessment. . . . You must go to the office to-morrow or the day after."

"Good Lord! If you and Irene must run an agency, why the devil—sorry, darling—why on earth don't you fill in the profits?"

"But there has been no profit so far. To-day we might have pocketed twenty *schillinge*, but we did not dare to, on account of the taxes."

Irene softly opened the door and looked in.

"Well, have you told him?"

"Yes," Ottokar said, and his whole manner changed. He gave his sister an angry look, and he sounded greatly irritated as he added:

"I know all about it. Of course it was YOUR idea. I'm very angry with you, Irene."

"No, Ottokar, it really was my idea," Nora said; "but you gave it to me. Do you remember telling me that Huber had said he was ready to pay a month's salary if only he could find a suitable wife? When the bank went smash I remembered it . . . and the result was our matrimonial agency. Don't be cross."

"I'm not angry with you, dear, only with Irene, who ought to have known better. I'm afraid there will be a horrible mess. I hate the idea of going to the revenue office."

"That's all right," Irene comforted him. "I called up old Schiro whilst Nora was confessing to you. He's coming here after dinner, and he's promised to give us some advice."

"Thank goodness. He's sure to know all about it. But now listen, my dears! You're going to put an end to the whole blessed thing."

"We can't, Ottokar! We really cannot drop our clients without a warning. I promise not to accept any new ones. But those we have got. . . . And two have already become engaged."

"Who?"

"Miss Salt and Mr. Bite."

"Surely you're not going to make the poor devils pay?" Ottokar said, deeply shocked.

"Of course not. But listen, Ottokar! The Schiros are disgustingly rich, and Miriam and the journalist are sure to be happy together. As to the others . . ."

"Besides, my dear," Irene said dryly. "You've no earthly right to tell Nora what to do. She isn't your wife any longer. If she wants to make money that way, it's her funeral."

Ottokar smiled a trifle sarcastically, and pulled a bill from his pocket.

"Do you call that making money?" he asked with gentle sarcasm. "Look at it! It's the bill for repairing Mr. Gedecke's car: a hundred and thirty *schillinge*. Don't look so frightened, Nora darling; it's all right. But I do want you both to promise me something: if you want to go on with your business—heaven save the mark—till you have married off your present clients, for goodness' sake do the thing at home and don't try to

go in for excursions. In our house there's merely the possibility of violent political debates ending with a damaged chair or table; and at least we won't have to replace them."

CHAPTER XV

NOWADAYS young people have given up the old-fashioned manner of courting. Miriam Schiro and Tom Bright, the journalist, belonged to the modern school; they did not talk of love, they liked each other, and told each other so frankly, without the least trace of sentimentality. They talked about it, not in a summer-house in the moonlight, as their parents had done, nor in a drawing-room, nor in a conservatory sitting out a dance, nor in hurried whispers in the passage, but in a café, drinking cocktails and listening to the blaring of the band.

"I don't want to marry you," Miriam said. "It's too risky. If we should not get on well. . . ."

She frowned slightly, remembering her father's views on divorce. After a short pause she went on:

"Yes, don't you think a companionate marriage would be best? We can't live with father; he's terribly old-fashioned, poor darling. But we could take a flat, not too far from the airport."

"Just as you like."

"You won't try to stop my flying, will you?"

"Of course not. I'll be very proud when you fly to America."

"Good! Then the thing's settled."

They smiled at each other, feeling as happy and as hopeful as their parents, sitting in the summer-house or the conservatory had done.

"I'll tell Father to-night," Miriam said.

The journalist laughed.

"Life has grown easier for men. When I think that thirty years ago I should have had to put on my best suit, and ask for an interview with your father, and then, having told him all about myself, my income and my past, solemnly ask him for your hand. . . . A ghastly idea."

"Yes. And then a long engagement. Deeply moved relatives who would insist upon kissing us both, a grand wedding. And later on, maybe, all the bother of a divorce."

"Do you think you need talk of a divorce already?"

"Perhaps it's a bit premature. I just happened to think of it."

And then they talked of the flat and the furniture, just as their parents had done, many years ago.

* * *

In the evening Mr. Schiro came to see the Sternbachs. Not the kindly old Schiro they knew, but an excited, irate old man, spluttering reproaches, laying all the blame at their door.

"A companionate marriage!" he wailed. "My daughter! Of all the things in the world. That's what comes of going to an amateur matrimonial agency."

"But if it makes Miriam happy?" Nora said depreciatingly.

"Happy! Of course I want her to be happy, but in a decent, respectable way."

He stared grimly at Irene.

"I might have known. You're as bad as Miriam is, Countess Irene. I ought to have gone to a real matrimonial agency."

"Have a drink, Mr. Schiro," Ottokar said soothingly.

"We're awfully sorry. You have been so kind; you helped me to get things right with the revenue office. But we really could not imagine . . ."

"My daughter!" Old Schiro refused to be comforted. "I'd rather the firm had failed. Just imagine what people will say if my daughter lives with a man she's not married to!"

"Lots of people do nowadays," Nora said.

"Not my kind of people."

"At least she'll give up flying," Irene said.

"She won't. That young fool encourages her insane fancy."

"I'm most terribly sorry," Nora repeated, feeling guilty.

"But how was I to know?"

"Never have anything to do with amateurs," old Schiro declared woefully. "That kind of thing never happens at a real matrimonial agency."

He gulped down Ottokar's old brandy as if it had been water, and added:

"I suppose as things have turned out you won't expect me to pay the percentage we had agreed upon. After all, my daughter is neither getting married nor will she give up flying."

Ottokar tried hard not to smile. Nora and Irene looked at each other in dismay.

"Of course, Mr. Schiro," he said. "We don't expect you to pay a commission."

"If all the marriages you try to arrange end that way. . . ."

Old Schiro was puffing like an angry hippopotamus.

"Can't you explain to Miriam what a good thing a happy marriage is, Countess Sternbach?"

Nora blushed. Who was she to talk about a happy marriage?

Mr. Schiro grew sentimental and slightly lachrymose.

"When I think of my dear departed wife and my dear

departed mother. . . . If they knew. . . . Thank God they did not live to see their daughter's and granddaughter's shame."

He began to talk about his married life, his mother and his grandmother, his aunts and cousins. He marshalled up an endless row of honourable and prolific female Schiros.

"We never even had a divorce in our family. . . . And now . . ."

Ottokar listened patiently. He was sorry for the old man, and he understood his grief. Old Schiro wanted grandchildren, and Ottokar was saddened by the idea that the Sternbach family would become extinct.

Irene and Nora were less kind-hearted. They were occupied in finding out how much money they had let slip through their fingers. Why couldn't Miriam have married the young man? They wanted the money so badly, and they had felt so sure of getting it.

Gradually Mr. Schiro calmed down.

"You're a sensible fellow, Count Sternbach," he said. "You understand."

The reproachful glance he threw Nora and Irene showed clearly what he thought of them.

He stayed on late, again and again giving voice to fresh lamentations. When he left it was past midnight.

Nora went and fetched the ledger and, frowning heavily, ran her pencil through Miriam's name.

"Whom have we got left?" she asked sadly.

"Mrs. Ride and Casimir, Margot and young Rack."

"They won't make millionaires of us."

"Margot has a lot of money."

Irene looked thoughtful.

"Yes, she has a lot of money, and as Mrs. Ride has refused young Rack, Margot will probably marry him. Nevertheless . . ."

"Why do you say 'nevertheless,' Irene?"

Irene shrugged impatiently.

"Never mind. A silly idea of mine, a very silly idea. We've got to be business-like."

"Not at other people's expense, Irene, and not at the expense of our own decency," Ottokar said gently.

"Don't preach! Isn't every business deal made at the expense of one's own decency, if one has any left?"

"We must make money," Nora said wistfully.

"I know, dear, but in a decent way."

"Then you'd better earn it."

Irene was irritated, and spoke without thinking. Seeing Ottokar's face change, she regretted her hasty words. But her brother did not say anything; he was too deeply hurt.

It was Nora who attacked her sister-in-law.

"How can you, Irene? It's beastly of you. You know how hard Ottokar is studying for his examination, and that he works in the lab. You really might consider that. . . ."

"I know," Irene said furiously, "that we have got about enough money for three months. We've been working hard, too. If you imagine, Ottokar, that running a matrimonial agency is all beer and skittles you're mistaken. We work like navvies, and then you come and put a spoke in our wheel, airing your silly scruples."

"If only you had asked my advice before embarking on that mad scheme," Ottokar said gently but reproachfully.

"You'd only have told us not to do it."

He smiled.

"I suppose I ought to be grateful that you did not try to organize a robber band, Irene."

Irene laughed and hugged him.

"You are a dear, even if you are good."

Nora watched them silently. She looked round the pretty room, thinking: We go on living as we lived when we were rich. In a few months' time there will be no

money left. What shall we do then? She shivered as if a cold blast had struck her. We shall be poor, and we shall not be able to get jobs, she thought. We have never learnt anything useful; we can only become swindlers, like Casimir. . . . Casimir, won't he fly into a rage because we have lost the Schiro commission! Of course, if he marries his Mrs. Ride, he will not need the money. . . . Perhaps he can give us some good advice. . . . But then, what about Ottokar. Will Casimir's advice suit him? I'm a pretty woman; I might make a good match. . . . But Irene and Ottokar. . . . After all, they're no business of mine . . . my divorced husband, the sister of my divorced husband. . . . When the money is gone we shall not be able to remain together any longer. . . . Why does that idea make me feel miserable? Irene, of course; I'm terribly fond of Irene. . . .

She went to the window and drew back the curtains. A desolate autumn night met her eyes. She felt unaccountably depressed. Without saying good night she softly left the room. She did not dare speak for fear of bursting into tears.

* * *

Casimir had the shock of his life when he heard from Irene that they had lost the Schiro commission.

"That's the kind of thing that happens when one's clients are very young," he grumbled. "Older people know—at least the woman knows—how her respectable neighbours will treat her in such a case. Mary won't want to go in for a companionate marriage, thank goodness."

"Mary?" Irene repeated. "Do you already call her 'Mary'? Has she accepted you? When are you going to be married?"

"The banns have not been published yet."

"Casimir"—Irene grew red with embarrassment—

"you. . . . When you're married you'll treat your wife well, won't you?"

"I always treated my wives well," Casimir declared. "All of them still feel kindly towards me. I'm absolutely fair in my dealings: you give me the money and I'll make you happy, that's my motto."

Irene gazed at him doubtfully.

"But will you be fond of her?"

"Of course. For one thing one gets accustomed to everything . . . and then . . . I shall be grateful to her for a pleasant life, for security. I did not become a swindler because I thought it would be fun. . . . You can't imagine how often the small official in me comes to life. The respectable little man who, after forty, begins to long for his ease and his slippers. Of course mine must be made of morocco and not of felt."

Irene laughed, but Casimir went on in a serious tone:

"That's a thing you cannot understand. A petty *bourgeois* remains a petty *bourgeois* all his life. At home we had coloured prints framed in shells hanging on the walls: Faust and Gretchen, a cheerful wounded warrior being nursed by a pretty girl. . . . You've never seen that kind of thing; it was the fashion when I was young. . . . I know that a van Gogh or a Kokoschka is far more beautiful, but something in me has never ceased hankering after the coloured prints. . . . Mary will be the coloured print with which I shall decorate my home; she'll also be that home where I shall spend my old age comfortably and peacefully. I shall have a roof over my head when it is snowing and a gale is raging outside. I shall always be sure of getting my dinner; I shall begin to read serious books—I always wanted to. I shall be absolutely happy. And you really think it necessary to tell me to be kind to the woman to whom I shall owe all that?"

He smiled and asked:

"Speaking as your partner, Irene, what were you doing in a jeweller's shop this morning? I saw you come out. If you want to sell jewels, I can give you a better address."

"I did not sell jewels; I bought something."

Irene looked like a naughty child that has just been found out.

"You BOUGHT something? May I ask what you bought?"

"A wedding present for Ernestine Salt."

"At the jeweller's? What did you buy?"

"Only a small pendant—nothing expensive—tiny sapphires; it was quite cheap, really, Casimir."

"Don't you think that a bailiff's wife would have preferred sheets or tablecloths to a pendant?"

"But one always gives jewels or plate as a wedding present."

Casimir smiled.

"YOUR coloured prints, Irene. *One* gives jewels; that is to say, the Sternbachs have always received or given jewels or plate as a wedding present. You, too, cannot rid yourself of the past. What is poor Ernestine to do with the pendant? Have you booked it as advertising expenditure? How much did it cost?"

"A hundred and twenty *schillinge*."

"Good Lord! Last night you lost our best customer and this morning you go and squander a hundred and twenty *schillinge*!"

"Can't I even give a wedding present?" Irene asked mutinously.

"You're always forgetting business, Irene—business."

"But she was so pleased, poor soul."

Casimir smiled indulgently.

"I must say I'm glad I only invested my brains with you and not my capital. You would ruin a millionaire. Speaking of money, I was terribly unlucky at poker last

night, and I've asked Mary to dinner for to-night and need some money. . . ."

"Advertising expenditure?" Irene asked mockingly.

"Exactly! Could you let me have a small sum? Yes? Thank you. And now for goodness' sake take care not to lose Margot and young Rack. I've found out that she's even richer than we thought."

Irene clasped and unclasped her hands nervously.

"Do you know, I hate the whole thing. Margot is silly but nice. I'm afraid he'll make her unhappy."

"What business is that of ours?"

"After all, we're responsible. I mean . . ."

"Nonsense!"

Irene grew angry.

"Don't say 'nonsense.' After all, we're not hucksters, selling inferior articles at too high a price; and young Rack *is* an inferior article."

"Business," Casimir said severely.

"I never want to hear that odious word again. Everything is business, everything is for sale. Every man tries to cheat his neighbour. I'm fed up with it. I want to do something clean and decent. Something that does not harm anyone. When I'm a prof. I shall not have to cheat people. I wish I was one already."

Casimir looked at her compassionately.

"YOU ARE like your brother, worse luck. Well, go on training, so as to become a prof. as soon as ever you can. And give up business. You'll always be taken in."

"Not by you and Mary."

Casimir shook his head sadly.

"We'd begun so well. I really expected us to make money. But I ought to have known better. The coloured prints, the immortal coloured prints, beautifully framed in shells will bring us to rack and ruin. Yours, Irene, not mine."

* * *

"Irene," Nora said, "to-morrow Margot and young Rack are coming to dinner; that's to say he's only coming after dinner. Perhaps something will happen."

"Perhaps."

Irene did not sound encouraging.

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing. I'm in a bad temper."

"Why?"

"I can't explain. The business is getting on my nerves."

"But think of Miss Salt; haven't we done her a good turn?"

"It certainly did not put money in our pocket."

Nevertheless, Irene cheered up. Ernestine Salt as a fiancée was really an exhilarating sight. For the very first time in her life she had become somebody; she felt herself beloved, desired, as if she had been a beautiful woman. . . . She could hardly believe it; she hardly dared believe that her empty, desolate life had changed—that lace-making and the Widow Ledger were things of the past.

She never noticed that Mr. Bite was small, elderly and shabby. To her he looked like one of the heroes she had read about at school—powerful, gallant and imposing. He explained the mysteries of his profession to her, and she listened with passionate interest. She even thought debts and seizures delightful as long as it was Theodore—no longer Mr. Bite—who talked about them. Mr. Bite, on his side, basked in the admiration of his fiancée; he did not mind the rudeness of his chief any longer who, poor man, had never been able to see what a fine fellow Mr. Bite really was. Had he not been a fine fellow, surely such a clever and charming girl would never have consented to marry him. They passed their time admiring one another, and were as happy as only people who know themselves admired, can be.

The Widow Ledger allowed them to spend the evenings in her sitting-room. She had just lost two lodgers, and hoped that the couple would rent the empty rooms. Ernestine and Mr. Bite sat hand-in-hand on the old sofa and made plans for their home and for a holiday in the country as soon as they had put away enough money. Mr. Bite brought along his guide books, and they spent their future honeymoon in countries they would never see. Ernestine showed lace patterns to her fiancé, and he nodded appreciatively: "Lovely, really lovely."

Sometimes the landlady would come with a pot of coffee and all three would sit together drinking it, whilst Ernestine asked herself how she could ever have been afraid of the kindly woman.

And then wedding presents! Ernestine kept them in her chest of drawers. When Mr. Bite had said good night she took them out and gloated over them. Mr. Bite's colleagues had sent salt cellars and sugar tongs; the Widow Ledger had presented her lodger with a sofa cushion; Mr. Hirsch, the owner of the firm for which Ernestine worked, had given her a tea-service; one of the sales-women had sent a cosy; and then there was the pendant, given by the Sternbachs. . . . Ernestine, who had never had a present since her mother died, was as happy as a child.

"But the most beautiful present of all," she kept repeating, "is the one Count Ponitzky sent."

She gazed lovingly at two coloured prints framed in shells—the one representing Faust and Gretchen, the other the Eiffel Tower. Casimir had hunted high and low for the cheerful wounded warrior nursed by a pretty girl, but had not been able to find him.

CHAPTER XVI

"OTTOKAR, your dinner jacket is getting terribly shabby," Irene said to her brother.

"I know; Huber told me so," he replied with a wry smile.

"You must get a new one."

Ottokar laughed.

"You keep forgetting that we've no money."

"I don't. But you must dress decently."

"Irene," Ottokar grew serious, "don't talk nonsense. You haven't the slightest idea what it means not to have money."

"I have. I always travel by tram."

"If you're not in a hurry and take a taxi!" Nora said tactlessly.

Irene turned round and glowered at her.

"Money! It's always money! I'm fed up with it. As if money wasn't something vulgar and unimportant."

"As long as you have got enough of it."

Nora knew what she was talking about. She remembered life at home, remembered how her mother had sighed when her daughter had wanted a new frock; how they had talked it over, trying to find out the cheapest shop. She recalled the endless discussions whether it would be wiser not to buy the eggs in the dairy, but from the man who had a chicken farm and who came twice a week. He asked less but then, of course, he did not take back the rotten eggs. . . . Yet she had never known real poverty. They had had their own house; they had never starved. Nora looked pityingly at Ottokar and Irene. What did they both know about it?

Ottokar was already regretting his unkindness, and tried to change the subject.

"Tell me, was one of your guests or whatever you call them, a preacher? Wait a moment! What was his name?" He pulled out a letter. "John B. Daniel. You've been having such a queer crew in the house that I get terribly mixed up."

"The gangster!" Irene cried.

"Gangster? Irene, Nora, did you invite a gangster? Look here, that's rather too much of a good thing."

"He isn't a real gangster," Nora interposed hastily. "Irene only . . ."

"Have we also got a fence, a burglar and a well-known pickpocket amongst our guests?" Ottokar asked despairingly. "Of course I knew at once that Ponitzky was a swindler, but he's a delightful chap all the same, and I really like him. But a gangster? Irene, Nora, that's going too far, my dears. And I've gone and asked the man to dinner to-night. I had a letter from him, telling me that he had met Aunt Yetta at Naples and that he had a message from her. He's leaving to-morrow, and he asked whether he could see me to-day. And now he turns out to be a gangster!"

"No, no, Ottokar, it was a mistake. Listen, I'll explain."

But Irene had no time for explaining. Huber threw open the doors and announced Margot, who was followed by the Rev. Mr. Daniel.

Ottokar felt uncomfortable. After all, the man was his guest and he had to be pleasant, even if Mr. Daniel was a gangster. His thoughts wandered vaguely to Al Capone, moonshiners and gunmen. . . . In his mind's eye he saw the Reverend John B. Daniel commanding a gang of murderers, bribing officials, kidnapping innocent children and lovely maidens. Irene was too bad; one really could not make friends with a gangster, could not receive him, and one certainly should not place one's brother in a position in which he has to be charming to a gangster.

Margot seemed rather disappointed at not seeing Mr. Rack. She kept glancing towards the door, and when Huber announced dinner, she looked decidedly annoyed. At dinner she hardly said a word; Ottokar tried to make conversation, but it was uphill work, for the pretty woman only answered with a yes or a no. He also noticed that she hardly ate anything. Irene was chatting with the gangster, merrily, almost familiarly. We must have had a criminal in the family, Ottokar thought, and he is coming out in my sister. Goodness alone knows what she's up to now. She's talking to the man as if they shared a secret. He tried in vain to remember a criminal ancestor. Maybe he would have to go back as far as the robber-knights, or even further. But why had Irene inherited the criminal bent and not he?

Greatly worried, he turned to his silent neighbour. A pretty woman, a charming woman, but terribly absent-minded.

Irene had also noticed Margot's absent-mindedness, and whispered to Nora on leaving the dining-room:

"She looks as if she were in love."

"Touch wood."

The gangster said:

"I'd like to talk to you about an idea of mine, Count Sternbach. A plan that might interest you."

Ottokar felt shocked. Did he really look as if he were likely to work with a gangster?

"Let's go to the library, Mr. Daniel," he said. "We won't bore the ladies talking shop. But I'm afraid . . . I . . . I shall hardly be the right man for you."

Huber came in with the black coffee looking upset, and said to Nora:

"Countess Sternbach, you must excuse me, but the child is crying and won't stop. I'm afraid that there's something the matter with the boy. Would you be so kind as . . ."

"Of course. Come along, we'll see what's wrong. Irene, you must amuse Mrs. Wiker. I've got to go and have a look at Huber's little boy. I'll be back at once."

Irene and Margot remained alone in the drawing-room. Irene looked at the other woman, and something stirred in her. Not the criminal bent that had frightened Ottokar, but something much more dangerous and more likely to do her harm in our days of mad selfishness; love for her neighbour—the same love that had, centuries ago, induced an ancestress of hers to give up her home, her country, all that made life pleasant and beautiful to go and nurse lepers in a leper colony.

"How pretty you are to-night," Irene said.

Notwithstanding her thirty-three years, Margot blushed like a schoolgirl.

"Do you think so? I'm glad."

She smiled.

"Perhaps it's because I have at last made up my mind."

"Oh, you've made up your mind?"

Irene knew only too well what that meant.

"Yes. You may have noticed, Countess Irene, that Mr. Rack has been making love to me. . . . But of course you've noticed it. After all, it's your business."

How vulgar she is, Irene thought crossly. Why should I care what happens to her? Let her marry the young brute. After all, we want the money badly.

Unfortunately Margot went on talking.

"I . . ." she smiled shyly, "I should so love to be happy. . . ."

"Most people do."

"I know, but then I've never been really happy. My late husband . . . he was twenty years older than I and terribly jealous. He only married me because he wanted to have a good-looking hostess for his dinner parties. When I married, dinner parties were still very important. But young Rack is different. He's so idealistic. I really

believe he does not even know that I'm rich. He told me the other day that I inspired him, that he could work much better when he knew I was there. Don't you think, Countess Irene, that one hardly ever meets a man like him? An absolutely unselfish man, who only lives for his work? You must not laugh at me, but I'd give anything to be the wife of such a man."

Irene did not feel like laughing. She saw in her mind's eye Ottokar's shabby dinner jacket and the ledger in which only a single sum remained: Margot's fortune. I am not going to be sentimental, she told herself angrily. But looking at the other woman she saw on her pretty face the same expression she had seen on Ernestine Salt's when she had come into the hall on the day of the picnic.

Irene suddenly felt sick. If only I could run away and not come back, she thought. Then she heard herself say:

"Mrs. Wiker, dear Mrs. Wiker, you must not marry Mr. Rack."

Margot stared at her.

"Why?"

"He's sure to make you unhappy."

"You're thinking that I am a few years older than he? Nonsense? At your age, Countess Irene, one always thinks that matters a lot, but after thirty one knows that as long as a woman is pretty . . ."

"It isn't that. I . . . look here, I must tell you the truth. The other day Mr. Rack asked me whether Mrs. Ride was richer than you. If she was, he was going to decide on marrying her. . . . You don't believe me? It's true, nevertheless. That's the unselfish young idealist who lives only for his work. If Mrs. Ride had accepted him, he would have given you up without a pang."

Margot changed colour; on her pale cheeks the rouge stood out a burning red. She looked like a frightened doll.

"He'll only squander your money," Irene said passionately. "He'll neglect you. He'll spend your money on other women; he'll . . ."

Irene broke off seeing with a shock that Margot's eyes had filled with tears. If she cries, all the colour will come off her lashes, the girl thought compassionately. It must be awful not to be able to cry because one has to think of one's eyelashes.

"Is that really true?"

"It is. You must believe me. Don't take it to heart. The man's not worth it. And don't cry, please, don't cry. You're so pretty and crying . . . crying always spoils one's complexion."

"Especially if it comes out of a pot."

Margot's voice had grown hard and cynical.

"You're quite right, my child; I can't afford a husband who makes me weep."

She remained silent for a short while. Then she asked:

"Why did you tell me? After all my marriage with Rack would have put quite a lot of money into your pocket."

"I did not want to tell you," Irene confessed. "But . . . somehow I could not help doing it."

Margot looked at her strangely.

"So there really are some people left who don't only think of getting money? Who even care what happens to you? Don't look so grieved, my child; I'm not broken-hearted. Of course it was rather a facer. . . . But now I'll enjoy snubbing the young man."

She smiled and said gaily:

"You're not exactly a good business woman, Countess Irene. If you go on like this, I'm afraid the agency won't make you rich."

"The coloured prints," Irene murmured dreamily. "The immortal, indestructible coloured prints."

Margot got up and taking hold of both her hands, suddenly kissed her:

"You're a darling," she said, choking over the words.

"I'm afraid our partner will call me a fool," Irene replied woefully, imagining Casimir's face when she told him.

* * *

Whilst Irene was proving Ottokar's belief in the doctrine of heredity to be true, he was sitting in the library with Mr. Daniel, trying to discover criminal traits in the man from Chicago. It was uphill work. Mr. Daniel talked about Ottokar's aunt and her gallant bearing, about Naples and the beauty of Italy, about Facism and other systems.

When, Ottokar asked himself, will he come down to brass tacks? A gangster who waxes enthusiastic speaking of the Bay of Naples, who is shocked by the poverty of our country . . . ? What a queer gangster.

At last the cue came :

"Your aunt told me that you were interested in medicine, Count Sternbach, and that you are studying for an examination."

That's it; he wants to find out whether I can get drugs for him.

"I shan't pass my examination for another six months."

"I know."

What an organization! Ottokar felt astounded. The man is counting upon a chance that cannot be realized for another six months.

"As things are in this country," the man from Chicago said, "it won't be easy for you to find a job."

Ottokar sat back in his chair and lit a cigarette.

"I suppose not," he replied coldly.

"How are you going to live in the meantime?"

"That's my affair."

"I want to propose something to you, Count Sternbach."

"I'm afraid I shan't be able to accept your proposal."

"Why?"

The man from Chicago looked surprised. "You don't even know what I am going to say."

"I can imagine it."

"Did your aunt mention it in her letters?"

"My aunt? You don't mean to say that you dared to talk to her about that kind of thing?"

"Why not? I really cannot understand . . ."

Ottokar lost his temper.

"You're my guest, Mr. Daniel, and I don't want to be rude. Nevertheless, I must tell you that one of the worst crimes in my eyes is illicit drug traffic. It's as bad as murder—no, it's even worse—because it ruins thousands and ten thousands of men, body and soul. Just because a few criminals want to get rich quickly."

"That's what I always say, Count Sternbach. I don't believe that any one in the States has fought the drug racket harder than I. But what makes you think of drugs?"

"You . . . you . . . but if you What on earth do you want me to do?"

The man from Chicago seemed bewildered.

"You thought . . . you believed . . ."

He burst out laughing.

"I seem to be unlucky in dealing with your family. Your charming sister took me for a gangster, and you believe that I want you to sell drugs! It certainly does not make life any easier when a man hails from Chicago."

Ottokar was put out of countenance. He gazed at Mr. Daniel with a helpless look.

"Listen, my young friend: I'm neither a gangster, nor a bootlegger, nor a drug seller. Neither do I sell

innocent young girls to South America, nor kidnap children; and I've never bribed anyone in my whole life. If you remember some more crimes you believe me to have committed, say so. If not . . ."

"I really don't know what to say. . . ."

"Then don't say anything and listen to me. I talked over my idea with your aunt, and she agreed with me. I want you to . . ."

And then the man from Chicago began talking and Ottokar listened, growing more and more interested and more and more pleased.

"Well, what about it, Count Sternbach?"

"I really don't know how to thank you. Of course I agree. It's so kind of you to wait for six months, but perhaps I can pass my examination in five."

"That's your affair. In the meantime you'll have to manage somehow. I'm a business man and not a philanthropist. You can't expect me to pay before having received the goods."

"Of course not."

"And now might I ask you for a bottle of beer? I'm going back in a week, and I must drink my fill before leaving Europe. I shan't be back for three months, so I've no time to lose."

Ottokar rang for Huber and told him to bring three bottles of beer.

* * *

Mr. Rack was blissfully happy. Never had Margot Wiker been so charming and so kind. Never had her lovely eyes rested on his face with so tender an expression. How much a month will she let me have? he asked himself. Five hundred, a thousand? Surely more than that. The woman's madly in love with me; she'll never say no when I ask for money. And he continued to tell

her how he despised money—filthy lucre he called it—how he hated the idea of ever being rich, how sorry he felt for the poor, and how all his writing was but an appeal to humanity for social justice. Margot smiled sweetly and repeated from time to time:

"How right you are. How I admire your unselfishness."

Nora watched them, feeling almost as happy as Mr. Rack. She too was doing sums in her head. The bogey of poverty seemed to be vanishing for ever: Margot Wiker and Mr. Rack, Casimir and Mrs. Ride—why they would be able to live for at least a year on the commissions. And much can happen in a year. Her idea had been excellent after all. Ottokar would not be able to make fun of her any longer. Perhaps it would be a good thing not to give up the matrimonial agency: to go on making money.

Margot got up.

"I've really got to go," she said.

"May I come with you?" Mr. Rack asked eagerly.

"Do."

Margot winked at Irene and the girl understood. Of course, she will let him have it in the car when he's got to listen and cannot run away. Good for Margot.

Margot kissed Irene good-bye, and Mr. Rack, watching her radiant face, thought: How happy she is; expecting me, no doubt, to propose to her on the way home.

He took his leave in rather an arrogant manner, for, after all, the Sternbachs were poor and had to work for their living whilst he would shortly be not only a famous author but also an exceedingly rich man.

Mr. Daniel said good-bye in a cheerful mood. He had drunk three bottles of beer and was feeling good.

Nora yawned.

"Let's go to bed. I'm dead tired."

Ottokar shook his head.

"Just a moment. Why on earth did you tell me that the American was a gangster?" he asked.

"We never told you so."

"You called him 'the gangster,' and I nearly made an awful mess of things. You must really be more careful."

"Irene . . ." Nora said hesitatingly.

"Yes, Ottokar, you're right; but, after all, anyone might have made the same mistake. When Nora's pearls . . ."

"Nora's pearls?" he interrupted her.

"Yes, after one of our parties they had disappeared. We did not want to make a fuss . . . so I took your Browning and went to the Semmering. . . . And I accused Mr. Daniel . . . and then he wasn't a gangster after all."

"You took my Browning and threatened a most respectable man with a gun! Irene! I wish I could send you to a convent for good. If the man had not got a sense of humour. . . ."

"But we had to try to recover the pearls. We might have to sell them one day. Ottokar, I believe Mr. Gedecke stole them."

"Stole them? What ARE you talking about?"

"Anyhow they've disappeared."

"I can't believe it."

Nora grew impatient.

"Surely I ought to know whether I've got my pearls, or whether they are lost."

Ottokar grinned.

"Do you want to know where your pearls are? In the safe in the library. You probably played with them as you always do, and the fastening came undone. I found them lying on the sofa and put them away."

"And you never told me!"

"I forgot all about it. So many things have happened in between. You know I'm absent-minded. . . . I'm sorry, Nora."

Nora smiled, but Irene burst out:

"How could you, Ottokar? Just imagine if I had gone and told Mr. Gedecke to give back the pearls. Just think what ghastly consequences your silly absent-mindedness might have had."

"And your impulsiveness."

"Don't quarrel. We've got the pearls and the gangster—sorry, Mr. Daniel—has forgiven you, Irene, and to-night we brought off a good thing."

The telephone rang and Irene took up the receiver.

"Irene Sternbach speaking. Oh, it's you, Margot? What happened? Did everything go well . . .? What did you say . . .? He jumped out. . . . The car was driving at top speed. . . . Good . . .! Yes, I'm delighted. I'll come and see you to-morrow. You must tell me all about it. So long. Good night, my dear."

"Have they become engaged?" Nora asked joyfully.

"Engaged? She told him to go to the devil, and it seems he went."

"Are you mad? Everybody could see that she . . ."

Irene blushed; she hung her head and looked guilty.

"Nora darling; don't be angry. . . . But I could not help it. . . . I simply had to tell her the truth about the young brute; I had to warn her. It would have been too beastly of me if . . . Why are you laughing, Ottokar?"

"Yes, I really can't understand your laughing," Nora said mournfully. "Our last chance but one. And we can't even claim the dole."

"Ottokar, will you stop laughing at once. I really don't see anything funny in all this. Stop, I say. What ARE you laughing at?"

"Your criminal bent, Irene, that I've been trying to discover."

"You've either taken leave of your senses or you're drunk."

Irene gazed anxiously at her brother who was still

shaken with laughter. Then, putting her arm round Nora's shoulder, she said coaxingly :

"Darling, please forgive me."

"Oh, all right," her sister-in-law said despondently. "But I really don't know what to do now."

"We'll find ways and means. . . . Ottokar, if you don't stop laughing at once I'll murder you."

But even this threat did not sober her brother. Sinking on the sofa he choked and gurgled helplessly.

Irene flew into a rage.

"Intercourse with a gangster seems to make a brute of a man even if the gangster is not a gangster," she declared cryptically, and drew Nora out of the room.

CHAPTER XVII

NOT even in her wildest flights of imagination had Ernestine ever dreamt that even if she found a husband—and what an *IF* that had been—her wedding would be a social event. But Irene had undertaken all the arrangements. She had decided that the wedding dinner would be at their house. ("Nothing matters any longer," she had said to Nora and Ottokar. "We may just as well squander a little more.")

"I wish I knew what you mean when you say 'a little more,'" Ottokar said gloomily. "How many people have you invited?"

"Old Schiro, Miriam and Tom, Casimir and his lady-love—I really can't call her a girl friend—and Margot. I don't know whom Ernestine has asked."

"Do you really think Ernestine's friends will get on with our clients?" Nora said nervously. "You know what snobs they are."

"We'll learn 'em," Irene said vulgarly. "Don't worry. Leave it to me."

Ernestine was surprised to see how many friends she had—friends who, wishing no doubt not to appear too forward, had carefully kept in the background, although they had, according to their own words, "Always been so fond of dear Miss Salt."

"Of course I shall come to your wedding, my dear child," the Widow Leger had said graciously. "Surely I cannot desert you on the most important day of your life. You know that I have always had a mother's heart for you, dear child."

Talking in the shop for which she worked about her wedding and the dinner at the Sternbachs, Ernestine was astounded to hear old Mr. Hirsch say :

"What about me, Miss Salt? Aren't you going to invite me to the wedding? After all, we've been friends for ages."

Ernestine invited Mr. Hirsch and the pretty fair shop-girl who had sent her a cosy. It was wonderful to be able to invite people or to ignore their hints, and still more wonderful to say :

"After the wedding there will be a wedding dinner at Countess Sternbach's. Just the family and a few intimate friends."

Mr. Bite asked humbly whether he too might invite a few friends.

"Goodness," Irene said, after having told him to ask whomever he wanted to. "Just imagine, Nora, all the bailiffs of Vienna coming to dinner!"

"I'm not going to imagine anything," Nora was in a bad temper. "You've promised to look after everything. I'll order dinner; that's all you can expect me to do."

Nora had been moody and depressed for days. Strange to say, Ottokar seemed more cheerful than his wont.

Of course, Nora thought bitterly, he's looking forward to getting rid of me as soon as there is no money left and I have to go home. That's what he calls love. And Irene is just as bad. As if we did not belong together at all. . . . But perhaps no one ever does belong. . . . Yet, when I think of my people. . . . She sighed. What a muddle life was.

* * *

During the wedding Irene sat beside Miriam and the journalist.

"Isn't it exactly like the last chapter of a Victorian novel?" she whispered into Miriam's ear. "The organ throbs heart-rendingly the Wedding March from *Lobengrin*—ghastly, but Ernestine would have it—the Vicar is encouraging them to be fruitful in procreation. . . . Just imagine a world peopled by little Bites!"

"Who gave her that lovely veil? It's real lace."

"Mr. Hirsch, the old gentleman in the second pew, the only one except Ottokar who looks like a gentleman. . . . Good gracious, look at your father, Miriam! What is the matter with him?"

Old Schiro was sitting in the front row. Hearing the Vicar's appeal to Ernestine and Mr. Bite to be fruitful, he took out his handkerchief and blew his nose. A moment later he wiped his eyes.

"Poor father," Miriam said wistfully. "He's miserable because these two people are being married in church, and he's thinking: 'Of course, my only daughter. . . .'"

"Look, Miriam, all the wedding guests seem to think that it's a funeral. Nora is crying and Kicki Kater too, the young man six foot two is sobbing bitterly, and Mrs. Ride is wiping her eyes. A cheerful crew!"

She looked round.

"The bailiffs aren't crying as far as I can see," she

said with a sigh of relief. "But I suppose their profession has made them callous. Ottokar is certainly looking solemn. Dear me, there's young Mann. I never invited him. What a cheek. Why did he come to the wedding?"

"You'll find out at dinner," Miriam said teasingly.

"Do tell me. . . . Oh, Miriam, I always thought you two were moderns of moderns, and now you're sitting hand-in-hand! Are you going to weep too?"

Miriam blushed, but Tom Bright did not let her hand go, but said with a smile:

"Surely one can be fond of one another without all that fuss."

The organ was playing the Mendelssohn Wedding March—Irene's choice. Then the newly-wedded couple left the church and drove off in old Schiro's car.

Irene was unlucky. There were not enough cars to go round, and she had to drive back in a taxi with old Schiro.

"Why wasn't it my daughter?" the old gentleman said reproachfully.

Feeling guilty Irene remained silent.

"If only I could see my little girl standing with her young man in the synagogue, how happy I should be. A bailiff, not that I want to be unkind, but after all, a bailiff. . . . Yet he's been married in church. . . . And Miriam. . . . The Bite's have no money; what's the good of poverty marrying poverty? Whereas my daughter would have had a fortune on her wedding day. . . . And I should have died happy."

"You'll go on living for ages, dear Mr. Schiro."

"One can never tell. Anyway, I should have died happy. Miriam would have been provided for, and she'd have had a good husband. I like the young man, if only he had not got such crazy ideas. And I should have loved to have grand-children. . . . I'm an old man. . . ." Mr. Schiro blew his nose noisily. "A poor old man with

an only child. . . . You can't understand. Just wait till you have a daughter of your own."

"Don't you think it's rather premature to marry off my daughter?"

"All my brothers and sisters, all my relations are horrified. That kind of thing has never happened in our family. They keep telling me not to permit it. . . . My dear mother. . . ."

"I know, I know," Irene interrupted him hastily. She knew all about old Schiro's dear mother.

"You don't know. You cannot imagine the scandal."

"Mr. Schiro," Irene said desperately. "Must I explain to you how things are nowadays? Don't you know that the rich are always right? What would have been regarded as a scandal if Miriam were poor will be merely a pardonable eccentricity. Of course, if she were a kitchen maid, all the respectable wives who commit adultery in secret would tear her to pieces like wild beasts, but Miriam, being your daughter. . . ."

Old Schiro wiped his eyes.

"It's not decent for a young girl to talk about adultery," he said crossly.

"Don't forget that we have got a matrimonial agency which is always a kind of preparatory school for that kind of thing."

Irene, who was terribly afraid old Schiro would begin to cry in earnest, wanted to shock him.

The old gentleman was shocked. He put his handkerchief into his pocket and gave her a piece of his mind. Irene listened meekly without saying a word. She was glad when at last the car turned into the drive.

* * *

Ernestine sat at the head of the table between her husband and Ottokar. She felt terribly important. How

delightful it was to feel important. The wedding dinner was being given in her honour, and for her sake her husband's colleagues had been invited—the nice, honourable men who otherwise would never have had a chance to dine with the best people. Even Mrs. Ledger owed the pleasure to her. Rather a good thing too, as she and Theodore had rented the two empty rooms, use of kitchen and bath—always a risky thing. But if ever the Widow Ledger dared to be rude, Ernestine would gently remind her of her friend, Countess Sternbach, and the landlady would pipe down at once. As long as I live, Ernestine thought blissfully, I shall not have to knuckle under to anyone. For a moment she wondered if she could not have made a better match, a girl whose best friends belonged to the aristocracy. . . . After all, she came from a good family; her late father would have said that she had made a misalliance.

Looking down her eyes fell upon the plain gold ring on her finger. She had never hoped to wear the symbol of wedded love. A tender smile lit up her face, and she pressed Theodore's hand under the table.

Ottokar chatted gaily with the bride, but he was far from feeling happy. Coming back from church, Nora had whispered to him:

"You'll have to make a speech."

He racked his brains. What on earth was he to say? He had never made a speech, and the most absurd ideas flashed through his brain. I do hope, he thought, I shan't say: I drink the health of all the bailiffs who have honoured us by coming to our house. We can never be grateful enough for their beneficial labour. . . . I must also be careful not to talk of the holiness of matrimony, so as not to hurt old Schiro. . . . And I must not say anything that might be taken as a political allusion; people are always imagining that nowadays. . . . Dear me, what am I to say?

His eyes roved over the dining table Irene had charmingly decorated with flowers. Two people were looking absolutely happy: Mr. Bite and the Widow Ledger. Mr. Bite's colleagues seemed shy. They bowed stiffly whenever Nora or Irene addressed them, and answered in monosyllables. Old Schiro's face made one think of a funeral. Casimir looked respectable and well-to-do. He's grown stouter, Ottokar thought. Young Mann was chatting with Kicki Kater, and the six foot two young gentleman seemed annoyed. How queer! Somehow all these people strike me as rather pathetic, Ottokar went on philosophizing. He caught the glance of haughty disdain and outraged virtue that Ernestine threw at Kicki Kater, and felt irritated. The State ought not to . . . at least the State ought not to tax those poor devils. . . . His thoughts ran riot: what happened when a bailiff had the bailiffs in? Surely that must happen sometimes. . . . Does the "officiating" bailiff suddenly grasp what an odious profession he has chosen? Why do the bailiff's frock coats look so wistful? And young Mann's single eye-glass—poor chap he is not even capable of holding it in his eye—somehow looks wistful too. And why do I feel as if I were at a puppet show? Of course, I know the reason: all these people want all the others to believe that they are richer and grander than they are . . . none of them has the pluck to be what he really is, except Mr. Bite and Kicki Kater. . . . Perhaps that's one of the reasons why the world is in such a mess. . . . Perhaps, if . . .

Huber, coming up behind him filled his glass, and said under his breath:

"Countess Irene says you really must make a speech. You cannot put it off any longer."

"Huber," Ottokar whispered back in dismay, "what am I to say? Do help me. Have you ever made a speech?"

"Once, at the jubilee of our skittle-club."

"Skittles? That's no good to me."

"Buck up, Count Ottokar. The guests will applaud whatever you say."

Ottokar got up very slowly, lifted his glass and looked round helplessly. Huber remained standing behind his chair, ready to come to his aid.

"Ladies and gentlemen," Ottokar began, "we have met to celebrate . . . two dear friends of ours have to-day been united in holy matrimony . . ."

He saw old Schiro's reproachful face and grew confused.

" . . . Life, ladies and gentlemen, is like a game of skittles. The ball rolls . . ."

He caught Irene's angry look. Skittles did not seem an appropriate subject. He blundered on:

"Marriage, dear friends, is like a democratic republic, both partners enjoying the same rights and . . ."

Young Mann was grinning scornfully and looking as if he were going to heckle.

Ottokar grew annoyed.

"Ladies and gentlemen, I feel greatly honoured to congratulate the newly-wedded couple. When I think of the beneficent work the bridegroom is doing for the community . . ."

The devil, just what he had wanted to avoid saying. . . . The bailiffs looked pleased, but the other guests were staring at him in amazement.

"Every work is beneficent," Ottokar went on in despair, "But none more so than the one connected with marriage. . . ."

He stopped dead, frightened by the shocked expression on the Widow Ledger's face.

Huber prompted him:

"I propose the health of the newly wedded couple. . . ."

With a sigh of relief Ottokar almost shouted the words. The glasses clinked merrily, and he sat down.

Miriam, Irene and Tom Bright were choking with suppressed laughter, and Huber whispered:

"I must say, of all the speeches I've ever heard . . . ! If only I'd known what a bad speaker you are, Count Ottokar, I'd have rehearsed the speech with you."

Casimir got to his feet. He was not embarrassed in the least. His speech was amusing and full of tact. He did not hurt anyone's feelings. Ottokar could not help admiring him.

Mr. Bite got up to express his thanks. He too stammered and stuttered, and the guests grinned ill-naturedly. But when he, waiving all rhetorical ambition, spoke with a trembling voice of the great happiness God had given him, Nora felt a lump in her throat, and old Schiro once again felt for his handkerchief.

After that everyone seemed to make a speech. The bailiffs spoke, old Schiro enlarged upon the holiness of matrimony, young Mann declared that Austria and her great sister Germany wanted a new and valiant generation in case of having to wage war. It was an unlucky speech; most of the guests looked perplexed and uncomfortable, but the worst was yet to come. Irene got to her feet:

"Women are not supposed to make speeches, but I'm going to make one, nevertheless. All of you have said nice and wise things, with one exception: the man who talked so foolishly about the valiant, strong new generation in case of a war. Just because I am a woman, I must reply to that. And I shall answer these wicked words with a question addressed to my fellow women: When are you going to refuse having children so as to give cannon fodder to an aggressor State? And when are young fools who know nothing about it going to stop glorifying war? When . . . ?"

Miriam caught hold of her arm and whispered:

"For goodness' sake, shut up. That really does not belong here."

Irene laughed.

"I've just been told that my words are not suited to the occasion. I don't agree, but I give in. I only want to say one thing more: may our dear friends enjoy all the blessings of peace and be very happy."

Nora rose hastily and led the way into the big drawing-room. Young Mann joined the bailiffs who had applauded his speech, and began talking eagerly to them.

A most respectable-looking old bailiff sat down beside Ottokar.

"I liked what you said about the democratic republic, Count Sternbach. It was excellent. Only democracy can save the world from disaster. But I'd never have expected to meet sympathy for my ideas in so grand a house.

Casimir drew Irène into a corner.

"Have the Sternbachs ever produced statesmen?" he asked maliciously. "Or only diplomats? After hearing you and your brother speak, I assume the latter."

One of Mr. Bite's colleagues who had drunk too much sat apart, and, nodding gaily, talked to himself:

"Life is like a game of skittles," he repeated. "What a wonderful comparison. Really wonderful. . . . Skittles, the ball, life. . . . I wonder, dare I ask the Count to become a member of our skittle club? It would be fine to have a Count as a member. Skittles. . . . Life and the ball rolling. . . ."

"Where are the van Dams?" Ottokar asked Nora as soon as he had got rid of the respectable old bailiff. "Didn't you invite them?"

"Are you missing Nantje? What a pity. They went back to Holland the day before yesterday. If only I had known. . . ."

She turned away, but Ottokar took hold of her arm.

"Why are you angry with me, dear? We've been getting on so well during the last weeks. . . ."

"If that's your idea of getting on well with a woman.

. . . You neglect me, you spend the whole day in the lab. and the evening in your study. . . . I'm fed up. . . . You and Irene treat me as if I were the housekeeper. And you aren't even polite enough to hide your wish to get rid of me. . . . Yes, I know you do . . . don't contradict me. . . . But I'm not going to stand it any longer."

She turned her back upon him and went and sat beside the Widow Ledger.

"What a lovely wedding," the old lady said. "I'm so glad, for Ernestine's sake. You can't imagine, Countess Sternbach, how fond I am of dear Ernestine. From the very first day she came to live with me I felt like a mother towards her. If one has got to let rooms. . . . My dear husband was Councillor of State, and my late father was dentist to the King of Saxony. . . . I'm sure you can understand how hard it is upon me. . . . But what can one expect in a world that no longer believes in morals and kings?"

Old Schiro was sitting with his undutiful daughter and her young man.

"If it had been your wedding, Miriam," he said sadly.

"For goodness' sake, Father, there you go again. . . ."

"When I think of you, my child, my heart feels like breaking."

"Nonsense, Daddy! Your heart isn't going to break. You're glad that I'm happy. Besides, just think what a lot of money you're saving by not having to give me a dowry."

"I'm so sorry to grieve you, Mr. Schiro," Tom Bright said kindly, "but what am I to do as long as Miriam refuses to get properly married?"

Old Schiro looked at the young man, and his face grew hopeful.

"You would not mind marrying her?"

"Of course not. I'm not as old-fashioned as Miriam, who thinks herself a heroine because she refuses to be married like anybody else. I'd much rather . . ."

"Tom, if you say such things I shall run away."

He laughed.

"I'll fetch you back."

Old Schiro suddenly looked years younger. He gazed at them both, feeling immensely relieved.

"Perhaps you'll change your mind," he said tentatively, looking at his daughter with an imploring glance.

"Look here, Daddy, if you'll give up being the unforgiving parent and come and see us, we'll talk it over." She smiled tenderly; she was very fond of the old man. "Listen! What would you say if I got married in the synagogue as a birthday present for my moral old father? After all, your birthday is at the end of next month, so you'll just have time to buy me a wonderful trousseau."

"Oh, my darling!"

Old Schiro choked over the words. He put out his hands and held Miriam's and Tom's tightly:

"My dear children, you have made me very happy."

"Of course, now you'll have to pay up," said Miriam teasingly. "The matrimonial agency won't let you get off so easily."

Old Schiro frowned.

"I'm not so sure about that. After all, they made a mess of things and you will have been living with Tom for almost six weeks without. . . . All right, dear, I won't scold; you know I only want you to be happy. . . ."

Irene was angrily watching Casimir. Why didn't the man look after their guests? She saw him walk up to Nora, followed by Mrs. Ride.

"Our turn next, Countess," he said. "Mrs. Ride has just promised to be my wife."

"All the best."

Nora was really pleased. Ten thousand *schillinge* commission! She shook Mrs. Ride's hand almost affectionately, meaning every word of congratulation.

"We won't have a smart wedding," Casimir said. "Just a quiet affair."

"Yes," Mrs. Ride added with a smile. "After all, we're not exactly in our 'teens."

"Besides a smart wedding is very expensive," Casimir said.

Nora looked her surprise.

"Casimir is very economical," Mrs. Ride remarked. "It's one of his good qualities."

"One has to be economical," her fiancé declared. "One never knows what is going to happen. A nest egg for rainy days is always a good thing."

Nora felt slightly bewildered. Irene would have understood Casimir's change of heart. Being at last face to face with security and a peaceful life, he had once more become the small official with the small official's dread of the future. The older Casimir grew, the stronger that feeling would become. The former swindler would have a sole aim in life: security at any price.

The wedding guests had eaten and drunk their fill, and were growing sleepy. The dark November afternoon began to flow into the black river of night. All the lamps were lit.

Huber came with the tea.

"Why don't the people go?" Irene asked Huber in a whisper.

"The newly-weds have to go first," he whispered back. "At least, that's the custom."

But the "newly-weds" seemed inclined to stay on for ever. Ernestine was holding court. All the guests came up to her and said something flattering. She sensed that this was the day of her life, that never again she would feel as important, as grand as to-day. She did not intend to lose a single instance of that wonderful experience.

At last even she was satiated.

The "young" couple and the Widow Ledger drove

home in old Schiro's car. They walked upstairs together. The Widow Ledger stopped on the landing and smiled coyly.

"You must be longing to be alone," she said, and kissed Ernestine tenderly. Then she disappeared into her room.

The Bites' new flat was decorated with garlands of paper roses. On the door hung a white board with the words "Welcome Home" framed in forget-me-nots and carnations and ivy. The garlands were a present from Mr. Bite's colleagues, the board had been the Widow Ledger's idea.

"How lovely," Mr. Bite said, deeply moved.

"Beautiful," Ernestine murmured.

They stood in the sitting-room, looking at each other and feeling rather shy.

Mr. Bite felt he ought to be passionately loving, but he had eaten and drunk such a lot that he felt sleepy, and only wanted to go to bed as soon as possible. Ernestine was waiting for his love-making and asking herself how an innocent maiden—for after all she was as innocent as a child—behaves when her bridegroom is moved to passion. Seeing that Mr. Bite remained standing on the same spot and did not betray any signs of overwhelming passion, she felt slightly disappointed.

There was a knock at the door, and the Widow Ledger put her head into the room.

"Excuse my disturbing you, but I thought you might like a cup of tea. It would do you good after all the excitement.

"Oh, thank you," Ernestine said, and went to fetch the new tea service Mr. Hirsch had given her.

Then she took off her veil.

The widow brought a tray with tea and pastry. Ernestine drew a small table up to the fire.

"Come and drink your tea, Theodore."

He sat down opposite to her. She poured out the tea and suddenly she felt a glow of quiet happiness: at last she could look after someone she loved, could do things for him; at last she could sit in her home with her man, and she would never be lonely any more.

Mr. Bite took the cup from her, put it down and kissed her hand, very tenderly, very softly. One could not have called his feeling passionate love, but his heart warmed to his wife. Ernestine's eyes filled with tears and her smile was tremulous.

"We're at home," she said softly.

Mr. Bite nodded.

"It's good to be at home, Ernestine darling. I'm sure we'll be very happy."

He looked tenderly at the small fragile woman and sat up very straight. He was a man, he was her protector; Ernestine would look up to him and admire him, as a good wife should. He kept her hand in his and, wanting to appear a great man in her eyes, he confided to her:

"To-morrow, darling, I've a fine bit of work. I've got to collect twenty thousand *schillinge*!"

CHAPTER XVIII

THE first snowflakes were floating through the air and clinging to the bare branches like tiny puffs of cotton-wool. Heavy black clouds hung like a pall over the garden.

"Winter's here!" Irene said, coming into Nora's small sitting-room, her cheeks rosy from the cold. "The first snow. Did you wish for anything, Nora?"

Nora was sitting shivering by the fire.

"I only want a single thing," she said crossly. "That all the errand boys in the whole town should suddenly

lose their bump of locality and not find our house. Ever since nine o'clock not only poetic snowflakes have been falling from the sky but also bills. Urgent. All the shop-people are clamouring for a large advance. Where am I to get the money from? After all, we've got to eat."

"Casimir will be married next week," Irene tried to comfort her, "and then we'll be rich. In ten days you can pay all your bills."

"If he does not quarrel with his lady love in the last minute."

"Not he. He'll never let go."

"Then she'll die, or one of Casimir's six wives will turn up bringing along her marriage lines and proving that she's never been divorced from Casimir."

"You've got the blues. Cheer up!"

"What have we accomplished, Irene? Nothing at all. We've arranged a marriage that has cost a lot of money and not brought in a penny. If only you had not been so rude to young Mann. We might have made some money out of him."

"He's found his way to the rival firm," Irene said with a wry laugh.

"The rival firm?"

"Yes. I met plump Mrs. Klepper this morning, and she told me exultantly that young Mann was going to marry the girl she had found for him. We are unlucky with our customers. Carl von Ahler cut me dead in the street, and Kicki Kater told me that the Aryan Nature Lover is saying the most horrible things about us. We're bad business women."

Nora sighed.

"What will Ottokar say when he sees the bills?"

"He can't say anything. It's your money. You're always forgetting. . . ."

"And you're always reminding me that we don't belong

together. Take off your things and help me to find out whether we've really spent all that money."

"The bills won't get smaller that way. We must take up something else. . . ."

Ottokar had come in and had heard Irene's words. He interrupted her hastily:

"For goodness' sake don't go and start a new business. Huber has just brought me a pile of bills. We've been living like millionaires. We must pay the bills. After that . . ."

He broke off and Nora said timidly:

"We'll get ten thousand when Casimir marries."

"The money belongs to you, Nora. Irene and I will just have to live somehow. I . . . I'm sorry, Nora, but I've talked it over with Huber, who seems to be the only sensible creature in the whole family. We've got to sell the house."

"Sell the house?"

"Yes, Huber has helped me to write the advertisement. Here it is."

Nora held out her hand for it.

"Fine family residence to be sold. Furnished or unfurnished."

Irene had grown pale. She walked to the window and stared into the garden. Turning round again she smiled wanly, and said:

"Fine family residence, that's Huber's style. Don't look so miserable, Nora. We really don't need a house. We can manage with a flat."

She went up to her sister-in-law and shook her.

"Don't give in, old thing."

"If only I had not had that mad idea. . . . It's ruined us absolutely."

Nora burst into tears and wept heart-breakingly.

Ottokar looked unhappy.

"You'll be able to live for some time with the ten

thousand *schillings*, Nora. Later on I shall be able to earn something. Our friend Daniel—your gangster—has promised me a job in a children's hospital. I'll be able to let you have a little money. Irene will just have to work. And the house ought to bring in a tidy sum. You won't be quite so badly off as you think. Please don't cry."

"Why do you always talk about me? Why should Irene work and not I?"

"Because I can rough it and you can't," Irene said, "Perhaps old Schiro will give me a berth. He's still very fond of me."

Nora studied the advertisement. "Fine family residence." To-morrow the advertisement would be in the paper and many people would read it. Would a single reader think of what it meant for the owners of the fine family residence? Saying good-bye to a life that one had expected to go on for ever. How wonderful it had been for the daughter of the poor country doctor to buy the furniture, the carpets, the pictures, without having to think of the price. How she and her mother had enjoyed shopping. She remembered with a pang Ottokar's kind smile whenever she had grown enthusiastic about something.

"Of course you must buy it if you like it, darling."

Now strangers would live here, beastly people; they would stamp their own personality on the house; they would . . .

"Perhaps old Schiro would buy the house for Miriam," she heard Irene say. "I'll ask him."

Nora wondered at her sister-in-law. How different she was from her. Irene made the best of things; she never cried over spilt milk.

Now Ottokar was talking.

"If only I could find a job for Huber. Poor devil, having to look after the little boy. . . ."

Of course, Nora thought bitterly, he's thinking of

Huber and Huber's little boy, but he doesn't care in the least what is going to become of me.

"Perhaps old Schiro might engage him."

"Irene, you're not to bother the dear old man with all our worries. I won't have it."

"All right, I won't say anything about the house. But he must engage Huber. Listen, you two! He might give us a tip; if we speculate in the stock market with the ten thousand we could easily make a fortune."

"I won't speculate, I think it's wrong," Ottokar said sternly. "Besides, you're forgetting that the money belongs to Nora."

"Oh, just as you like. If you want to lose a fortune. . . ."

"Nora," Ottokar said gently, "I'm terribly sorry for you. You know that I had hoped to make your life a happy one. . . ."

Irene gazed expectantly at her sister-in-law. But Nora did not move. She had hidden her face in her hands, and remained silent.

Irene shrugged.

"Oh well . . ." she said rather crossly. "I had hoped. . . . Never mind."

She took her brother's arm.

"Let's go to the library, Ottokar, and talk things over."

Her voice sounded cold and scornful.

"We'll try to find out how to make things easy for Nora."

Nora remained in the sitting-room, her face still buried in her hands.

* * *

Casimir whom they had not seen for a whole week, came round in the evening. Irene received him with the bad news:

"We're absolutely broke, Casimir. Could you let us

have a small advance? Your wedding is only four days off."

Casimir sat down and lit a cigarette.

"I'm glad you mentioned the subject, Irene," he said slowly. "Because it shows me that you are still clinging to a mistake. I've tried to put you right several times, but you did not seem to understand."

"A mistake?" Nora asked in a small voice.

"Yes, you're quite forgetting that my wife is marrying into the firm and that therefore no commission need be paid. Surely you must understand. . . ."

"I understand that you're trying to cheat us," Irene cried angrily. "But I'll talk to Mrs. Ride."

"That won't be any use. I have already told her that under the circumstances there is no need to pay a commission."

"But surely that's impossible," Nora said feeling desperate.

"I have informed myself," Casimir said coldly. "You can't go to law about it."

"And you pretend that you're a decent swindler?" Irene said. She was dying to slap his face.

"Excuse me, Irene. Since the banns have been read, I am no longer a professional swindler, but an honourable member of human society. Being a good business man, I cannot allow my wife to squander money."

"And what would happen if I told Mrs. Ride about your past?"

"That would be blackmail, Irene."

"You seem to have studied the whole code."

"Of course I know all about it." Casimir's face lost its solemn expression and he grinned broadly. "I had to, whilst following my former profession."

"So you don't intend to pay?" Nora asked.

"I wanted to propose something to you. Assuming that the matrimonial agency exists—mind, I say assuming—

I, being your partner, get half of the commission, that would be five thousand *schillinge*. To this we must add the expenses I have had as your partner. . . .”

“Do you expect us to pay for the flowers and the sweets you gave Mrs. Ride?”

“Only half of the expenses. But, as you have said more than once that the matrimonial agency does not really exist and I have met my future wife at an ordinary party in your house, you are not entitled to a commission. Nevertheless, I want to prove myself a gentleman, and I therefore offer you an indemnification of a thousand *schillinge*. Do you agree?”

Irene stared at Casimir and asked inconsequently:

“Have you kept your taxi?”

“Of course not. I could not know how long we were going to talk.”

“And you did not want to squander money? All right, Casimir, had you kept the taxi we would not have come to terms. But as you didn't, we shall. Pay a thousand *schillinge* and . . .”

“Irene,” Nora cried, “how can you?”

“Shut up, darling. You don't understand. Our dear friend, Casimir the swindler, is dead. The man sitting opposite to you and smoking is Mr. . . . I don't know his real name, so let's say Mr. Casimir Ponitzky, a petty-bourgeois who has been lucky enough to find a rich wife in his old age. We should never get the better of his money-grubbing soul. All right, Casimir, pay up!”

For the last time the former Casimir came to life.

“You must excuse me, Irene,” he said in a hurt tone. “But isn't it rather premature to talk about my old age?” Irene laughed.

“So you can still be human, Casimir. I take back the old age. Did you bring the thousand along?”

“You interrupted me, Irene; I offered to pay a thousand in three instalments—the first on the first of next

month, the two others every first of the month. Do you want an agreement in writing?”

Irene reflected.

“I suppose you are expecting us to behave handsomely; to say: We don't want your money, buy a wedding present for your wife with it. But you're mistaken. We agree to your paying the thousand in instalments, and we want an agreement in writing.”

Casimir sighed.

“Not exactly aristocratic.”

“You've taught us something,” Irene said, “that I, at least, shall never forget. And I was fool enough to believe that you were decent. . . .”

“I once did a decent thing in my life,” Casimir replied. “And as it was against the law I went to prison for it. I'm neither rich nor thoughtless enough to do something decent again.”

He took the agreement from his pocket and signed it.

“Satisfied, Irene?”

“We've got to be.”

She put her hand out for the agreement, but Nora forestalled her. She caught hold of it and threw it into the fireplace.

“I won't take a penny from such a cad!” she cried. “Get out and don't let me ever see you again.”

Casimir looked at her admiringly.

“A friendly and noble gesture,” he said.

Then getting up he asked:

“May I telephone for a taxi?”

“In the hall, not here.”

He bowed silently and left the room.

Irene gazed sadly into the fire.

“A thousand *schillinge* in three instalments are being burnt to cinders,” she said woefully. “And you did not even make him pay for the call.”

She remained silent for a while, then she said:

"That was the last of the Mohicans. The firm has gone west. If we could only declare bankruptcy. Do you know I'm rather glad you burnt the agreement. I'd have done it myself if Ottokar had not bored me to death telling me what a lot he owes you and how miserable he is because he cannot do anything for you."

She laughed softly.

"I really ought to cry, Nora, but I can't help laughing, when I think of your splendid idea that was to make us rich, of the gangster who is an honourable man, of the swindler who is *petit-bourgeois*—a horrid, niggardly, mean *petit-bourgeois*—and we were so proud of our deep insight into human nature. . . . I do wonder what surprises I shall have during my long life."

* * *

Sitting in her bedroom, Nora put the letter she had just written into an envelope and addressed it. The letter was for her father, and began :

"Dear Father,

"I shall come home as soon as the house has been sold and everything is settled. I hope you and Mother will not mind. I shall do my best not to be a nuisance, and as soon as possible I shall try and get a job—if I can. . . ."

The light from the reading-lamp fell on the small blue envelope. Gazing at it it seemed to Nora as if it were growing larger and larger, till it hid the whole room, the whole house, all the days, months and years she had lived here. She was not like Irene; she could not laugh when fate knocked the bottom out of her world. She did not enjoy the idea of taking up arms against life.

To-morrow the advertisement would be in the paper, and perhaps the day after people would come and look

over the house. Irene would show them round. I know I should never be able to do it, to smile and say, "Yes, the furniture is real Empire, and the boiler heats the whole house, and the kitchen range will be the joy of your cook's life. . . ." Of course, the people would find fault with everything, so as to get the house as cheap as possible. . . . The dear house. . . . Perhaps it would be sold in a day or two. . . . Then she would have to go away. . . . Ottokar and Irene would move into a two-room-flat. . . . And she would be sitting at home knowing that her people did not want her. . . . How lonely it would be. . . . Snow and ice and winter wind . . . and the two grumpy old people. . . . And Mother nagging all day long. . . . And Father looking at me with reproachful, sad eyes. . . . Perhaps Irene will come and see me sometimes. . . . She wondered whether Ottokar would come too. . . . She would miss Irene. . . . No, not Irene, Ottokar. . . . How funny. . . . He used to bore her so terribly. . . . And to-day she could not imagine anything worse than having to live without him. . . . When he went to the States they might both be able to live on his fee. . . . Of course, they would be poor, very poor. . . . But then he had never asked her to go with him. . . . He had expected her to live with her parents. . . . After all, they would always have more money than the Bites. . . . And she would not be so lonely. . . .

She thought of the people who had been their clients, and wondered what they would have done in her place? Suddenly she remembered the strange way Irene had looked at her, as if she had expected her to say something, to do something. What had she expected? Why did she always stress the fact that Ottokar was terribly worried about his divorced wife's future? Did he really care what happened to her?

Somewhere a clock struck two. Nora gave a start: was it as late as all that? Something made her think of

a sultry summer night, months ago. . . . She had been lying on the balcony and had heard Ottokar come home. Never again would she hear him come home. . . . How quiet the house was, how deadly quiet. . . . They were all asleep; only she was awake. She thought with a shudder of the many nights at home when the whole house would be sleeping peacefully and only she would be unable to close her eyes. She would lie awake for hours hearing the clock strike in the tower of the small Gothic church, longing for . . . for the pleasant luxurious life she had lost. Yes, but not only for that. . . .

She got up and began to undress. But she could not make up her mind to go to bed. She felt too nervous and restless. Perhaps it would be best to go home to-morrow or the day after? Ottokar could make all the necessary arrangements. . . . She felt she would never be able to bear the respite granted them till the house was sold. How could she stand the strain, knowing that Ottokar might say any day:

"The house is sold."

Then the packing, all the rooms suddenly looking strange and hostile, as if one had never lived in them. . . . They would appear empty although the furniture was still standing in its old place. Even to-night, during dinner, things had felt unreal, uncanny; as if the three of them had not really been there at all; as if they had been ghosts, or, at the best, strangers—unwelcome guests. The house, the rooms seemed to know that they were going to desert them: they had breathed an atmosphere of hatred and doom. How unkind things—and men—are, when one is alone. Perhaps some people are strong and can bear being surrounded by enemies. . . . Irene, yes, she would not mind. But Ottokar! He had looked at her to-night as if he too was afraid of loneliness, as if he too felt the same torturing dread that had taken her by the throat. . . .

The blue envelope stood out, a tiny patch of colour, on the mahogany table. To-morrow afternoon her mother would get the letter. She would rip open the envelope with her usual quick, impatient movements, would skim through the letter and say with a sigh:

"Nora is coming home for good. Poor child! If only she had listened to me. I always told her not to marry that man. . . ."

And then poor mother would do sums in her head and, probably, on the blue envelope too, trying to find out how much more expensive life would be with the poor, darling child home for good.

Father would not say a word. Buried in his usual silence he would perhaps feel ashamed—the good old man—that a daughter of his had left a husband who had lost his money and could not keep her in luxury any longer. Left him? How absurd! She was always forgetting that they were divorced, that she had divorced Ottokar when he was still a rich man. No one had a right to reproach her. On the contrary, she had behaved exceedingly well; she had even tried to make money. . . .

If only sleep would come. She walked softly up and down the room, trying hard to think of other, less important things. But somehow in this melancholy night nothing seemed unimportant; everything was closely connected with her own life—and Ottokar.

A memory flashed through her brain, something that had happened in her childhood. She had done something wrong, and had denied having done it. Mother had boxed her ears and left her to herself. But when Father came home in the evening he had called her into the garden. Nora could still feel the soft evening air and smell the sweet scent of hay. She had sulked, but her father had not scolded her; he had only said gently: "Do you know that you have done something wrong, little daughter?"

She had shaken her head angrily.

"No!"

Father had drawn her into the summer-house and had sat down beside her on the wooden bench.

"Listen, my child! It does not matter so much that you have been naughty. Of course, you ought not to have told your mother a lie, but maybe we are just as guilty as you are in not having gained your confidence. But one thing, little Nora, you must do—you must be honest towards yourself. You must never cheat yourself. Do you understand what I mean, little daughter? Always be honest towards yourself."

The little girl who had not cried when her mother had boxed her ears, who had sulked all day long, hating everybody and everything, had burst into tears and clung to her father's hand. Sobbing wildly, she had promised him always to be honest towards herself, never again to hide behind a lie.

What had made her remember the insignificant little event? Was it because once more she was afraid of admitting the truth to herself? Because she wanted to cheat herself? Because she was a coward? Afraid of looking sentimental and silly in her own eyes?

She went to the table, took up the letter and tore it to shreds. Then she put on her dressing-gown and tip-toed out of the room.

The passage was dark and she groped her way. Her hand touched the door handle of Irene's room. Nora stood listening for a moment. Irene was asleep. She walked on softly.

Another door handle and yet another one: that was Ottokar's room.

Nora noiselessly opened the door. The small lamp with the green shade was burning on the table beside the bed, and Ottokar was sitting up, an unread book lying beside him.

Seeing Nora he gave a start.

"Are you ill?" he said anxiously.

"I can't sleep," she replied plaintively.

Her heart was beating like mad, and her knees were trembling.

"I'll get up at once. Just a moment! We'll go to the library, the fire is still burning. I'll make you a cup of tea and we can chat till you feel sleepy."

"No," she said, not knowing that her voice was that of the little girl speaking to her father in a summer-house, many years ago.

"No, don't get up. I . . . I only wanted to ask you something."

"You want to ask me something?"

"No, yes. . . ." She drew a deep breath and said hurriedly, afraid of her own daring: "I don't want to ask you anything. I wanted to tell you that I don't want to leave you. That I want to stay with you, even after the house is sold and when there is no money left. I want . . ."

"Nora!"

He stared at her as if she had spoken in a language he could not understand.

"It's so cold," she said, shivering. "I really can't remain standing in the door for ever." She laughed shakily. "Irene would tell you that your manners are simply awful, Ottokar. After all, one usually asks a visitor to come in and sit down. . . ."

Somewhere a clock struck three. The night was very quiet, and in the whole house not a single light was burning.

CHAPTER XIX

FOR four weeks people came to look at the "family residence"; for four weeks all kinds of men and women turned up who had only two things in common: money and a way of finding fault with everything.

Some thought the house too old-fashioned, some said it was much too modern. The more people found fault with it, the more Nora grew to love the house. Never had the rooms looked so cosy, never had the garden—even in its desolate autumn sadness—seemed lovelier. Ottokar, who showed the people over the house, did not lose his temper; he listened patiently to their complaints, and his voice remained soft and gentle. Only Irene and Nora knew what the tiny wrinkle over his aquiline nose signified, and the almost imperceptible smile with which he answered innumerable, often impertinent questions.

Christmas came. Irene had been afraid of it; she had shrunk from a mood of sentimentality and sadness. Ottokar was so sensitive, and no one could tell what Nora would be like.

"We won't have a Christmas tree," Irene said decidedly, after having listened to a very fat and very vulgar new-rich woman telling them, whilst she looked at the library, what a giant Christmas tree she had just bought for her children. Nevertheless, she came home laden with mistletoe and holly.

"Do you know," she confided to her brother on Christmas Eve, when Nora had run up to the attic with presents for Huber's boy, "I'm getting to admire Nora. I never expected her to behave so well."

Ottokar smiled good-naturedly.

"I wouldn't talk about behaving well if I were you. When I remember how you behaved yesterday."

Irene blushed.

"Admit that it was just my luck that young Mann had to come along with his fiancée when you were out. I did not mind the fiancée, but the beastly little cad treated me as if I were a shoe-black. As long as he thought we were rich he simply cringed. Don't you remember? To think of him going about and preaching idealism and the beauty of equality! And after he'd gone young Rack came and insulted me because he pretends that we've spoilt his chances with Margot. It was enough to make a saint lose his temper."

"You certainly lost yours."

"I'll be glad to work with professionals," Irene said with a little sigh. "At least, they won't put on airs."

"Of course, some will. You'll always meet people who confound arrogance with good manners."

"And to think that that cad Mann is probably going to buy the house and live here, as he would say 'in grand style.' And small Manns being born all over the place—dirty, mean, Nordic, militarist, horrid small Manns."

Ottokar smiled reassuringly.

"Don't you believe it. The girl looks as though she would not stand for that kind of nonsense."

"When is he going to let us know whether he'll buy the house?"

"Next week."

"Poor dear house! I'm so sorry for it, being inhabited by Manns! And I feel bad thinking that we shall have to part with Nora. What are you laughing at, Ottokar?"

"At you. Fancy your being sentimental."

"I'm not," Irene said angrily. "But you—you've become absolutely callous all of a sudden. You must admit that Nora is sweet."

Ottokar smiled again, and threw his sister a mischievous glance that she could not understand.

* * *

Next week came. Young Mann had promised to come in the afternoon. Irene felt nervous. She went from one room to the other, trying to imagine the family Mann living in them. She also thought of the miniature flat she and Ottokar were going to, and of Nora, living at home with her people. Poor girl, she would be miserably unhappy.

The second post brought a letter for Ottokar. Irene put it on his writing table. It's from Father's old solicitor, she thought anxiously; what on earth can he be writing about? I do hope it is nothing unpleasant. Though I can't imagine what could be more unpleasant than our life is going to be. She took up the two picture post-cards she had received by the same post. One of them was from Casimir and his wife; they were staying at Nice for their honeymoon. Irene could not help laughing: the card was insufficiently stamped and she had had to pay the difference. Had Casimir done it on purpose? I wish we had accepted the thousand *schillinge*, she thought; I must buy myself a winter coat. But then, most likely, he would not have paid the other instalments.

The second card was from Kicki Kater, from St. Moritz, where she seemed to be staying with the young man six foot two. Such are the results of our matrimonial agency, Irene mused: Casimir pockets the money and Kicki Kater—not that I grudge it her—prevents the young man marrying a good and virtuous girl. Ernestine Bite . . . She frowned and looked disgusted. Ernestine had disappointed her. She had met her in the street a few days ago and had asked her to come to tea. But a terribly embarrassed but no less dignified Ernestine had replied stiffly:

"I'm so sorry, dear Countess Irene. . . . But we've been told—you know how people will gossip—that Countess Nora Sternbach. . . . You must not take it amiss, but if so many people say so there must be some truth in what they say. . . . To cut it short, people say

that Countess Sternbach is Count Ottokar's divorced wife and that she is living with him. . . ."

"What about it?"

"You must try and understand my point of view, Countess Irene. Perhaps people don't mind that kind of thing in your class. . . . But you see, in the higher middle class. . . . I have to be very careful, very circumspect; after all my husband . . . his reputation, his status. . . . Being an official. . . . And his colleagues and their wives. . . . I'm so sorry, but Mrs. Ledger agrees with me. . . ."

"So we'll only have the pleasure of meeting Mr. Bite in an official capacity," Irene had said mockingly. "In that case it won't be long before we see him again."

"I'm sorry to say that my dear husband is rather too liberal in his ideas. Nevertheless, he must consider his position. After all, he represents the State."

Irene had turned her back upon Ernestine without a word, and had walked on, her eyes filling with angry tears. Shortly afterwards she ran into old Schiro and told him what had happened.

The old gentleman had nodded.

"At least now you know how people react to that kind of thing."

"If you're going to scold me. . . ."

The old gentleman had noticed her anger and her wet eyes.

"Never mind, my child. You're very young still. You don't know how many things people have got to consider. There are always business partners or superiors one must not give offence to. Life consists of wondering what other people will say. Of respecting their prejudices, of shelving natural, human feelings. You may be quite sure that poor Ernestine hated hurting you, but she had to consider all she had been taught at home and at school, all the idiotic things that people believe necessary for the welfare of the State."

"Since when have you become an anarchist?"

Old Schiro had laughed and, drawing her arm through his, had walked on slowly.

"I really believe that you're the only one, my child, to whom I can talk without fear of being misunderstood. I went to see Miriam last night. She couldn't be happier if they had married in the Synagogue and at the registrar's. Nevertheless, I am thankful that she has changed her mind and will consider other people. Don't forget, my child, there always are OTHER PEOPLE in life."

Irene shook off the remembrance of Ernestine and Casimir and the whole rabble, as she called their former clients. She also tried hard not to think of old Schiro's words—she would not admit to herself that for her too there would always be people whose opinion she would have to consider. For the first time in her life she felt frightened. Would she too have to become like the others, afraid of scandalizing Mrs. Grundy, dependent on people she despised?

Where was Nora? She had promised to be back in an hour; they wanted to decide which of the pictures they were going to sell at once.

Irene went and sat in the window seat. She looked out at the old trees and listened to the twittering of the sparrows. I wonder, she thought, whether they too have got to consider prejudices and the strait-laced ideas of other sparrows? She saw Nora and Ottokar coming through the garden, and ran to meet them.

"Ottokar, there's a letter for you, a fat letter from father's solicitor. Do read it at once. I'm so afraid of his writing unpleasant things."

"You're afraid?" Ottokar looked incredulous.

"Yes."

Nora took off her fur coat and her hat. She was looking very pretty and very happy.

"Where have you been for such a time?" Irene asked.

"We had some shopping to do," Nora said.

They went and sat in Ottokar's study and he read his letter. He read it once, twice, three times, as if unable to grasp its contents. Then he said slowly:

"Irene, when young Mann comes here to-day, tell him that we've changed our minds. We're not going to sell the house."

"What did you say?"

"We're not going to sell the house."

"Are you drunk or ill, or have you gone mad?"

Nora gazed at Ottokar in amazement.

"But, Ottokar dear, we can't; it's impossible."

"We can. It's possible."

He put his arm round Nora's shoulder.

"Aunt Yetta is dead," he said softly.

"Yes?"

"And, and she has left a quarter of a million to be divided between my wife and me."

"A quarter of a million," Nora cried rapturously. "What a lot of money."

But Irene looked unhappy.

"Ottokar, Nora, don't be so pleased, my poor dears. The will is not valid."

"Why?"

"It says: you and your wife. . . . But you haven't got a wife. . . . If Aunt Yetta has got other relations, they can dispute the will."

Ottokar burst out laughing.

"They can't."

"Why not?"

"Because I have got a wife."

"You . . . you . . .?"

Nora's cheeks had grown rosy. She turned to her sister-in-law and said teasingly:

"Guess where we were this morning."

"How can I guess? Besides, what does it matter

where you were. Good Lord, just think of all the money we're losing. Why it's much worse than any loss resulting from our idiotic matrimonial agency."

"Don't interrupt, Irene. Listen to what I tell you. Ottokar has got a wife. We've just come from the registrar's."

"What did you say? You've been married; you've been re-married?"

She stared at them. Then she put her hands to her head.

"But why, why?"

"Because I too am not free from prejudice, and want the youngest Sternbach—as poor Aunt Yetta used to call him—to be born in wedlock."

"And your work?" Irene asked her brother.

"Of course I shan't give it up. The income-tax people will see to it that we don't have too much money."

He got up.

"I must call Huber and tell him that he need not go job-hunting any longer."

"Aren't you pleased, dear?" Nora asked her sister-in-law, struck by Irene's serious expression.

"What about? The money, or your marriage, or because Huber can again drive our car? I don't know what to think. I'm absolutely nonplussed. What a trite happy end! Just the thing that happens to the kind-hearted, gallant, pure hero in old films. It's almost uncanny." She frowned. "I think you're beasts not to have told me before. And you might at least have told me that I've got a nephew."

"You haven't got one," Nora said hastily. "But you might have one in due course of time."

Irene still kept looking from one to the other. Then she seemed to remember something.

"How much do I get?" she asked.

"What are you talking about?"

"I want my commission."

"Your commission?"

"Yes. I represent the firm; I have arranged a marriage between two people worth a quarter of a million. I'm not going to let you trick me out of my money. How much is three per cent. of a quarter of a million?"

Nora considered for a little while.

"Seven thousand five hundred."

"I'll make you a present of the five hundred," Irene said loftily. "A wedding present," she added with a grin. "But I want the seven thousand."

"You can have them," Ottokar declared. "You're the first of the family to earn a commission, but you've worked hard, and I don't grudge you the money, my dear. Wait! Don't thank me yet; you only get the money on condition that you and Nora won't found another firm. A quarter of a million is a tidy sum, but I'm sure there would not be a penny left in a year's time if you two women started another business."

"Don't talk that way, Ottokar; you ought to be grateful to our agency. After all Nora DID have a bright idea, even if . . ."

"Nora's ideas," Ottokar interrupted his sister, "are always bright."

And going up to his wife he kissed her tenderly.

Irene smiled, then turned away discreetly and looked out of the window.

THE END