

The doctor has spoken to me on the subject, and I could not discourage him in order not to deprive you of a good house-keeper.

'No, indeed. I should not have thanked you for it, either,' said the old gentleman. 'For that would be an excellent match for Fannie, and she would be sure to be happy. I only hope that she will accept the offer when it is made.'

'Kerner is only waiting until he has procured Gustav's discharge.'

'I fear he may have to wait quite a while yet for that.'

'Is there no prospect yet?' 'Not as far as I know. I have heard nothing from Frau Winkler in a long time, and Doctor Kerner keeps silent too. Well, well, so that's the reason he comes here so often?'

'Yes, indeed. And that was the reason I used to go out to Elm Court so often, too,' said Kurt, with a laugh. 'Love is a strong magnet. Good-by, papa! I am going to the colonel's now to give him this letter.'

The old gentleman looked thoughtfully after his son.

'What spirit he has,' he said to himself. 'Well, well, when he has once doffed his uniform he will regret it, that I prophesy. But he'll get over it, too; he is bound to the care, and his life at Elm Court, with those excellent, sensible people, cannot fail to be a happy one.'

His pipe was burned out; he took another from the wall and lit it, then he wandered up and down the room.

'Fannie and Doctor Kerner,' he muttered. 'Who would have thought of that? Well, I'm heartily glad of it for her sake. Kerner is a man of honour, he makes a deal of money. Zounds! She couldn't make a better match! But will she see that? What if she were to say: No?'

He stopped and shook his grey head in vexation and, as he followed up his thought, the possibility of a refusal on Fannie's part seemed to trouble him more and more.

'I must find out about that,' he said at last. 'I'll sound her. The deuce! It would be a folly she could never forgive herself for.'

He left his den without delay and went to the sitting-room.

Fannie was sitting at her work-table by the window; her needle was idle.

The hasty movement with which she raised her hand to her eyes left the colonel to guess that she had been crying.

'Why, what's the matter? Not a case of unhappy love, I hope,' he said, in his jovial way.

'What put that into your head, uncle?' Fannie replied, with a forced smile, as she took up her work again, in evident confusion.

'Zounds! I suppose I may ask?' 'And who should be the object of that unhappy love? I don't think it would be possible for you to answer that question, sir.'

'I am not so sure of that,' said the colonel, roguishly.

'Then please—' 'No, that is my secret, child. So it has never struck you that you might get married some day?'

A crimson glow suffused the girl's sweet face; she bent her head lower, and a hardly audible sigh escaped her lips.

'No,' she replied. 'What could I offer a man who wished to make me his wife? Nothing but a dishonoured name.'

'Any man who will want to marry you will be aware of that, so you need not consider it an impediment if he does not. And besides, even if your brother were guilty, nobody could blame you in the least for it.'

'His name is mine also.' 'That is true, and I am your foster-father. No people might just as well say that I had brought him up to be a thief.'

'That would be absurd.'

'It would be just as absurd to make you responsible for your brother's faults. No, child, don't trouble yourself with such unnecessary anxieties; let a blot on your honour, and if you should meet a man who loves you and wants to make you happy, say: "Yes," joyfully, and let nothing cloud your happiness.'

'And suppose such a case should occur,' said Fannie, without looking up from her work; 'would it not be ungrateful of me to leave you, sir? Don't think of my doing so, dear uncle. I shall stay with you as long as you live.'

'Indeed! Well, that decision does great credit to your heart, but it shows that your little head is not as wise as I took it to be. Do you really suppose Vera will let anyone care for me but herself? Do you think I shall be forsaken if you leave me? Why, they are getting ready a set of rooms for me at Elm Court even now, and I think I shall be very well off there.'

'Oh, in that case I shall, of course, have to try to find another home,' said Fannie, with a sigh, while the tears started to her eyes again. 'You are right, uncle; your place, henceforth, will be with your children at Elm Court, and I cannot live there.'

'I should like to know why?' 'Don't be angry. You must feel that I am right. I am the sister of the man who is supposed to have robbed Baron Busee. My presence would constantly remind the baron of that loss. Consequently, it is a matter of course that I cannot accept his hospitality.'

'Has there been a word said about that?' asked the colonel, testily, twirling the ends of his moustache and sending forth great volumes of smoke. 'I don't expect to go to Elm Court for a long time yet. I merely wanted to prove to you that I should by no means be forsaken if you should leave me for a home of your own.'

'Well, that will not happen very soon, either.'

'Who knows?' 'I, uncle dear. I am quite sure of it.'

'Then you have never yet met a man whom you could love with all your heart?' She lowered her eyelids. A tell-tale blush again spread over her face.

'I do not deny such a possibility,' she replied. 'But I assure you that I have never given it a thought until now.'

'Nonsense, child! Every girl thinks of such a possibility at your age, and I assure you have done so too; don't deny it. I don't blame you for it; on the contrary, I find it very natural. So, as I said before, if a good man asks you to be his wife and you feel that you can love him, don't hesitate long, but say: "Yes." Such happiness comes to us but once in our lives, and if we let it escape us then we have let it forever.'

At this moment the door opened, and Doctor Kerner was announced.

The colonel rose quickly and went to meet the visitor with a hearty grasp of the hand. A momentary blush passed over Fannie's face as she bade him good morning.

'Have you brought us good news?' asked the old gentleman, placing his pipe in the corner and offering the lawyer a chair.

'I am happy to say I have,' replied Kerner, adjusting his spectacles and casting a warm, tender look at the young girl, who looked up joyfully. 'But you must pardon me if I do not disclose to you what must remain a secret for the present. You may—indeed you probably will—learn everything this evening. But I did not wish to keep you waiting so long; I wanted you to share my joy at our having almost reached our goal.'

'And I thank you for it with all my heart,' replied Fannie, whose eyes sparkled with joy. 'We will gladly be patient and ask no questions, if you wish it. Only tell us something: May we now count with certainty upon my brother's being discharged and exonerated?'

'I feel sure of it,' said Kerner. 'I expect confidently that the real culprit will be arrested to-day.'

'Who is he?' asked the colonel, quickly.

'That is one of the questions that I am not yet at liberty to answer.'

'Have you convincing proof?'

'We hope to obtain them by noon. We have these proofs in prospect from two quarters; if one attempt fails the other will probably be successful.'

'And if both should fail?' asked Fannie, with nervous anxiety.

'I am not afraid of that,' replied the lawyer.

'But it is possible.'

'Then we are so close on the man's heels that he cannot escape us.'

'He could leave town.'

'We would no longer allow him to do so, Fraulein. We have discovered enough to have him arrested.'

'Well, that promises well for the realisation of our hopes,' said the colonel, twirling his moustache. 'Zounds! If the scoundrel is once in goal he'll realise that he must confess. Let your attack be a vigorous one, doctor. Don't allow yourself to be unwhored.'

'Make your mind easy,' replied the lawyer. 'What we have begun we'll carry through, and as things are at present I can promise you that the guilty party will not escape us.'

'Do you think the money will be recovered, too?' asked the colonel.

'Certainly, it is through the discovery of the bank notes that the thief is to be unmasked.'

'Ah, I should be glad of that for Baron Busee's sake. He says, indeed, that he has got over the loss but, zounds! No matter how rich he is, it is no trifle to lose a hundred and fifty thousand thalers. But how about Sonnenberg? We all have been taking him for the guilty party. Is he no longer under suspicion?'

'Not as regards the robbery.'

'Nor Mrs. Brighlon's death, either?' said Fannie.

'Well, I have formed no opinion as to that yet,' replied the lawyer, with some hesitation, which showed plainly that he did not wish to speak on the subject. 'Possibly we may ascertain something to-day or to-morrow. The discoveries which we have made leave no doubt that he is an adventurer, but in that case, too, the tangible proofs are wanting which alone would justify an indictment. However, we have little or nothing to do with that matter; we may be satisfied if we can have Dornberg restored to liberty and honour.'

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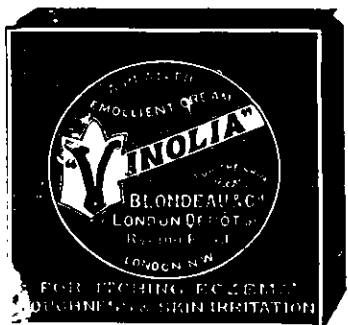
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