

WOOLING A WIDOW.

BY EWALD AUGUST KOENIG.

CHAPTER XIV.

REJECTED.

DORA had not been mistaken in her supposition that Sonnenberg would soon put the decisive question to her.

She read the resolve in his face when, shortly before noon on the following day, he entered her drawing-room. She saw the quick, significant glance which he cast at her companion, and her indignation against this fortune hunter awoke within her in full force.

Since she had been told what the detective had learned with regard to him in London, she actually felt an aversion to him. She would have given much to have been able at that moment to confront him with the terrible accusation that he was a thief and a murderer.

In his usual courteous manner, he raised her hand to his lips and seated himself opposite to her.

"Allow me to express the hope that your mind is more at ease now," he said, glancing keenly at her lovely face. "I am sure you must have resigned yourself to the unalterable facts and formed the wise resolve to forget the man who proved so unworthy of your love."

"You might be wrong in your supposition," replied Dora, with forced composure.

"I can hardly believe that, for no other reason than because you cannot fail to remember what you owe to your reputation and your position in society. You must permit me to revert once more to the subject which Frau Hennig brought up a few days ago. I am obliged to do so, for your own sake. The scandal-mongers are growing bolder and bolder; and when I prove them, I am asked, mockingly, what gives me the right to enter the lists in your favour."

"That sounds very alarming indeed," replied Dora, in a tone of mingled irritation and sarcasm. "What have I done that is so bad?"

"Nothing but that you have not openly dissolved your relations with that man," was Sonnenberg's answer, while his eyes, which were glowing with passion, again turned significantly to the companion, who left the room noiselessly.

"Ought not every one to take it as a matter of course that my engagement to him no longer exists?"

"Certainly; but, nevertheless, they cling to the belief that it has not been cancelled."

"I am sure I don't see how I am to convince them of the contrary."

"Nothing easier than that," he cried, in violent agitation, seizing her hand, which she hastily withdrew from his grasp.

"Dora, you must have known how much I love you, you must have discovered it long ago. Make me the happiest of men by giving me the rights of a betrothed husband. Then no one will venture to blame you or to connect your name any longer with that of a criminal."

She lowered her eyelids for a moment. She did not wish him to read in her eyes the anger which blazed up within her.

He interpreted the flush on her cheeks in his favour, and did not see the bitter, defiant expression which lurked in the corners of her mouth.

"I need not tell you that I will do all in my power to make you happy," he continued. "I know that you do not care about such effusions, nor can I find words to describe as I would wish the feelings which I entertain for you. I can only entreat you to reinstate your life and your future to me, and assure you that you will never regret it. You are acquainted with my circumstances, my future prospects and the traits of my character. There is nothing in any of these which could cause you any anxiety or mistrust of me."

"Nothing?" Dora interrupted him, unable to conceal her indignation at this audacious self-praise. "I am not so sure of that."

"And what reason have you for doubting it?" he asked, somewhat taken aback.

"I have various reasons."

"Which you must inform me of, so that I can refute them."

"I must," replied Dora, haughtily. "What should force me to do so?"

"The consideration for public opinion to which I directed your attention a while ago."

"You have nothing to do with that."

"More than you think," he replied, irritated by the sharp tone which she had assumed, and which led him to fear, even now, that his hopes might not be realised. "Your name is also connected with my own, not through any fault of mine. It is but the natural result—"

rupted him in so peremptory a tone that he remained silent. If you thought that I would allow myself to be influenced by that you were mistaken."

He bit his lips in suppressed anger and nervously twisted the points of his beard.

"I did not allude to that circumstance," he said, with a slight shrug of the shoulders, "because I considered it necessary in order to induce you to favour my wishes. I merely wished to draw your attention to the fact."

"No more of this, if you please."

"And you will not tell me why you distrust me?" he asked, once more forcing himself to the friendly tone in which he had addressed her before. "I thought, until now, that nothing stood between us but the memory of that scoundrel who deceived you—"

"Have you never deceived a woman?" she again interrupted him.

"Not to my knowledge."

"And yet I suspect, in spite of that declaration, that Mrs Mary Brighton knew you very well."

This blow fell upon him so unexpectedly that he started, and even though he did not lose countenance, she did not fail to notice his sudden alarm.

"I have told you repeatedly that that lady was an utter stranger to me. Why then do you revert to the subject at the present time?"

"Because, just at this moment I happened to remember the lady's looks so full of hatred and revenge," she replied, gravely, fixing her eyes upon him. "I have never doubted for a moment that those looks were meant for you alone."

"I regret that the poor woman is no longer alive so that I might make it possible to set your mind at rest on that subject."

"I do not think that—"

"I should prove to you that the lady never knew me."

Dora was incensed at this lie; she felt tempted to cast the name of John Brighton in his face. No one, it seemed to her, could expect her any longer to pretend to be on friendly terms with this man.

She forgot the warning and plans of the detective. Dislike, abhorrence and contempt had taken possession of her thoughts and feelings so entirely that she no longer was conscious of anything but the irresistible impulse to break with this man forever.

"If that is the only reason which induces you to doubt the sincerity of my affection, you will be obliged to admit that it cannot be called a valid one," he resumed, after a pause. "I was happy in being allowed to call myself your friend; I believed that that friendship justified me in entertaining hopes the fulfilment of which promised me the highest earthly happiness, and now I learn that you trouble your mind with groundless suspicions which shake the confidence with which you have favoured me hitherto. I entreat you to do away with this mistrust; to give me your full confidence again, and you may rest assured that, as my wife, you shall be as happy as you deserve to be."

"I regret—"

"Do not deprive me of all hope," he exclaimed, in feverish agitation. "Ask for time to consider? I will gladly give it to you. Consult with your friends—"

"No, Herr Sonnenberg, I shall not do so, for I cannot expect any sincere advice from that quarter," she replied, icily. "You know perfectly well that my heart, with all its thoughts and feelings, still belongs to that unhappy man whom you call a scoundrel, and that it will be his forever. You might, therefore, have told yourself that the realisation of your hopes is impossible."

"No, no," he replied quickly. "I could not tell myself that, for I could not consider the continuation of your love to a condemned criminal as anything but folly."

"Perhaps no one knows as well as you that he was innocently condemned," she cried, fixing her flashing eyes on Sonnenberg, with a penetrating look.

"Madam," he replied, rising from his seat, "I do not understand the meaning of those words, but I suspect that it is insulting to me. Nor do I know what reason you have for feeling such anger against me, for I am not conscious of having given you any occasion for it. If I have been slandered to you, I suppose I may beg of you to tell me plainly what you have heard, and thus make it possible for me to defend myself."

"No, indeed," said Dora, who had recovered her composure and now perceived that she had gone too far; "no one has slandered you to me."

"Then what you said was merely a surmise," he asked, in a subdued tone.

"You must be satisfied with what I told

you before: I cannot forget this man whom I still love."

"Notwithstanding that you know certainly that he deceived you?"

"So I was told at the time, and I can never forgive myself for believing it. Now I am better informed."

His face had grown livid. The deep furrows between his angrily contracted eyebrows told of evil, revengeful thoughts.

"Then you will give me no hope whatever," he said, as he took up his hat.

"Of what use would a hope be to you, the realisation of which is impossible?" she replied. "I regret that you have forced me to tell you all this, but you demanded frankness of me, and I felt myself obliged to comply with your request."

A spiteful expression crossed Sonnenberg's face. He bowed ceremoniously.

"You might have done so more courteously, madam," he said hoarsely. "I am not conscious of having done anything which would give you the right to insult me."

"That was not my intention!" she interrupted him quickly.

"And still you said that no one knew better than I that Dornberg was innocently condemned."

"In moments of excitement we do not always remember that our words may be misunderstood," replied Dora. "Pray consider that remark unaided, or of no significance. And do not bear me any ill-will for the answer which I have given you, which I was obliged to give, because my heart dictated it to me. Under other circumstances it might have been different."

He bowed again, and retired slowly to the door.

"Farewell!" he said. "May you never regret having repudiated the hand of a true friend."

Dora turned away from him with a slight shrug of the shoulders.

Sonnenberg left the room, and when he had closed the door behind him, his livid features were distorted by the evil passions raging within him.

Another door opened softly and Ernestine glided into the passage.

She started when she saw his face, and hastily laid her finger on her lips, so as to warn him against a loud outbreak of his fury.

"I heard everything," she whispered. "I cannot understand her answer—only yesterday she seemed inclined to accept you."

The quivering of his lips showed how difficult it was for him to control his excitement.

"That hope is destroyed forever! I must speak to you to-night, Ernestine."

"To-night? I don't know if—"

"You must make it possible."

"I might go to you—"

"No, I do not wish that!" he said quickly. "I have reason to suppose that our friendly relations are suspected. Where was Dora last evening?"

"At Fraulein Dornberg's I think."

"Well, I will send her a letter, the contents of which will, I hope, induce her to go out this evening again. Then you must send the servant away. Can you do so without exciting suspicion?"

"What are you going to do?" asked Ernestine, somewhat alarmed.

"I will tell you to-night. When the coast is clear here put the lamp near the window. I shall be watching for the signal, and will come as soon as it is given."

Again a door was opened. Dora stood before them.

Sonnenberg hastened to take a ceremonious leave and to disappear through the outer door of the apartment.

With an apparently unembarrassed air Ernestine followed her mistress into the drawing-room. She had no suspicion of the storm that was raging in Dora's bosom.

"I suppose I owe it to you and to your underhand dealings that that man dared offer me his hand!" Dora began, in a cutting tone, while she paced slowly to and fro. "The accusation which Gustav Dornberg made against you appears to me in a very different light now, and I can only regret bitterly that my eyes were not opened sooner."

Ernestine had seated herself in an easy chair. A scornful smile hovered around her thin lips.

"I do not understand you," she said, coldly. "That Sonnenberg would make you an offer you could foresee as well as I; and, if you would be just, you cannot deny that you have encouraged his attentions. How could he suppose that you would con-

sider him presumptuous? You have appeared in public only in his company—"

"And in secret he tried to influence me through you," Dora interrupted her, impatiently. "Even though I remained silent I was well aware of your clandestine meetings and interviews."

"Well, then, if Herr Sonnenberg asked me to say a word in his favour, why should I have been so unskillful as to refuse?" asked Ernestine, now likewise assuming an aggressive tone. "All that I did was solely for your interest. You had to cut loose at last from that criminal—"

"In order to give my hand to a fortune-hunter? Do not look so surprised. You know that man and his past life. You entered into a league with him of which I was to know nothing. And you did so while I was still engaged to Gustav and before any shadow had fallen upon our happiness, and you two made common cause with my brother and his family. All this I now recognise clearly and distinctly, and I repeat that I can only regret that these intrigues did not come to my knowledge sooner."

Ernestine had risen. However hate might have taken possession of her, she yet succeeded in retaining her outward composure.

"Your reproaches are highly offensive and insulting," she replied, tossing her head defiantly. "I cannot comprehend how Sonnenberg's offer can have excited you so violently, and I can understand still less the injustice with which you heap reproaches upon me. Nor do I know of what you can accuse me, for I cannot see that I have done wrong even if I did countenance the suit of so thoroughly honorable a gentleman."

"Honorable!" said Dora, sarcastically, again forgetting, in the desire to give vent to her indignation, the warning of the detective. "I do not consider him so."

"Have you proofs to the contrary?" asked Ernestine, watching her keenly.

"Not yet; but—"

"Ah, so you are ready to condemn him on the strength of mere suppositions. Then, of course, there is no use in defending him."

"Did the jury who convicted Gustav Dornberg have any better proof?" asked Dora. "But enough of this—you will understand that we cannot remain together any longer than after these explanations. I leave it to you to sever our connections in the manner most convenient to you. You are welcome to remain under my roof until you find another position that suits you. I will not hurry you, and am ready to agree to any reasonable wish you may entertain."

A low knock at the door interrupted the conversation, and the next moment Frau Heppner entered the room.

Did she know already that Sonnenberg had been rejected?

Dora could hardly believe it to be the case; but, nevertheless, she received her sister-in-law more coolly than was her wont.

"I only came to invite you for this evening," said the latter, looking after Frau Hennig, who left the room somewhat noisily. "Papa and mamma are going to leave us next week to go to London, and as we probably shall not see them again very soon we want to have a family gathering at our house to-night."

"I must beg to decline," said Dora, rather distantly. "You know I am not on very good terms with your family."

"Goodness, how excited you are. Have you had a quarrel with your companion?"

"If I have she may thank her friends for it."

Frau Heppner's steel-grey eyes flashed angrily.

"You said that in a very singular tone," she replied. "Do you count me among those friends of hers?"

"All of you. You were all in league with Sonnenberg against me."

"With Sonnenberg? Against you?" asked her sister-in-law in surprise, shaking her head. "You must allow me to remark that your meaning is incomprehensible to me."

"You may say so, Maria," replied Dora, sarcastically, "but I do not believe in the truth of your assertion. I know only too well that Gustav Dornberg owes his misfortune solely to your intrigues, and that Sonnenberg took an active part in them. Altogether, I am better informed on that subject than you may think, and for that reason my rejection of Sonnenberg's offer was a very plain and decided one."

"Good gracious! He has proposed to

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