

The Tree of Knowledge

DRESDEN

February.—To-morrow I am going to Gericke. I have given my beauty and my blood to this art, to its terror, its rapture, its despair. I have given my humanity: more I cannot give. If it will not make the return of one imperishable harmony, I must strike fire from life in other ways. The darkness is near us all, the nothingness, the unspeakable Woe. But here is, in the meantime, a world of golden light and white winds and my youth—my youth which must be fed of all things precious, here and from the ends of the earth. To-morrow I am going to Gericke. He has all my MSS., all the music wrung from

THE TREE OF KNOWLEDGE

my dreams—the score for the Maeterlinck plays, the Heine sequence, the setting for the Whitman Song of Death. And Gericke will not spare me the truth—whatever it be. . . .

To-day, in the garden by the river, a faint and delicate wafture of Spring floated in the air; a gorgeous sun set over the pinnacles of the ancient city and a single, black swallow wheeled in the evening sky. I let Egon hold my hand. He looked delightful in his uniform—boyish and yet dignified. He took off his helmet for a moment and the wind touched his silken, yellow hair like the hair of a child. He took it into his head that I was thinking of him and said so. I laughed.

“There are so many other things, Lieutenant von Helmuth.”

Poor boy! Tears came into his earnest, German eyes.

“I thought you cared. . . .”

THE TREE OF KNOWLEDGE

That was too much at an hour when the grey Fates were weaving so gravely at my thread of life. Suppose Gericke says: “Very clever, very good for a woman, but it can’t live!”

I turned on my gold and white youth.

“Care? And become Frau Lieutenant von Helmuth in a garrison on the Russian frontier? I must have life, *lieber Junge*, complete life. I must know every splendour—the flashing of jewels and the glint of marble, music and the fragrance of infinite flowers, the enamelled brilliance of perfect day and nights of the fulfilment of all desire. Unless”

“Unless?” he echoed.

“Nothing!” I said, sharply. “Go home and study the art of war and think of your little cousin in Magdeburg. She will help to continue the von Helmuth race—competently.”

He went off with steps that dragged a

THE TREE OF KNOWLEDGE

little. But what is one to do? If I loved him I should put a thousand miles between us. I cannot afford to love Egon. Art has taught me the secrets of the passions in storm or in tense quietude more than life, by which I am unsullied, could have done. It gives me a vision of an amber strand under an infinitely blue sky and the white surges thundering at my feet. There Egon should bare his head and the wind should play with his silken, childlike hair; he should put his arms around me—his white, strong, cool arms. . . . And at the end of a few weeks I should awake, having given away my one pearl beyond price (if Art should fail), and be as far as now from the visible glory of life. If Art should *not* fail, I may yet go to that glittering shore and play with bright shells and let Egon kiss my eyes that the sun has dazzled. . . . Otherwise a battle, not of caresses, awaits

THE TREE OF KNOWLEDGE

me. I have no money and I need all in my life that money can buy. A heartless cosmic process flings me upon this pitiful, brief shore of life, gives me a passion for all visible glory and delight, a passion strong as the storm and as merciless to others and myself. The Tables of the Law are broken: the Gods are dead. Why should I hesitate to build my Visionary Palace which is also the Palace of Life? It must have pillars of jade and lapis-lazuli; golden sphinxes with topaz eyes; the looms of the ancient East must cover its shining floor. Slaves upon bended knees must bring me the fruits of the earth and I must cast the priceless, jewelled goblets into the blue sea that lies below. The Visionary Palace costs money, and the Tablets of the Law are broken, the Gods are dead.

Gericke looked at me with his cold, pas-

THE TREE OF KNOWLEDGE

sionless eyes. I have never seen fire in those eyes except when he conducts: during the *Vorspiel* to Parsifal they smoulder, during the *Liebestod* they flare. To-day they were as dull as two smooth pebbles abraded by the currents of geologic ages. He looked at me for a long time in silence, so long that my breath threatened to give out. Then his heavy lips moved.

"Also, you wish to know . . ."

"What the work is worth, not from any two-penny point of view. Don't tell me it's earnest, commendable, talented. I cannot afford to give my life for anything less than immortality."

He threw back his great, ugly head and laughed for the first time in my experience—a brutal and elemental laugh. I got up and felt a curious chill creep, snake-like, up my spine.

"I have my answer . . ." I said weakly.

THE TREE OF KNOWLEDGE

His laughter yielded to a grey, weary smile as he leaned forward.

"Sit down," he commanded sharply. "Your work is—earnest—commendable—talented." He rasped out the words in hard, staccato fashion. "You have worked—admirably, with a whole heart. Any other pupil of mine would give years of life for such words from me."

I shrugged my shoulders, but the knife was going into my marrow.

"What is the use of talking, Herr Professor? You have pronounced judgment upon me."

He leaned closer to me until his head nearly touched mine; the dull, greyish eyes seemed to weigh upon my heart.

"I am fifty," he said slowly. "I have worked all my life like a galley-slave. My works—*du lieber Gott*—they won't live. Nobody knows it better than I. But if the thing were to do over again, I'd do, the

THE TREE OF KNOWLEDGE

same. *That* is love for one's art. As for you, your dirty egotism would rot your genius if you had it."

"But I haven't."

"No. . . ."

All that happened no longer ago than this morning, and yet the thing seems incredibly distant—ages and lives away. I know now what agony is, a personal, human agony that belongs to me—not the despair of Isolde transfigured in those waves of delirious harmony, not the sadness, intolerably exquisite and poignant, of *Mélisande*, but a grey, corroding agony lived through by the light of my familiar lamp. I must kill it, throttle it, I must not let it lay its hand upon me and carve its marks upon my face. There is still life, life. . . .

This afternoon when the sun was at its height and streamed into my windows I let down the velvet curtains and my

THE TREE OF KNOWLEDGE

chamber lay in a soft gloom. I lit two candles on my dressing-table and then tossed my garments one by one upon the bed. The long mirror reflected the tall, white, perfect image against a background of the silken waves of dark hair. I saw a more triumphant loveliness than dwells in any music I could have dreamed or written. I saw that for which men from of old have battled against tall towers and citadels, for which they have crushed the bones of the ancient Earth, their mother, for which they have striven and despaired and died. That which could burn the "topless towers of Iliion" can conquer for me a few glittering years, can break for me the barriers of a perverse and bourgeois society, can keep me from its judgment and its penalties. . . . The agony weakens, the dreams of art fade. I have dwelt under the skies of Veronese and have laughed with fauns and satyrs in

THE TREE OF KNOWLEDGE

Boecklin's cypress islands. The symphonies of Brahms have loved me, the passion of Schumann has clamoured in my blood. I have walked upon aërial heights with Zarathustra, and shuddered with Aglavaine and Tintagiles upon the marge of leaden meres and windless forests. All that is over. I shall give a banquet in memory of my Ambitions and my Brains. I must fasten myself upon life and draw from it the breath of its uttermost ecstasy, and I must pay no price. For Art I have paid this agony and the memory of it will make me warier forever. I have made my choice. To-morrow I shall go over the old ground once more. Then, as my drastic Germans say: "*Schwamm drüber!*"

As soon as Egon received the invitation to my banquet, he came. I lay on the *chaise-longue* and watched him with cold

THE TREE OF KNOWLEDGE

interest now, the choice being made. His face was curiously white; the skin about his eyes was drawn; his movements were quiveringly nervous; his language had that precision which I have noticed in other high-bred Germans under an emotional stress. He looked straight at me.

"I will lay down my commission. I am an engineer and could command a position the—ah—emoluments of which would be considerable."

"And wouldn't all the dead von Helmuths turn in their graves?"

The blood surged into my little soldier's face.

"I will forget even that—for you."

I let the sleeve of my silk dressing-gown slip from my shoulder.

"Your sacrifice would be quite wasted."

"Perhaps not entirely," he replied with a pained frown. "You will forgive me for saying that I seem to discern in you

THE TREE OF KNOWLEDGE

possibilities that are terrible, possibilities from which my whole being recoils. No price would be too great to save you from these, to turn you safely into the haven of my love."

I wouldn't have credited my little lieutenant with so fine a perception.

"And those possibilities are?" I asked softly.

He turned, if possible, a trifle whiter.

"Since we understand each other, what is the use of going into disagreeable details? I am ready to give up for your sake my career, my family, my whole life."

I felt brutal because life had hurt me recently and I answered:

"It's not enough."

"Is that your last word?"

"My last word."

He got up, bowed low, clicked his heels together in military fashion and started to walk toward the door.

THE TREE OF KNOWLEDGE

"Egon," I called.

He turned.

"*Gnädiges Fräulein befehlen?*"

"Will you not say good-bye?"

He hesitated, crimsoned and turned back. He bent down on one knee beside me and kissed my hand. Then he sprang up and went without a word.

So I have made a second choice. In the eyes of the world a very foolish one, no doubt. Did I make the choice after all, I who sit here? Was it not made for me? One does what one can. I was in the blind, dumb slime that quivered into life far back in the elemental ages upon that one miraculous day in Eternity; I was in the ungainly dragons of the primæval mud; I was in the tooth and claw, the loin and lip of the caveman, and in a thousand thousand of my ancestors thereafter. I was inherent in all these. Through all these the monstrous universe shaped me to

THE TREE OF KNOWLEDGE

the being that I am, the being who made this choice, the being who (to descend from the cosmic to the parochial) could not be Frau Egon von Helmuth, a pillar of the Prussian aristocracy on twenty thousand marks a year, a brewer of coffee, a danner of socks, a mother of blond babies. After the storms of music, after the surging waves of all emotion, I must have more than that. Beethoven has fortified my soul, Wagner has sharpened my subtlest nerves, Tschaikovsky has taught me a yearning wistfulness for all fragile and exquisite things under the stars. My beautiful, dear desires clamour for fulfilment, if indeed the world hold the joy and glamour of their quest. The stupid laws of stupid people must be burned away. My one law is—not to be found out, not to sacrifice one perfect golden dream of flesh or marble, one great action or passion in the supreme Art of Life, one purple

THE TREE OF KNOWLEDGE

hour of liquid stars and yearning winds, one sigh, one word, one gesture, to the decrepit mandates of the emasculate. . . .

I search my soul in vain for any sign of fear, any presentiment of defeat. Rather do I feel an exhilaration as of new wine. My heart burns with the presages of triumph after triumph. I have a vision of myself shod in sandals of silver no whiter than my feet, folded in veils of silk set with the pearls of half an Orient, holding in the leash of my loveliness the power and wisdom of the earth.

I had them all down at the Hôtel Bellevue to dinner last night. Gericke didn't come, nor did Egon. I was rather glad not to have the boy's emotional death's head at my feast. Those who came were merry, and later—moved. Otto Saar made quite an affecting speech on the loss sustained by the art of music through my

THE TREE OF KNOWLEDGE

abandonment of it. Heigho! We had champagne and roses and at two in the morning the girls became indiscreet. Little Thérèse danced on the table with gold bracelets around her tiny ankles, and when the laughter trailed off some imbecile grew pathetic and sang in a high, half-sobbing tenor voice, "*Stell auf den Tisch die duftenden Reseden,*" sang it to the bitter end and broke down at the nerve-grinding pathos of the closing words: "*Wie einst im Mai.*"

Then they went and they were all so tipsy that they didn't notice my staying behind at the last moment. But I wanted to see the hall with the lights still bright and the glasses overturned and the innumerable soiled petals, like drops of blood, on the table and the chairs and the floor. My God, it was ghastly! The broken meats were noisome, the blue cigarette smoke had a stale, acrid stench.

THE TREE OF KNOWLEDGE

The ghost of pleasure was more joyless and hideous than any sorrow could have been. It taught me how I shall have to fight for the joy of life in a world dedicated by its very nature to sorrow.

The night air cooled these clumsy, sentimental fancies from my brain and I slept well. This morning I burned letters and useless manuscripts and lounged about, thinking quite calmly and prosaically of the future. I have lived with genius at the culminating points of the race's passion and imagination. The mean scope of the individual life will scarcely offer anything comparable. The world will have to be very amusing to rival the grotesques of Casanova or the *Contes Drolatiques* of Balzac, the revelry of the *Arabian Nights* or the horrors of de Saad. No; my mind won't be surprised, nor my senses. Are prepares us to expect a rapture of which reality is probably

THE TREE OF KNOWLEDGE

quite innocent. I know nothing yet as a personal experience, but I don't believe that love at its lowest or highest terms is the consuming ecstasy that Swinburne writes about. So that with a mind learned in all the intricacies of the world's adventure and vice, I am not likely to be either shocked or disappointed. I start free of all prejudices, stript of the tawdriness of all time-honoured lies. Not the virtuous, not the faithful, not the tenders of the altar-fires of any propitiatory fetishism have encompassed the splendours of my desire, or have lived in literature or made history. Theodora dancing in the circus, Cleopatra slaying the slaves who had satiated her lust, Guinevere and Isolde branding their lords with shame, Messalina in the sailors' tavern, Herodias of the Seven Deadly Veils, Lucretia Borgia and the Pompadour, the lyric secrets of intolerable desire that lurk in the eyes of the

THE TREE OF KNOWLEDGE

Gioconda of Leonardo—these are the names and fates with which the world still rings.

And, after all, fidelity is not a human, not a civilised virtue upon any terms. It is an exact contradiction to the whole civilising process that makes for mental and sensory complexity, for change and multiplication of interest. Unlike the senses of doves, canary birds and donkeys, our senses are inextricably blended with our nerves and our brains. A thousand subtle influences bind or estrange us. A light, a memory, a perfume, a fold of drapery, a passage of verse—these influences in the human process of sexual selection tend to a variety of which the mere body is ignorant, but which is the very condition of the soul's life.

I start free of another drag. My heart is not very tender and it would be hard for me to be hurt through any human re-

THE TREE OF KNOWLEDGE

lationship. I shall not give my soul away; I shall not suffer through compassion; I am not made, in truth, to be unhappy or sorrowful. My mind and body cry out at pain, but when the pain is over there are no lees of regret or wistfulness in my heart. Only my Art. . . . But that is at an end.

After I had taken my books back this afternoon to the Royal Library for the last time, I sat for a while on the stone seat in the garden. The river was a ring of jade, the green-tinted Cathedral and Palace wavered in the misty air on the opposite bank. I had sat there so often snatching a moment to watch the tremours of colour before I returned to the excitement of sound. But now I am done with the starved question of music, the music's craving to understand, the exhausting, empty answer. And, after all, we are human; we have lips and hands. That rap-

THE TREE OF KNOWLEDGE

ture of excitement may transcend but cannot forever replace the earthlier joys on which our nerves insist. That crying of our hearts and of our senses which is the substance of art—shall not life quiet it?

Yet I am lonely to leave them, these monsters and wind and sea deliriums! Could anything adequate follow this furious overture, this yearning of Titans through the thunder and boom of symphonies?