

close beside her, lie the best, most faithful friend she has met in years—Madam Potiphar!

How much diversion, how many pleasant hours this book has given her. It was, in deed, the only friend who had sought her out in her loneliness, and who had given her news once more of him whom she had never forgotten, but about whom she had questioned no one—Cyprian Lankwitz. Reviews of this book, which has created such scandal by its comments upon society in the capital, had first called her attention to it. She had ordered it, and read it with ever increasing enthusiasm. All these opinions were here; the author of the book felt as she did, and that brought him nearer the hermit of Bahrenberg than any one before. She had sent her agent to the capital to learn the author, with what result can be imagined.

She grew more and more fond of the book. Its delightful, if sharp, humour made her smile, although she fancied she had forgotten how. The unknown author, 'Severin,' amused her, made her laugh and cry, and shortened her lonely hours. Truly, this anonymous 'Severin' deserved to be rewarded.

A smile lit up the sick woman's features, and hastily, in nervous dread lest death might frustrate her plans, she commanded a messenger to ride to the nearest town and fetch lawyers that she might make her will.

The lawyers came just in time. The invalid's condition had been aggravated by her feverish excitement.

The will was drawn up, and to the amazement of the lawyer, Claudine, Baroness von Bahrenberg, made the author of the book, 'Madam Potiphar,' A. Severin, the universal heir of her large fortune. Baroness Florence Oshly's name was not mentioned, and her daughter, Mignon, inherited only the old family diamonds, which must remain in the family.

Half the cattle and fine estate, as well as Claudine's actual cash, were to fall to an unknown man who had alarmed the fashionable world by a book whose contents were so scandalous that he was forced to conceal his identity behind a pseudonym.

A notary called the baroness's attention to the fact that 'A. Severin' was a name which, in spite of all conceivable efforts, had as yet remained unpierced, but one of the other men interrupted him with a significant wink.

'Pray, my good friend, do not grudge the world this fine joke. Think of the sensation. The author of 'Madam Potiphar' is offered a princely fortune if he will lift his visor. Something so interesting has not occurred before in the nineteenth century. Do you think a mortal can resist this tempting will? Never! My fingers burn to publish the announcement in the newspapers. So keep still. Whether it is a pseudonym or not, now we will discover the author of 'Madam Potiphar.'

So the testament was signed and sealed, and such peaceful calm came over Baroness Claudine that her physician almost began to hope for an improvement in her condition.

But when the first snowflake whirled in the air, the martyr of Bahrenberg lay pale and cold upon her pillow, and it seemed to those who saw her that the homely old face had never looked so beautiful as since the kiss of the silent angel who ends all earthly misery.

The lawyers could scarcely await the time for opening the will. With one stroke the already half-forgotten 'Madam Potiphar' would be the centre of interest, and solution of the anonymous riddle would surely create more sensation than in the first place the book had created.

And it was so. Probably printers' ink never created more sensation than the legal announcement that Baroness Claudine von Bahrenberg had left her large fortune to the author of the book, 'Madam Potiphar,' and that the author, 'A. Severin,' or the person identical with this pseudonym, had only to present himself to the under-signed lawyer, and prove his identity, to enter upon his inheritance.

This was an event which would electrify the coldest being.

Public interest grew from day to day.

'Has he announced himself?' was the burning question.


There was no other topic of conversation, and where 'Madam Potiphar' had long lain in a corner, it was quickly brought out again and dusted. It had never been imagined that Claudine von Bahrenberg would thus excite their curiosity and impatience once more.

But 'A. Severin' was a pseudonym and remained one.

CHAPTER XV.

COUNT CYRIL LANKWITZ'S rooms were noticeable for their extreme simplicity. Heavy old furniture, costly only because of its age, had been brought from his mother's old castle. Ornaments, arms and costly knick-knacks would only have been in his way, in which respect he was a

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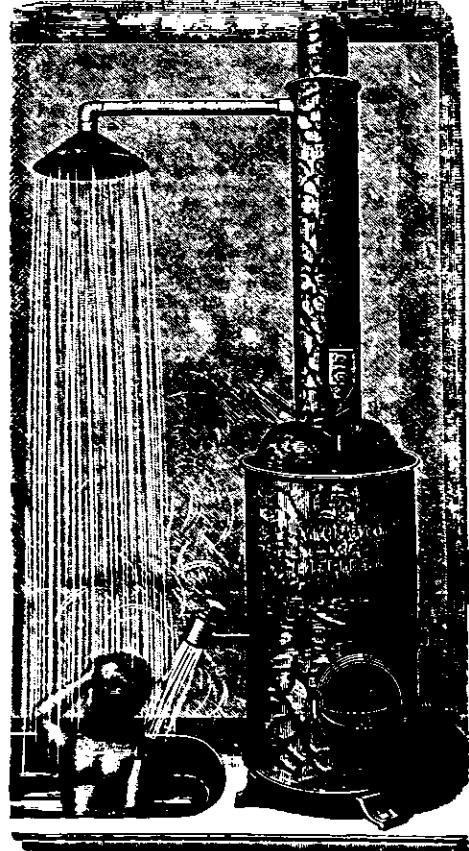
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striking contrast to his father, whose refined, artistic taste never wearied of accomplishing new marvels of decoration and comfort, which trifles consumed a small fortune.

Cyril sat in his large leather-covered armchair, a thick wolfskin beneath his feet, an extinguished cigar between his teeth. He was absorbed in his work, and forgetful of all else. An open letter from Princess Hatzmire lay before him, and the young count was poring over the damaged chronicles which he had saved from Neudeck.

There was a furious ring at the door-bell. Only Count Cyprian rang thus. His hasty, elastic step was heard almost immediately in the hall.

'Good evening, my boy,' he cried, entering the room. 'The devil! Busy again?' Valleral slapped his son affectionately on the back, threw his coat to the old servant who had limped after him, and rubbed his hands. 'Something warm, old man. A little cognac—but quick!'

The servant gave his young master a helpless, imploring glance, and Cyril quickly pushed back his chair and laid down his pen.

'This is delightful, papa. I have just this moment finished. Some cognac, then, at once.' And he drew out his keys and went up to an old carved sideboard. 'You may go, Brann. I have everything here.'

The captain followed his son, both hands in his pockets, and stared curiously over his shoulder into the open cupboard. He laughed softly to himself.

'Just like an old maid! Everything neat and orderly. Glasses, bottles, and plates—canned goods—dear me, you can serve a breakfast at any moment,' and he threw himself down upon the comfortable old sofa. 'You are a queer fellow, Hosanna. To be sure you live as comfortably as a backwoodsman, without any service; but even that has its advantages; you are spared much vexation. I am not distrustful, but now I believe that you are right, and that that wretched Parisian, my valet, robs me unmercifully.'

'Have you discharged him?'

'Valleral sighed and took the offered glass of cognac.'

'To be frank, I have not the courage, I am so used to the fellow. He is so attentive, knows all my habits and likings; and, do you know, my boy, at my age, one becomes a trifle lazy and helpless, and the perpetual training of servants is terrible.'

'Still I should think it more agreeable than such a reversed order of things. You are not Moulins' master; he is yours.'

Cyprian laughed.

'I have often thought recently what a wretched existence an old bachelor leads.'

Cyril raised his head abruptly.

'And you say that?'

'I say it. Even liberty may become burdensome, because one who possesses it usually abuses it. It has lost the charm of novelty for me, and in spite of my gay life, I am unpeppably bored. How valuable a true woman's love is. I long for all the tender interest your mother used to take in everything that concerned me. Who really sympathizes now with me?'

'I, father.'

'My good boy! Yes, you are a comfort when I can come and unburden my heart to you, but you live here and I live there; and however attached a father and son may be, it is quite different from the love of a wife, who is one heart and soul with you.'

Cyril laughed nervously.

'You are in a strange mood to-day, papa, a mood which I have never seen you in before.' He laid his arm on the captain's shoulders. 'What makes you so gloomy? Moulins alone, or a mournful, perilous ebb in the cash box, which all your joy and love of life have drained?'

Valleral smoothed his handsome moustache thoughtfully. He smiled, but even his smile was somewhat sad.

'Ebb—a serious ebb,' he sighed, deeply.

'Ah, dear, innocent, saintly Hosanna, what does a model man like you know of the terrible meaning of this word? He rose and paced the room excitedly. Suddenly he paused before his son and rested both hands heavily on his shoulders. 'Cyril,' he murmured, 'I foolishly gambled for a few evenings, had no luck, and am on the verge of ruin.'

The young count started up in horror.

'Good heavens!' he groaned.

But Valleral continued, with flushed face:

'As I know that at present you need every penny yourself to tide over the strike of your miners without impairing your estates, I look upon it as absolutely out of the question, my boy, that you should hold your hopeless old father above water this time. What I need is too much—and so—so— The speaker paused, drew out his perfumed handkerchief, and mopped his brow. Cyril sat as though paralyzed, and stared straight before him. 'And so?' he repeated faintly, mechanically. 'So I must marry?'

'Marry?'

'And some wealthy, very wealthy woman,' said Valleral, seating himself comfortably on the sofa again. Now that he