

their heads over it. The setting was beautiful. August was a person of taste, and he recognised the beauty. To be sure, they were copying all the old wonderful settings and designs now for the imitation jewellery.

'What price?' he asked.

The assistant took it back, found no tab appended, and turned hastily to a whole row of pearl necklaces for comparison.

'Thirty-five shillings,' he said.

So there would be a whole five shillings over for some fruit and a bottle of white wine to grace the little supper.

August did not care for imitations. He had meant Lotte to have a genuine thing, even if it were small. Still, the necklace was lovely. He glanced at Lotte's white neck showing above the fur jacket. The necklace would look lovely on it.

He bought and paid for the necklace and took it away in its shabby old case, he and Lotte in the seventh heaven of delight.

A year ago! And Christmas was again upon them. But how sadly things were changed! August was ill, very ill, every day growing thinner and paler before Lotte's terrified eyes. Ill clad, ill fed, he had taken a chill at the beginning of the winter, and had not been able to shake it off. The fogs were particularly heavy and black that Christmas—so different from the last happy one—and they got into August's throat and chest, half strangling him.

'If you could only get him away!' said the over-worked young doctor. 'It is madness to keep him here. He is a big, strong fellow naturally, but he has run down hill at a pace. It would be life to him.'

It would be life! And the utmost Lotte was able to do was to keep a fire going day and night, and by incessant pinching and contriving, to procure a little nourishment for August, from which he would turn away with a groan, knowing that Lotte pinched herself in order to feed him. And there was something Lotte had not dared to tell August. She wept when his eyes were not upon her, and prayed incessantly to the good God; and, meantime, her eyes grew bigger and bigger, and her soft cheeks showed hollow places. She did not dare think of the future. And—August's life might be saved by a few of those pounds the rich people were squandering in the great city every hour of the Christmas-time.

Well, Lotte would keep up her heart, for August's sake. With one of the few shillings, she bought a little Christmas-tree, and decked it with the tinsel and colored things, saved over from last Christmas. She dressed it up one afternoon in August's room, while he lay in bed and smiled at her weakly.

'I do not know what our gifts will be yet,' she said, nodding her head at him with a pathetic pretense of gaiety. 'But they will come, August—surely they will come.'

She was to play the violin that night at a big party in a West End Square. She hated to go out and leave August; but there were a few guineas, and they would tide them over Christmas. It was a great thing that somebody's birthday should have fallen at such a slack time, and been celebrated by a dinner party and At Home. But for these few guineas Lotte did not know how she would have got over the Christmas. She fervently thanked the good God for the engagement.

She put on her little shabby black evening dress. She clasped the pearls about her neck, standing before the glass.

'How they become thee, little one!' August said. 'They are wonderfully pretty, seeing that they are only imitation. It is well thou canst keep them, seeing they have no value.'

Lotte smiled at him, although her eyes were bright with tears. She was thinking how different it had been last year. How strong and well her August, her bridegroom, had been! And now! His life depended on something she could not give him, although she would have given her own life for it.

The pain and the trouble seemed to have got into the violin, which was a good old instrument. It might come to selling that to procure August the things he wanted. But the violin was what they lived by; with a cheap violin, Lotte's engagements would dwindle and cease.

She played beautifully, with a poignant sweetness. Her thoughts were full of sorrow. The violin sobbed and cried, like a heart in suffering because it cannot avert trouble and death from those it loves. The audience was moved—some of it too deeply to join in the conventional applause. One or two came up to thank Lotte for the pleasure she had given them. And Lotte was pleased. She would have something to tell August when she returned home.

While she put her violin into its case in a little anteroom, from which she could see the gleaming supper table covered with all the out-of-season delicacies, and was wishing she could have carried home some of the things

to tempt August's sick appetite, a little old gentleman with a hooked nose stood beside her.

'Allow me to congratulate you,' he said, with a snuffle, 'on your—'

Lotte expected him to say 'playing,' but the word was 'pearls.'

'My pearls!' she said, in amazement.

'There was nothing like them in the room,' he went on. 'I know—I know all about pearls. They are unique.'

Lotte stared at him. Was he joking? But no; his look and manner forbade the idea.

'Indeed, sir, you are mistaken,' she said. 'My pearls have no value. They are not real.'

'Not real! No value!' he repeated, in a shriek. 'My dear lady, I will give you for them six thousand pounds.' He lowered his voice as he made the offer, and glanced about him anxiously; but there was no one within ear-shot.

Lotte was frightened. She thought the old gentleman must be a bit mad. She began to move toward the door, with her violin held between him and her.

'I will give you six thousand pounds,' he went on, growing more and more eager. 'Will not that content you? Well, then, I shall make it seven. It is as much as they are worth. Here is my card.'

He forced a card into her hand.

'I must ask my husband,' she said, more to pacify him than anything else.

'Ah, yes, the husband! He will consent. When shall I know? To-morrow?'

'I will let you know to-morrow,' Lotte answered.

She was getting into her cab by this time, and the importunate man had followed her to the cab door.

'Your address?' he shouted, as the cab began to move.

But Lotte was glad the cabman had whipped up his horse. She was quite glad to get away from the madman who offered her seven thousand pounds for a string of mock pearls.

She had the card still in her hand when she came in on August, whose face brightened at sight of her.

'Thou hast been long, sweetheart!' he said. 'And I have wearied for thee.'

'And thy fire is low and the fog is in the room,' she replied, kneeling down to replenish the fire.

While she ate her bread and cheese by his bedside she told him of the madman who had offered her seven thousand pounds for the pearls. He listened with languid interest till she picked up the card which had fallen on the floor, and read out the name and address. Then he looked startled.

'Why, Lotte,' he said, 'he is one of the richest Jews in London, and his Park Lane house is filled with beautiful things. Supposing—supposing—he were right about the pearls?'

Lotte uttered a little cry. She saw August strong and well again; she saw prosperity and comfort and freedom from carking cares, and it was like a mirage in the desert. Suddenly her face fell.

'Then, to be sure,' she said, 'we should not really own the pearls at all. It would be some one's mistake.'

'Thou shalt take them back, Lotte. To-morrow thou shalt take them back to the shop, and tell them what has happened. It is strange if the Jew is mistaken.'

'And at least they will give me back what we paid for the pearls,' Lotte said. 'Sometime thou wilt give me another string, August—perhaps real ones; who knows?'

The next morning after breakfast Lotte put on her little fur jacket and cap and went off to the West End. Fortunately, the fog had drifted away, and the streets were quite bright. Lotte had the case inside her muff. She hurried on as well as she could for the crowded streets. She did not dare glance into the shop windows; there were so many things she would have wanted for August. When she was coming back, she might perhaps be able to get him some little delicacy. If the people at the shop should take back the pearl necklace and return her the price paid for it.

August had told her what to do. She was to march into the shop boldly, and ask to see one of the principals, and tell her tale, and hand him back the pearls.

'They may treat thee as a mad woman, Lottchen,' he said. 'I wish I could go in thy place. Yet tell them the name of him who said he would give thee seven thousand pounds for the necklace. If the story should be true—'

'Oh, August, if it should be true!' she repeated. 'Seven thousand pounds! Think what that would mean to thee and me!'

'If it is worth so much, it is not worth it to us. It is worth to us just thirty-five shillings. We are honest folk, thou and I, Lottchen. Come back soon, dear one!'

There were as many pourparlers before Lotte gained