

and the sound of distant streams tumbling over the rocks had sung in his ears.

How well he remembered it! How he recalled stopping at the fountain where stood an image of St. Florian, the village patron; and how, carefully skirting the inn, he had hurried around to the kitchen, only to find his Gertrude too busy, much too busy, to give him a word. Yet there was that trifling, flirting Sylvester helping her to ladle out the soup—almost as if he were a son of the house. And as recently as the spring just past, blue-eyed Gertrude had encouraged him, Andreas, plain of speech, used to work but unused to women—had encouraged him to hope.

Then the Schützenfest had come, and Sylvester had returned from the Transvaal. Travelled and self-confident, this same Sylvester had caused a fluttering in the Leuterdorf dovescotes. For, in shooting at the Eagle, Andreas, the Forester's assistant, being troubled, failed of his best, and Sylvester, the soldier, triumphant as King, had, with easy assurance, chosen Gertrude as his Queen, and availed himself in every way of his claims and privileges. Andreas, too proud to complain, had, with slightest farewell, gone willingly on the mission given him by the Forester, to Switzerland, and later to the Schwartzwald, and there had prolonged his stay, in study and experiment.

But here again, in Christmas week, once more he walked Leuterdorf street, whence the tourists had long gone and only the sombre firs persisted among the overwhelming snows. The animals were under shelter, the little, playing babies safe in bed, the pleasant sights and sounds of summer vanished. Night and darkness and bitter wintry blasts were about him, and the heart within him was as unquiet as when he went away. He crossed once more the market-place, with its fountain frozen motionless now and St. Florian with a mantle of snow. The inn's fire and lamplight made bright squares on the snow outside, and through the window-panes he saw Sylvester bending over and restoring to Gertrude her worsted ball, with perceptible pressure of the knitter's fingers. His firm jaw wore a forbidding squareness on his abrupt entrance within. Notwithstanding he had a hearty reception.

'Ha, Andreas, this is a pleasant surprise,' cried the blacksmith; and the schoolmaster said: 'We were fearing the Schwartzwald fairies would hold thee over Christmas, lad.' Herr Cornelius clapped him on the shoulder, and the dreamy Fabian came from his corner to clasp his friend's hand. For had he not grown up among them, plain, honest, and true, always kindly and helpful though reticent and grave? Hedwig hastened to pour a fresh, foaming tankard, and to ask cheerily: 'Did you come back for to-morrow's dance, Andreas?' Even Sylvester, with light ignoring of the past, gave him debonnair greeting; and only she whose voice he yearned to hear had started, murmured something—nothing—and resumed her knitting.

'Did he come for to-morrow's dance, Hedwig?' said Fabian, laughing. 'Surely you know him better. Nothing could have brought him back but that the work is finished that he went to do.'

Gertrude's head bent a little lower.

'The question is not why—but how he came,' said one of the peddlers. 'The storm was thick three hours ago when we arrived, and the Hinter Pass almost impossible.'

'I came by the Alter Pass,' said Andreas quietly.

'Himmel!' said the other peddler. 'Why, it was madness! On skis! That side of the way was worse and there the avalanche fell. Give Christmas thanks, man, for your life.'

The knitter's fingers were still for a moment and her lips pale; and Andreas' eyes met hers suddenly with a most unexpected intensity, while his heart gave a great throb. The next instant she jested with Sylvester, and Andreas answered calmly: 'We never know just how much we may have to thank God for.'

'For all things,' said Herr Cornelius ponderously, 'especially sleep, for which it is now the hour. You will remain the night, Andreas; you must, after so long a ski journey, be tired out.'

'No, I thank you, Herr. My report is yet to be made to the Forester. Come, Fabian, your way goes with mine. Good-night, Hedwig.' Andreas might have had even a friendlier word for the slim, silent maiden who stood beside her sister, had not Sylvester gaily interrupted:

'I hurry no one; but I am waiting to help shut up the inn, and Hedwig is very sleepy.'

How could Andreas know that, as he went his resentful way, pretending to listen to Fabian, up in her little pigeon-hole of a room, a girl, with tremulous lips, said to herself: 'He is too cold to care for anything but his work.'

Andreas' affairs with the Head Forester kept him busy the next day, or he might again have been angered to see Sylvester at the Inn, supervising, suggesting, and working at the decorations for the evening dance. He found but a moment to send down some birds to Herr Cornelius with his compliments.

'These foresters and game-keepers,' scoffed Sylvester, when he saw the gift, 'they think they own the earth—the Lord's forests and all His creatures therein. I have been in lands where there are no tyrannical restrictions and no aristocratic privileges. Why should the Herr Count or his officers have the right to shoot a deer or hare and not you or I?'

'I don't want to shoot a hare,' said Hedwig simply. 'Sylvester, you talk nonsense,' said Gertrude. 'The lands and forest are the Herr Count's, not yours or mine.'

'I like game,' said he, nodding down at her from his ladder, while she held up for him the Christmas wreaths, and mark my words, Gertrude, since my gruff and grim neighbor, the Forester's assistant, has not the decency to offer me some shooting, I will take it when I can.'

'The freeholder's land adjoins the Count's. Why not ask your father to get you permission?'

'To be refused by His Mightiness, Andreas? How charming you look in that position, Gertrude, and with your cheeks so red.'

'Don't be silly; and don't, I beg you, spend Christmas day in gaol for poaching.'

'Have no fear; and be sure you save me the first and third and half-a-dozen other dances.'

'You are really too modest.'

'Above all, remember your promise to wear your Queen's crown.'

She had not forgotten, but she did regret that promise, for it had been made in last night's pique over Andreas' demeanor. Yet when the lamps were all lit in the long dining-room, and the green and crimson and floating ribbons of the decorations glistened, no one could have denied that its chief ornament was the young maiden, in scarlet petticoat and velvet bodice, with snowy sleeves, and the golden crown which so becomingly adorned her head.

Then the great doors flew open and, preceded by two fiddlers playing mightily, there came in a rush of icy air, and with it a procession of young men and girls, alert, expectant, chatting, laughing, and rosy from winter's touch. There were the *Scenerins*, Rosalia and Hilda; Matias, the goatherd; Fabian and his sister, Elise, the dairy farmer, Anselm, and his cousins; the black-eyed Sophie, who helped the freeholder's wife and was a wonderful spinner; these and many more. Their elders preferred the warmer kitchen, where small and mild Father Friedel, their pastor, was already installed with pipe beside the stove. But who minded the cool air of the dining-room when the fiddlers' march changed into a dance tune and young men and maids swung into such rhythmic, lively measure as made the floor shake and the rafters ring with wholesome merriment; such measure as would amaze the sophisticated who knew no dancing but the languid waltz. The King and Queen of the Schützenfest led this, and upon them Andreas' eyes fell when he entered, escorting the Forester and his only daughter, Fräulein Marie. Herr Cornelius hastened to receive the new arrivals, for the Head Forester was reputed rich; had already spoken of retiring; and that would mean the advancement of Andreas. The Head Forester also dined sometimes with the Herr Count himself, so he must be placed at once next to Father Friedel.

'The Christmas decorations are very pretty,' said Marie timidly.

But Andreas could only see the golden crown, which seemed to mock him from Gertrude's hair. Another dance began, and Sylvester, calling boldly: 'The Queen again honors her King,' led her forth. Andreas, in fiery anger, found himself opposite them with Fräulein Marie, gentle and sweet and wearing fashionable town attire, about which the girls whispered behind their hands, and 'supposed Andreas would inherit the Head Forester's place, if—' and so on.

'You—you were long away, Andreas,' said Gertrude, when she was near him in crossing hands.

'Had I known—certain things—I would have wished my absence longer,' he answered roughly.

'Take care,' interrupted Sylvester, 'you mix the figure; that's wrong; you are forgetting how to dance, man, as well as how to shoot.'

'It is possible,' retorted Andreas, with knitted brow, 'that I shoot better at a living target—if I am not a wandering soldier.'

'You both shoot wonderfully,' said Fräulein Marie in haste.

She crossed to Sylvester, and Gertrude murmured hurriedly and low: 'What "certain things"?''

'Why these'—still frowning—'that women have no truth in them, and care for nothing but their vanity and the last feather-head that flatters them.'

'Is that for me?'

'Yes, if it fits.'

She said no more, holding her pretty, crowned head high, while a deep flush stained her cheeks. But as he swung her for the last time, he saw that her lips trembled and great tears stood in her soft eyes. He had no chance to speak to her again, for she was surrounded, and when the dancing was over, Fräulein Marie was his charge.

The landlord beamed upon all. The occasion was a certain success—it was gratifying to see so many, including the Herr Forester himself and the freeholder's son, attentive to his pretty Gertrude. He was even satisfied that Hedwig should fill and re-fill plate and glass for the poetic Fabian, at whose carvings the summer visitors raved. He shrugged his shoulders; perhaps one could do no better for her.

Under the sparkling stars in the winter night, the Forester's party went homewards; but the silent Andreas paid but perfunctory attention to his companions' remarks. He thought ruefully of his late anger. 'The pretty, darling child—with the tears in her blue eyes! And I to cause them! What a brute and a clown am I! I cannot