

# WOOLING A WIDOW.

BY EWALD AUGUST KOENIG.

## CHAPTER XVI.

### OUTWITTED.

ON the evening of the day on which Sonnenberg had unmasked himself to Roland, Dora was in a state of great excitement.

She had received an anonymous letter, which informed her that a certain person was ready to furnish her with irrefutable proofs of Dornberg's innocence, provided she was willing to pay for them.

She was further advised to consult at once with her lawyer or her friends concerning the letter, and to send her answer by mail that same evening.

The address was given in initials. The person in question would call at the post-office the next morning for the answer, and then immediately give further information, in case the sum of money offered in return was satisfactory.

Of course, Dora resolved at once to show this letter to Doctor Kerner and the colonel; Fannie and Herr Martin could also join in the consultation and, at my rate, a very liberal offer must be made to the anonymous writer.

She did not mention the matter to her companion; she had lost all confidence in her.

The breach between the two had, indeed, been partially healed by a calm, serious explanation, owing, chiefly, to Ernestine's falling in with Dora's opinion of Sonnenberg; but the separation was still to take place.

The companion was welcome to remain until she had found another situation, but she had to promise in return to hold no communication with Sonnenberg either personally or by letter.

Ernestine, too, seemed to try to avoid anything which might displease her mistress, and thus she asked no questions as to Dora's plans when the latter ordered the servant to go for a cab.

'Katherine will have to go out,' she said as Dora was putting on her bonnet before the glass. 'I should be glad if you would tell her so, she seems determined not to obey my orders any more.'

'Where has she to go?'

'I have written down all the errands so that nothing need be forgotten,' replied Ernestine, handing her a paper.

'Oh, yes, that is all right,' said Dora, looking over the list hastily. 'I should have forgotten all about those things if you had not reminded me of them.'

'That is very natural, in view of all that you have on your mind just now.'

'Here, Katherine,' said Frau Winkler, as the old servant entered the room, 'you will have to do these errands this evening. Look over the list carefully so as not to forget anything.'

'This evening?' said Katherine, sulkily, while she fixed a searching look on Ernestine, who was busy with her work.

'There's a good deal to do and a long way to go, madam.'

'You can take the omnibus where it is too far to walk and I shall not return very early, either.'

With this Dora bade her companion goodbye and left the room, accompanied by Katherine.

Ernestine laid down her work and sent a look full of hatred and spite after her mistress.

She rose softly and then crept on tiptoe to the door, where she stood listening.

She heard the carriage roll away.

Katherine returned to the kitchen, and showed her ill-humour by the noisy way in which she bustled about there.

Thus some time passed. Then the servant came out of the kitchen and along the hall. The door of the apartment was opened and closed again with a vehemence which made its glass doors rattle.

Ernestine waited a few minutes. All was quiet outside. She opened the door and went out into the hall.

A light was burning only in the letter. The kitchen was dark. Neither the house-keeper nor that of the apartment was hanging in its accustomed place. This was the surest sign that Katherine had left the house.

Ernestine bolted the apartment-door and returned to the drawing-room. Drawing a deep breath, she set the lamp on a small table near the window.

Sonnenberg had evidently been waiting for this signal outside, for only a few minutes passed before the bell rang softly.

'Ernestine took the lamp from the table and followed him silently.'

'I suppose you wrote the letter that Dora received to-night,' she said, after they had seated themselves.

'Yes, and I see it has fulfilled its purpose. Dora will now consult with her friends as to how it is to be answered.'

'Do you expect an answer?'

'Of course; but whatever it may be, it has no value for me. Where is the servant?'

'Dora sent her out on a round of errands.'

'Can she not return as she did the other day, and make her appearance here suddenly?'

'I have bolted the hall door, which I had, unfortunately, forgotten to do on that occasion,' replied Ernestine, so confidently, that Sonnenberg eventually felt relieved.

'Very well,' he said, 'then we can talk freely. Is it true that Frau Winkler has discharged you?'

'True and not true. We had a violent scene this morning after you left: words were spoken which made it impossible for me to remain here. I hardly remember, now, which of us two first demanded a separation.'

'Nor does it matter,' said he. 'What do you intend to do now?'

'The answer to that question is very easy: I shall look for another position.'

'Are you not thinking of revenge?'

Ernestine's grey eyes flashed. A bitter expression hovered about her tightly-closed lips.

'I intend to revenge myself,' he continued, in a hissing voice. 'And I should suppose that you would think likewise. If she did not intend to fulfil my hopes, of which she was perfectly well aware, it would have been very easy for her to give me a hint to that effect, and I should have been spared such a shameful defeat. What crime have I committed that she should reject my hand in so insulting a manner?'

'I think I can guess her motive,' replied Ernestine, and her eyes rested searchingly upon her companion. 'You said once that if you were to tell what you know Dornberg would be discharged at once. Dora knows that; indeed, I suspect that she thinks you are the one for whose crime her lover has been punished. She permitted your attentions merely so as to be able to observe you.'

'She was on a wrong track there,' sneered Sonnenberg, with a contemptuous shrug. 'Frankly, I wish I had done that deed, for I should then be in possession of a sum which would make me a rich man for life.'

'Then it was not you?'

'Did you think so, too?'

'Not at first. It was only after a while that I considered it possible.'

'Ah, bah! If it had only been possible! The scoundrel, who died Dornberg has to suffer for anticipated me.'

'If you know him—'

'Enough of that!' he broke in roughly. 'I am not yet sure whether I shall succeed in wresting a part of his booty from him. In any case, however, I must find some way of replenishing my empty purse. I cannot stay here any longer, nor can I tell how soon I may be able to gain a firm foothold in any other city. I do not know, either, what will become of you, and whether we shall ever again meet with a favourable opportunity for operating in common; so I am obliged to do something which will enable me to look forward, at least, to the nearest future without anxiety.'

'As for our operating in common, that, of course, depends upon chance circumstances,' said Ernestine, thoughtfully.

'Still I shall do all I can to make it possible. I shall try for a situation in some other place similar to the one I have filled here.'

'And what that amounts to we have seen,' he again interrupted her. 'No, I shall no longer build my hopes on such contingencies, and I should like to save you from the humiliations to which you are daily exposed in such a position. I intend to go to Paris day after to-morrow. You might follow me soon; then we should remain together.'

'That would be delightful; but what should we live on in that case?'

'On that which we take from here.'

She looked at him in silence for a few moments, then she shook her head dubiously.

'I think I understand you,' she said; 'but I doubt whether it can be done—it is too dangerous.'

'Why?' he asked, coolly.

'Because the first suspicion would naturally fall on us two.'

'For that reason we must take such precautions that there can be no idea of any suspicion against us.'

'But whatever preparation you may make—'

'My plan is matured; it will do away with your scruples. One question, however, first of all: What is to be got here?'

'I don't know exactly, but I think it would be worth while, if—'

'Please leave the rest of the question. Dose Dora manage her own business affairs?'

'Yes.'

'And how is her property invested?'

'In government bonds, mortgages, shares of various railroads and the like.'

'Has she a list of the numbers of those documents?'

'The list is with the papers.'

'And they?'

'Are in an iron casket which is kept in yonder cabinet.'

Ernestine pointed to an elegant, daintily constructed cabinet, which stood beside the writing desk.

Sonnenberg rose slowly and proceeded to examine it.

'That lock can be broken without trouble,' he said. 'And what is the amount?'

'That I cannot tell you either,' replied Ernestine, with a startled look at the portiere, for it seemed to her as if she had heard a slight noise in the adjoining room. At any rate there is a very large sum. And that casket contains not only those papers, but also bank notes, rolls of gold and, among other jewellery, a very valuable set of diamonds. If we could get hold of all that, indeed we need not trouble ourselves about the future.'

Sonnenberg strode up and down the room a few times, and then sat down again.

'We should make sure of a life of ease for us both, and at the same time revenge ourselves for the insults put upon us,' said he. 'And even if suspicion should fall upon me I will take care that nothing can be proved against me. To be sure, if I were to take the casket away with me now there is no doubt that we would both be arrested this evening. And it can't be done in the night without running the risk of bloodshed—'

'Not for the world!' cried Ernestine, horrified.

'I don't wish that either. It must be done by daylight. Let us say to-morrow afternoon. There is but one thing that troubles me: how to dispose of the servant. Dora will receive another letter during the forenoon—a reply to the answer which I hope to find at the post office in the morning. I will write that I shall expect her at three o'clock, at a given place, in order to furnish her with proofs. That she is to bring none of her friends with her, but that if she wishes to have a witness I will permit her companion to be present at the interview. That if she comes in the company of any other person our meeting will not take place. Do you think she will submit to this condition?'

'Yes, I think so,' replied Ernestine, after some reflection. 'She will submit to any condition, make any sacrifice, if the possibility of proving Dornberg's innocence is held out to her in return.'

'Very well; then you and Dora would not be here to-morrow afternoon. The house door is open, any one can go in and out without being observed—at least, I have never seen any inquisitive servants downstairs.'

'And yet, you might, accidentally, meet one of the inmates of the house.'

'I shall not be recognised; a wig and a pair of spectacles can disguise a face completely. That matter gives me no anxiety. The main question for me is whether an hour the servant can be kept out of the way without arousing suspicion.'

'When will your letter to Dora get here?'

'A little after twelve, I think; then there will be no time to consult her wise friends again, and she will be obliged to decide at once.'

'Very well, I will go out early to-morrow morning, and return before twelve. I will arrange matters so Katherine will have to be at a certain place at three o'clock, to get something for her mistress. I will manage it.'

'Are you sure you can?'

'Quite sure; I'll think over it this evening. You may depend upon it that the servant will not be in the house to-morrow at three o'clock.'

'Then all the rest will be child's play,' said Sonnenberg. 'The hall door will, of course not be bolted—'

'No, I will give you my key for it. But you must leave the key here when you go away, as I might be asked for it. You can put it under the sofa in the drawing-room. I shall look for it there and take it again.'

'How about the key to this cabinet?'

'That I cannot get for you. Dora always has it about her. And I think it would be better for us if the lock were broken open. That will look more like the work of professional burglars. I hear there are many of them in town—'

'And I will take precautions which shall confirm such suspicions. I shall leave behind me an old soiled cap and a torn cotton pocket-handkerchief, which could belong to no one but a vagabond. Under these circumstances, how should anybody suspect us? You were in Dora's company while the deed was being done, and I received a call from Herr Roland at my room in the same house.'

'At the same hour?'

'Well, it does not matter much whether the robbery took place a few minutes sooner or later. Roland will confirm my declaration, if necessary.'

'But what if they should search your room after all?'

'Then they would find neither the casket nor any of its contents; that, too, I have guarded against. Before it enters any one's head to undertake such a search, the casket, safely packed in a trunk, will be on its way to Paris, where I shall claim it in a few days.'

'And you intend to leave day after to-morrow?'

'Yes, I should be very glad if you could get me, before that time, a good wax impression of the key of the casket, then I can have a duplicate made from it in Brussels.'

'Shall I see you again, then, before you go?'

'Certainly! I shall come here to take leave.'

'Would you dare do that?' asked Ernestine, in astonishment.

'I don't see any risk in it. On the contrary, I shall demonstrate my innocence by doing so. And I shall show myself greatly concerned at the bold robbery.'

'But I hardly think that Dora will receive you.'

'I think she will.'

'Katherine has strict orders to tell you that her mistress is engaged.'

A mocking smile played around Sonnenberg's lips; his eyes flashed angrily.

'Curiosity alone will prompt her to receive me, if I call after this robbery,' he replied. 'She will wish to study the expression of my features, to read the confession of guilt in my face, and will, of course, find herself disappointed. But if she should deny herself to me, and you have obtained the wax impression, you will find some other way.'

'I have had to give a solemn promise not to say another word to you, and you can imagine that if I break that promise it would direct suspicion to us at once.'

'Well, I must leave it to you to act at circumstances make it seem best to you,' Sonnenberg said, after reflection. 'Unless I have the key, I shall be obliged to break open the casket, and the absence of a key might occasion me a great deal of trouble at the custom-house in Paris.'

'If I can obtain the impression, I shall do so. But how about the letter which you are to write to Dora? Are you not afraid that your handwriting might be recognised? If she does not find the anonymous correspondent at the appointed place to-morrow, and then discovers the robbery, she will guess at once that the writer of that letter enticed her from home in order to have an opportunity to do the deed.'

'No, she will not recognise my handwriting,' replied Sonnenberg, confidently. 'Let her think whatever she likes. Nothing can be proved against me, and that is the chief thing.'

'You seem very sure of your case,' said Ernestine.

'Because I know that I have reason to be so.'

'And when you get to Paris, will you write to me?'

'Within a day or two after my arrival. But not to this address, for it is better that Dora should know nothing about it. I will direct the letter to the post office, to be called for.'

'Yes, that will be best. Of course I cannot tell her that I am going to follow you to Paris.'

'Then pick a quarrel with her and leave suddenly. She need not know where you are going.'

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