

and clothed, she may well enchain a heart that is touched by her sad fate. Besides, she seems to be hopelessly, despairingly poor—the husband a drunkard, the children crying for bread—so pale and lean that it is easy to see that hunger has been her only lover since then. Under such conditions she will be an easy tool, open to all my plans. She will be accessible to all my teachings, and, by Heaven! I'll teach her to fasten this madcap that has thus far escaped all the toils that Fredersdorf and I have laid for him. She shall be the Delilah that tames this Sampson. True, it is a desperate attempt," he added, with a disdainful glance at the fainting woman, "to make a Delilah out of this grimy, pale, and half-starved woman, but she has the past for her, and my Sampson has a tender and pitiful heart. Besides, nothing has succeeded yet, and it is pardonable if we take refuge in extraordinary means under pressure of despair. So to work, to work!"

He drew a little gold phial from his pocket, held smelling salts to the fainting woman's nose, and rubbed her temples with a little sponge.

"Ah! She is moving already;" and he rubbed her temples again; then seeing that she was gaining strength he lifted her and placed her in a chair. "*Aux armes! aux armes!*" he murmured, with a smile; "*la bataille commence!*"

The woman opened her eyes and gazed about her with a questioning, dazed glance. But seeing the stranger watching her with a smile, her eyes filled with horror. She murmured, "I know that face; yes, I know that cold smile. I have met it twice before. When was it? Was it only a frightful dream, or was it reality? When did I see that devilish smile, that iron egotism?"

"She does not flatter me exactly," murmured the gentleman, without for a moment altering his friendly expression. "I'm only curious to know whether she will, finally, recognize me."

Yes, now she had really recognized him. She rose and stood before him proud, wrathful, imperious despite her poverty.

"Pöllnitz!" she cried, with flashing eyes; "yes it is you; I know you now. Who gave you the right to enter this house? What will you here?"

"That I have to ask you," he retorted, smiling. "What are you doing here—here in this dark, wretched hovel? Here where starvation and misery make their dwelling, where misfortune grins at you with hollow-eyed dread? What are you doing here, Doris Ritter?"

She started painfully as he pronounced her name, a scarlet

flush sped over her cheeks, followed by a death-like pallor. "Why do you call me Doris Ritter?" she asked, breathlessly. Then, buried in long-lost recollections, she stared before her, not heeding Pöllnitz.

"Doris Ritter, Doris Ritter," she said, softly, "where art thou? Why do they call thee by thy name, forgetting that thou art a sleep-walker, on the verge of a precipice, who must plunge downward if thy name be called and thou awakest. Doris Ritter," she went on, more passionately, "how dare they speak that name and drag me from my grave?"

"Yes, that is just what I want!" cried Pöllnitz, laughing. "I wish to draw you from the grave of humiliation and oblivion, to make you forget what you have suffered."

"I!" she exclaimed, with a scornful laugh. "And *you* wish to do that? You, Baron Pöllnitz, who are to blame for my misery. What have I done that I should suffer such misery? My God! I was innocent and pure in heart, I could hold up my head before God, and look my parents in the face. I had no need to blush even *before him*, for no sin rested upon me, and only because he respected me did he love me too. It was such a silent, resigned love. It had no language, made no claim. Were we to blame that others understood it, that song without words, and construed what they saw in our eyes? We were widely separated. A chasm yawned between us. It was only a sweet dream. Then ye came to waken us, to make a traitor of the prince, a miserable prostitute of me. Ye threw my love, of which I had never spoken, save to my God, like a rotten fruit, in my face, and tried to soil and stain my whole life with it. And ye succeeded. Ye have trodden my whole existence under foot, and not one ray of hope have ye left me. I shall never forget how ye tore me from my father's arms, dragged me to prison, and fettered my hands, because in my despair I tried to destroy the life ye had dishonored. And then ye came and dragged me before the king. Two men were with him, one with a red, low, bloated face with thick, licentious lips—that was Grumbkow; the other, with a fine, friendly face, an eternal, fawning smile, with cold, disdainful, heartless eyes—that was yourself, Baron Pöllnitz. I threw myself at the king's feet, and pleaded for mercy. But he pushed me from him with his foot, abused me with accusations that wounded my very soul. I swore that I was innocent, that no sin rested upon me, that I had never been the crown prince's mistress, had never spoken to him save in the presence of my father. They laughed, and loudest laughed Baron Pöllnitz."

"It is true ; she has forgotten nothing," murmured Pöllnitz.

"Forgotten," she cried, with a wild laugh. "Can one forget when one was driven like a wild beast through the streets, stripped by the hangman's helpers, hearing the laughter of the mob, feeling the hangman's lash? Oh! I have borne it without going mad ; and as I fled through the streets I saw that the houses were closed, that no one stood at the windows, no one had the heartless courage to watch my martyr's flight, and that comforted me, and I blessed the men and women who had pity and seemed to prove their belief in my innocence by refusing to witness my cruel punishment. As I ran farther, I came to a house that was not closed. The door was open, and before it stood a servant, who pointed at me with his finger, and laughed aloud ; and above him, on the balcony, stood Baron Pöllnitz, with heartless, stony face. Then I uttered the first cry of rage. Then my prayers changed to wild curses. The cry arose in my heart, 'He is to blame for my disgrace. He has poisoned the king and, with his pitiless scorn, slain the last doubt as to my guilt. May he feel himself loathed and despised in the hour of his death, may remorse gnaw at his soul and drive him, unresting, through the world all the days of his life!'"

She uttered a wild cry and sank, faint and trembling, backward in her chair. Baron Pöllnitz had retained his friendly smile. He laid his hand upon her relaxed arm and said, with a soothing tone: "It is true. I did you a wrong, but I have come to make it good. The day of tribulation is past ; you shall hold your head high again, and none shall dare to doubt your innocence."

She shook her head sadly.

"What help is that for me now? My father died of shame ; my husband, who married me for pity and because I brought him a couple of thousand thalers, could not bear his lot, finding me brand-marked and avoided like a criminal. He took to drink, and, when he comes home at night intoxicated, strikes me and calls me the most shameful names, only to beg my pardon the next day with tears, and begin the same old round again. My children——"

She wept bitterly, thinking of the terrible words her little boy had spoken to her that morning. Pöllnitz was weary of the plaint.

"Cry no more," he said. "Crying makes the eyes red, but you must be beautiful and attractive. If you do as I say, you will make your children happy once more. I will get you fine

clothing, and I know a skilful person who will make you so temptingly charming, and yet dress you so modestly, that you will be *Mater Dolorosa* and the beautiful *Magdalen* in one. Then I will bring you to the king, and he will read in your face the touching story of the wrong done to you. Then the task will be yours of reawakening the long-smouldering love, and finding in his arms compensation for your undeserved misfortune."

She looked at him with such flashing eyes that even Pöllnitz felt a little stricken, and cast down his eyes.

"Does the king send you with this message hither?" she asked, in a harsh, rough tone?

"No, not the king," he answered, almost timidly. "But I know that he remembers you with love and pain, and will rejoice at finding you again."

"If that be true, let him come and seek me," she exclaimed, proudly. "I will never go to him, for I am the affronted and injured. I saw his face to-day. He has grown cold and hard. His heart has been slain and turned to stone in his breast, to a gravestone, for Katt and Doris Ritter. He will not come to me."

"He will come, I tell you. Listen to me, Doris. You will not go to him? Then expect him here. Prepare, at least, so to receive him here as to make an impression upon his heart. Study your rôle well, and get your husband and children out of the way."

"My children," she exclaimed. "Nay, nay, only as mother, only under the protection of their innocent presence will I see him again. For my children only will I accept his sympathy and grace."

Pöllnitz stamped his foot angrily, and an oath died away between his compressed lips.

"You don't understand that our whole plan will fail if you do not do precisely as I prescribe? The king has no heart. But he has senses, and those you must flatter, to warm his chilled heart. You must meet him, not in the majesty of your misfortune alone, but in the tempting witchery of your beauty. You must work upon and win him, not with tears but smiles!"

She looked at him, full of scorn. "Go!" she said ; "we two have nothing to do with one another, and can have nothing in common. I should try to revenge myself for the new dishonor which you have just shown me, in your low propositions, but I know that I have no right to do so, for I am a woman laden with shame, and everyone feels justified in despising me. Go!"

"You send me away, then? You will not hear the voice of a well-meaning friend, you——"

"Baron Pöllnitz," she cried, with a loud voice, trembling with anger, "go, I tell you. Do not force me to extremes, to call the neighbors, and beg them to free me from the shameless man who disregards the sanctity of my house and abuses and sneers at a poor woman who abhors him. Go, and never let me see your face again, or hear your voice!"

"Well, I will go," said Pöllnitz. "Farewell, dear Madame Schömmmer. But I shall come again; and perhaps I may be so happy as to find in place of yourself the charming Doris Ritter, the young, enthusiastic maiden of olden days that loved the crown prince so passionately, and accepted his love and his gifts so willingly." He laughed, and pirouetted out of the scantily furnished room. He hastened through the shop, opened the door that led to the street, kicked aside the children sitting on the door-step, and went away.

"She is proud, indeed!" he muttered, with a shrug. "The lash did not humble her. That pleases me, and I am more convinced than ever that we shall succeed with her. She must and shall become the king's mistress, and since she will not go to him, I shall bring him to her. To-morrow he will examine the site for the queen mother's new palace, and that will be an admirable opportunity for me to bring him into her hut."

Doris Ritter, standing erect, with upraised arm, had watched Pöllnitz's departure. In this hour she was no longer the dishonored, shame-laden creature before whom all the world shrunk away—she was a proud woman, conscious of her own worth and her own honor, repelling an insult boldly and demanding just recognition of her dignity. But as the baron's steps died away the ecstasy of excitement died with it; and she was once more a poor, tortured, humiliated woman. With a deep groan she sank down upon a chair, folding her hands in her lap and staring straight before her. Once she muttered between her teeth: "Woe to him, woe to him, if he forgets what I have suffered for him; if he do not remove the shame that rests upon me! Woe to him, if he despises me as they all do. Then will Doris Ritter be his irreconcilable enemy, and take her revenge as surely as God is over us!"

CHAPTER XXVII.

THE PROPOSAL OF MARRIAGE.

"COURAGE, my handsome, lovelorn Count," said Madame Brandt to Count Voss, who was standing opposite her, with a forlorn expression, scarcely noticing in his misery the bewitching attitude that his charming Armide had assumed upon the velvet divan before him.

"I do not understand how you can be cheerful and laugh, when you say you love me," he said, hopelessly.

"Yes, I do indeed love you," she cried, laughing; "and for that very reason I am so cheerful. We are approaching our goal, and the curtain which is to conceal us from the world will soon be impenetrable. For no one will suspect that the husband of the young and beautiful Laura von Pannewitz could love the ugly, middle-aged Brandt."

"You, ugly and old?" cried the young count, indignant. "A blessing for you that it is yourself who speak such blasphemy. If it were another, I should kill him."

"But that would be very wrong, my dear friend, for that would betray our love to the world. Nay, nay, if anyone speaks thus to you, you must say, with a shrug, 'I do not know this Madame Brandt; what business is it of mine whether she is pretty or ugly? She may be old as Methusalem, for all I care.'"

"I shall never say anything of the kind. I could never bring myself to utter so disgraceful a lie. No, dearest, not even you are entitled to ask that of me. You see what power over me you possess, and still you are so cruel to me. You have condemned me to marry and I submit to your commands, though it seemed to me that my heart would break when I made my proposal to the queen. But now you must require nothing further; you must not inflict upon me the task of abusing and scoffing at you. No, no, I beg of you on my knees, do not torture me so cruelly, be merciful to me."

He had fallen on his knees before her, and laid his head upon the sofa on which Madame Brandt reclined in a careless attitude. She laid her hand upon his head, and played with his well-cared-for hair.

"I am not cruel. I am only prudent," she whispered, almost tenderly. "I would protect our love from danger, and assure

us an eternity of happiness. Trust me, Alexander, and do not doubt me. On the day that you lead Fräulein von Pannewitz to the altar, I will open my arms to you and tell you that I love you boundlessly!"

"No, no, you do not love," he sighed, forlornly. "You are always hard and cruel to me. You have never shown me any favor, never permitted me even once to press my burning lips upon your own, not the smallest gift have you ever accepted from me."

A scarcely perceptible scornful smile sped over the beauty's face as the passionate youth, still on his knees, continued speaking; she turned her face away to keep him from seeing her expression. But he thought it was because she was angry with him again.

"Heavens!" he exclaimed, in utter despair; "you won't even let me see your lovely face, you wish to drive me mad. What have I done to deserve this new torture? Is it an insult to ask of you the small favor of accepting a little gift from me? It is so sweet to constrain those we love to think of us, to place a ring upon the pretty, transparent finger, and say, 'Whenever thou seest this thou wilt think of me;' to ornament her throat with a gleaming chain and say to her, 'Now art thou chained, my love holds thee in bondage, thou art mine!' Oh! a man can begin to believe in the love of his sweetheart only when she condescends to accept a gift from him."

"And will you really begin to believe in me then?" she asked, in her tenderest tone, turning her laughing face to him once more.

"Yes!" he replied, delighted; "then I shall really believe in you."

"Well, then, give me something to remind me of you, something I can wear as a little dog wears a collar with its master's name."

She offered him her hand, which he passionately kissed. Then he drew from his bosom a case, so large and heavy that she could scarcely grasp it.

"But that holds no mere ring," she said, reproachfully. "You have deceived me, misused my kindness, and, instead of giving me some simple ring, you wish to overwhelm me with your wealth. Take back this case, dear Count. I will not even look at its contents, I will not know how far your extravagant pride goes. Take your treasures, and give me in their stead the simple ring I promised to accept."

She had arisen, and now handed him the case with the gest-

ure of an offended queen. Her poor lover stood before her with an expression of deep despair.

"If you really wish to torture me to death, do it at once, not day by day, and hour by hour," he said, almost weeping. "I do everything that you command, I am even about to be married for your sake, and you would not show me the slightest friendliness!"

He began to cry outright, and turned away to conceal his tears. Then, summoning all his resolution, he said, with the defiance of despair:

"Well, I will learn of you how to say no, and nothing but no. If you refuse to accept this case, I shall refuse to marry Fräulein von Pannewitz. If you force me to take back these miserable stones, I shall go straight to the queen and tell her that I have made a mistake, that I cannot and will not marry Fräulein von Pannewitz, and am leaving Berlin for a long absence."

"Nay, you must not go away and leave me," she cried, with an appearance of alarm. "Give me the case, I accept it. I cannot have you leave Berlin!"

The count uttered a cry of delight, and rushed to her with open arms. But Madame Brandt waved him softly back.

"When you are married I will kiss you, not before. To-day I merely accept this case, but I shall not open it, for fear of our quarrelling again."

Count Voss was beside himself with gratitude and pleasure, and swore that he longed to marry Fräulein von Pannewitz that very day, to win the gift of a kiss from Madame Brandt. The beauty laughed.

"Love does remove mountains, it is true," she said, "but it cannot lend wings to the tongue of a queen. You have placed the matter in the hands of the queen mother. You have made that royal lady your wooer by proxy, and now you must wait until her majesty pleases to make your offer to Fräulein von Pannewitz."

"She will do it to-day; the queen has given her promise. I was obliged to make my proposal to her, for the Pannewitz family especially demanded that I should have the queen's consent before they consent to my marriage."

"And Laura herself? Have you asked her?"

"Oh!" cried the vain count, with a shrug, "I am certain of her assent. She is a poor Fräulein dependent upon the proud queen dowager. I shall make her a countess and give her the freedom of living independently upon her estates."

where she will have everything—honor, wealth, splendor—only not myself, not her husband!”

“Poor Laura!” said Madame Brandt, softly.

“You pity her! but I shall be with you!”

“Yes, you will be with me, but to-day you have been with me too long. That may arouse suspicion. So go! Let me act for you. Act for yourself! do not be daunted by any difficulties; think of the goal that awaits you. Go!”

The count took his leave with a sigh, while Madame Brandt succeeded with difficulty in concealing her impatience and her desire to be alone. She looked after him with a scornful smile when he finally left her.

“Vain fool,” she murmured, with a shrug. “He deserves to be deceived, for he is an idiot! But now I will see what this costly box contains.”

She flew to the table and hastily raised the lid. A cry of surprise broke from her lips and her eyes glowed with pleasure as brightly as the diamonds in the case.

“This is, indeed, a royal gift,” she whispered, breathlessly; “more than royal, for I do not believe that Frederick is capable of giving a woman such diamonds. But I have earned them by my wonderful comedy acting. This unfortunate count is now firmly convinced that I am the most noble, unselfish, loving creature on earth! When I saw this great case coming out of his pocket, how my heart beat, how hard it was to restrain my hands from reaching to grasp the precious treasure. Yet I succeeded in appearing to decline it, mastered my impatience, and did not open it in his presence! Else he would, despite my effort, have seen my delight in my eyes, and that might have led the poor fool to question the unselfishness of my love. Manteuffel himself could hardly have acted more skilfully.”

She laughed aloud in the excess of her joy and closed the case, shutting it carefully within her writing-desk.

“Now to the queen mother,” she said. “The mine is laid, I will light the fire and bring on the explosion! I must hint to the queen that the marriage of the pretty Laura with Count Voss is necessary to prevent trouble in the royal family. I must—*eh bien, nous verrons!* I hear the queen’s voice already; she has begun her promenade in the garden, and I must not be absent!”

She took her hat and shawl and hastened away to the garden.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

THE QUEEN AS WOOER.

THE queen dowager was loitering in the garden of Montbijou. She seemed unusually cheerful, and her proud, grave eyes were lighted with a milder, friendlier gleam than heretofore. She had good reason too for being cheerful, for her bold wishes, cherished in vain so many years, seemed now about to be realized, and all the fine promises which her son had made at his first visit were being kept. She had already received the first monthly installment of her three-fold widow’s pension, her retinue had been increased and established upon a truly royal footing, and the king had told her yesterday that he should himself select the site of her new palace to-day. Moreover, the homage which she received from the whole court, and especially from the favorites and immediate attendants of the king, proved what influence was attributed to her and how great the importance attached to her favor and approbation. While Queen Elizabeth Christine had retired to her castle of Schönhausen, where she lived as though in mourning, the pleasure palace of Montbijou had become the meeting-place of the whole court. Even the young king, who had not rejoiced the heart of his queen with a single visit at Schönhausen, came almost daily to call upon his mother, and a brilliant escort of cavaliers accompanied him. So Queen Sophia Dorothea had good reason to be cheerful, and look to the future with joyful anticipations. Besides, this was the first time that she had taken her promenade with her own splendid retinue, that had only yesterday been completed and established. When she looked back, as she occasionally did, she no longer saw the two court ladies alone and bored, but six of the most distinguished and beautiful ladies of the nobility, who had been appointed to her service and were now in conversation with four cavaliers whom the king had selected. She listened to them chattering with her marshal, Count Rhedern, noticed the merry laugh of the newly nominated maid-of-honor, Louise von Schwerin, and the soft, melodious voice of the beautiful Laura von Pannewitz, whose grace and beauty had impressed even her spouse, the dead king, who had actually for a few weeks been enamoured of Laura.

Count Rhedern had besought the queen mother to grant him her assistance and mediation. He had begged her to be

his advocate with the king in a delicate matter. The count wished to marry, but had not yet obtained the king's consent, and would probably obtain it with great difficulty, for the chosen of the count's heart was, alas! no *Fräulein* of the old nobility, but had the misfortune to be only the daughter of a Berlin merchant.

"But I do not understand," said the queen, after the count finished his confidential communications, "why you wish to marry this lady; I think the nobility of this kingdom is not so poor in beauty, and Count Rhedern need surely not descend so low to seek a wife. Look back of you and you will see beautiful maidens, all of most strictly noble descent."

"Your Majesty is right now as always," sighed Marshal Rhedern. "These ladies are beautiful, aristocratic, young, and amiable, but one thing is wanting to make them perfect, Mamselle Orguelin is neither beautiful, young, nor amiable, but she has one quality wanting in all these charmers, and for this one thing I am forced to marry."

"Count, you speak in riddles, and, as it seems to me, in very doubtful riddles. What is this one thing that Mamselle Orguelin has, and for the sake of which you are forced to marry?"

"Your Majesty, this one thing is money!"

"Ah! money," said her majesty, smiling. "It is, indeed, a fitting thing for a cavalier to marry below his rank for the sake of money."

"Your Majesty, it is precisely because I remember the duties which my rank and my escutcheon impose upon me, that I have had to bring myself to this unsuitable marriage. Your Majesty will pardon me if I venture to lay before you the hidden trouble, the veiled misery of my house! The line of Counts Rhedern is an old and illustrious one. My fathers were ever rich in virtues, but never rich in money. The virtue of frugality alone seems to have been always wanting among them. They were too generous to refuse anyone a request, too proud and extravagant to suit the expenses of their noble family to the narrow limits of their incomes. They maintained externally the pomp and splendor of their rank, and gnawed in secret the hard crust of poverty. So it went from father to son, the debts increasing, the income decreasing; and if I do not determine to make an end of this poverty with one mighty sacrifice, I shall soon exhibit to the court and nobility the wretched spectacle of a Count Rhedern forced to give up his hotel, his equipage, his furniture, and servants, and live like a beggar."

"That is, indeed, a sad and urgent case," cried the queen, filled with sympathy. But are there, in our aristocracy, no heiresses whose fortune might save you?"

"None, your Majesty, who like Mamselle Orguelin could bring me a million."

"A million! that is a large fortune, and I appreciate your being forced to marry the lady. I give you my consent and promise you that the king will not refuse you his own. So make your preparations and have no fear."

"When your Majesty speaks so I am assured," said the count, with a deep sigh.

"And yet you sigh, count."

"Your Majesty, one more assent to my marriage is still wanting."

"The bride's own?"

"Yes; and this assent is bound up with another condition, which your Majesty alone can fulfil."

The queen laughed. "That is truly a strange betrothal. You speak quite seriously of your approaching marriage, and are not even betrothed. You speak of your *fiancée*, and Mademoiselle Orguelin has not given her assent—and whether or no she will do so depends, you say, upon me."

"Yes, your Majesty. For this lady, who is as proud of her million as though it were the most resplendent family tree, will become my wife only upon the condition that she be received at court and granted participation in all the court festivities, as suits her rank as Countess Rhedern."

"Truly, this is vast presumption!" cried the queen, with an angry frown. A shopkeeper's daughter who carries her arrogance so far as to aspire to appear at the court of Prussia! Never shall it be, never can I consent to such an innovation, for it is ruinous, calculated to weaken the prestige of the nobility and diminish its highest and best privilege—that of *alone* approaching royalty. It was this view which prevented me from receiving the so-called Count Néal at my court, although my son has granted him access to his own, and would, as I very well know, be gratified should I follow the royal example. But I, as queen, cannot do so. There must be a limit which separates royalty from the common world, and only unmixed, unblemished nobility can do this. You see, my poor count, that this time I cannot accede to your request."

"Ah! your Majesty, take pity upon me. Do but most graciously remember that I am ruined and a beggar if this alliance fail and I cannot marry Mademoiselle Orguelin's million."

"Yes, I had forgotten that," said her majesty, reflecting.

"Besides, this is a wholly different case, and I do not think that my queen has the same principle to follow here as in the case of the *soi-disant* Count Néal. A man always represents himself and his line, and no power on earth can give him nobler blood than flows in his veins. But with a woman it is different. She takes her husband's name and is elevated to his rank; she becomes bone of his bone, and can do no harm to the prestige of his name. The sons of Count Rhedern will always be Counts Rhedern, though their mother be sprung from no noble house."

"True," said her majesty, "the case differs from that of the adventurer Néal. Her husband's rank would cast a veil over the newly-made countess."

"And your Majesty would be the beneficent protectress of our family," said Count Rhedern, with a sweetly-insinuating tone. "Your Majesty would not only restore my house to its ancient standing, but also save for our country Mademoiselle Orguelin's million; for in case I cannot fulfil the condition which she has imposed upon me and assure her the *entrée* at court, Mademoiselle Orguelin will marry a young Hollander, a friend of her father, who has come hither solely to sue for the hand of the daughter."

"Then it is almost a duty to give you this lady to keep her million in the country," said the queen, with a smile. "Your request shall be acceded to, and this little millionaire, who so longs to appear at court, shall have her way. I will speak to my son, the king, to-day, and can say in advance that I am certain of his consent."

And the queen, proud and happy to have an opportunity of showing the court what influence she exercised upon her royal son, graciously let the count kiss her hand, and listened with pleasure to his passionate expressions of thankfulness and devotion. Then she dismissed him with a gracious nod and commanded him to send her Madame Brandt, whose merry voice she had long heard, and who had just been making the cavaliers and ladies laugh with one of her droll and piquant stories.

While the marshal flew like an arrow to fulfil the commands of his royal mistress, Sophia Dorothea paced up and down with an abstracted smile. Now that she was permitted to act as queen to some trifling extent, the woman in her stirred again. She found it amusing and delightful to have her hand a little in the play in the love affairs of the court people, and to arrange marriages like a beneficent fairy.

In this one day two of the most distinguished counts had besought her support; for both she was to do the wooing; both expected of her the fortune and future splendor of their houses. She was flattered and stimulated by these applications, and was therefore in her best and most gracious humor when she received Madame Brandt and began a conversation with her. At first the conversation turned upon indifferent things, but Madame Brandt knew very well why the queen had granted her an especial interview. She held the light ready which was to spring the mine that had been laid beneath the love and happiness of poor Laura von Pannewitz.

"Did you know," the queen asked, suddenly, "that we have a pair of lovers at our court?"

"A pair of lovers!" repeated Madame Brandt, with such visible surprise and fear that the queen's attention was arrested by it.

"You are so alarmed," she added, with a smile, "that one might suppose we were living in a cloister and it was a crime to speak of love and marriage. Or was it only a little anger that you knew nothing of the love story?"

"Pardon, your Majesty," said Madame Brandt, softly; "I knew this love-story well, but I could not dream that your Majesty had been informed of it."

"Then you knew of it? Ah! yes, Fräulein von Pannewitz is your friend, and it is therefore but natural that she should make you the confidante of her love."

"I am, indeed, the confidante of this unhappy and tearful love," said Madame Brandt, with a sigh; "but your Majesty may be assured that I have left no persuasions, no pleas untried. I have even resorted to threats to cure this unfortunate, enthusiastic young girl of her unholy, unhappy passion."

"You might have spared your pains," said the queen, with a smile, "for this love is not, as you say, an unholy but a happy one! Count Voss came to me this morning to sue for the hand of Fräulein von Pannewitz."

"Poor, unhappy Laura!" sighed Madame von Brandt.

"How so?" cried the queen; "you pity her in spite of my telling you that Count Voss is suing for her hand?"

"But what has Count Voss to do with Laura's love?" asked Madame Brandt, with such well-feigned astonishment that the unsuspecting queen might well be deceived by it.

"How so?" exclaimed the queen, impatiently. "Is it not Count Voss? Then whom does she love, and who can have

awakened in her an unhappy and tearful love? Do you know? Can you tell me the name?"

"Your Majesty, I know it, but I have pledged my word, with a sacred oath upon the Bible, never to let it pass my lips."

"It was ill considered to tender such a vow," cried the queen, impatiently.

"Your Majesty, it was my friend who demanded it of me; and in view of her sorrow and her tears, I could not refuse her request, by fulfilling which I gave her the poor consolation of pouring out her plaint into the heart of a true and silent friend. And this friendship makes it my duty to beseech your Majesty to support the proposal of Count Voss with all means at command of your royal power, and even to force my poor Laura, if necessary, to this marriage."

"How so? You say she loves another, and yet you wish me to compel her to marry Count Voss?"

"Your Majesty, there is no other means of saving two noble and devoted hearts from the errors of their unholy passion. Laura is a most chaste, noble, and virtuous maiden; but she is in love, and every woman grows weak at last under the tears and anger, the passionate glow of the beloved."

"So her love is returned?"

"Your Majesty, Laura would have maintained her maidenly pride in the face of an unrequited love!"

"And still you call this love unholy and tearful?"

"I call it so and it is so, for there are unconquerable obstacles in its way. A chasm lies between the lovers across which they can never join hands. They would be forced to plunge into its depths before they could be united! And every word which these two unhappy beings speak of their love is an offence—yes, an act of high treason!"

"High treason!" cried the queen, her eyes flashing with indignation. "Now I understand you. This proud, presumptuous maiden ventures to raise her eyes as high as though she were a princess of royal blood. In the arrogance of her beauty she aspires, perhaps, to play the rôle of a Maintenon or a La Vallière. Yes, I understand all now, her sentimental pallor, her sighs, her melancholy smile, her change of color when I told her that the king was coming hither with his court to-day. Yes, so it is, Fräulein von Pannewitz loves——"

"Oh! your Majesty, have mercy, and do not speak the name. For I should have to deny it, and that were a crime against your Majesty; or if I admitted it, I must be unfaithful to my oath and my friend! Your Majesty in your wisdom

has understood what I ventured only half to hint at, and my noble queen knows now why a speedy marriage with Count Voss seems the only means of saving both these great and noble hearts, which must otherwise consume themselves with vain longings or succumb to a passion stronger than their sense of duty."

"Fräulein von Pannewitz shall decide within the present hour to become the bride of Count Voss," cried the queen, imperiously. "Woe to her if she dare refuse; if her impudent arrogance goes so far as to cherish a passion which I have determined to destroy with the whole force of my royal will."

"May your Majesty follow implicitly the wisdom of your royal soul. I would only beg you not to tell poor Laura who it is from whom your Majesty has learned her unfortunate secret."

"I promise you that," said the queen, who turned about with unwonted rapidity, wholly forgetting her royal dignity in her angry haste, and hastened directly to her retinue, which paused as she approached, and took up its position at each side of the *allée*. At that moment a lackey in the royal livery was seen hastening from the palace. He approached Fräulein von Pannewitz and whispered a message in her ear. The maid of honor hastened at once to the queen, and bowing low, said:

"Her majesty the reigning queen has just arrived, and inquires whether your Majesty is disposed to receive her."

The queen did not reply at once. She looked with an annihilating expression of contempt at the young girl who stood before her with downcast eyes, all humility and devotion, seeming to feel the whole weight of the queen's scorn without raising her eyes; for she blushed deeply, and a pained, anxious expression spread over her features. The queen saw that Laura, blushing thus, was bewitching, and would gladly have trodden her under foot, to punish her for such highly treasonable beauty. She felt it impossible to be silent longer, to postpone the crisis. The crater of her anger flamed high, and the destroying stream of lava must break forth. The queen was now merely a passionate, reckless woman, nothing more; controlled solely by her anger and the might of her insulted pride.

"I will go to receive her majesty," she said, with trembling lips. "Her majesty has come without ceremony, and I will therefore receive her without formality. You may all remain here, Fräulein von Pannewitz alone will accompany me."