

he should take back his word, and throw off the yoke you have laid upon his shoulders? Isn't it sufficient that he should have proved to you that he thought no distance too great to put between you and him? Is it not sufficient that his family should avoid you as the plague? or will you take your father's ruin as a pretext for going a-begging to Degenthal for his love, and to his family for their pity?"

This outburst did not seem to shake Nora. She raised her eyes quietly up to her father, and said: "Curt was here a month ago; he came all the way from the East only in order to assure me of his fidelity and of his love. And oh! I *do* believe in him with all my soul!"

"Really! So he sneaks secretly to you, because he does not choose to recognise you openly! and you call *that* love, and you find *that* sufficient! Is that all the pride which your education has given you? The bluest woman of our troop would not endure such treatment from her lover. But you only listen to the suggestions of your blind passion, and all the rest is indifferent to you."

"O father, father!" said the poor taunted girl, "why are you so hard upon me? Tell me rather how I can help you, and you will not find me indifferent. I will never do anything to retain Curt, if it be for his happiness that he should forget me, but do tell me what I can do for you."

The director made a few turns in the room.

"I wonder how much your fine words are to be relied upon," he said harshly. And then stopping suddenly and facing her, he added: "Prove yourself to be worthy of calling yourself Karsten's child!"

Nora stared at him blankly, without understanding his meaning.

"Save him from ruin," continued the director. "You can do so by appearing in public; and with your talents you will have the whole world at your feet. If you consent to this, I shall in a few months regain all that I have lost."

Nora continued to stare at him in a helpless sort of way, as if he were speaking a foreign tongue which she could not understand.

"You are the most accomplished artist I know of in our line," he began again, perceiving that she did not speak. "You will be a new and fresh element; such a one as the world has not seen for years. You have inherited it from me," he continued, waxing quite enthusiastic at the thought. "Nature meant you to shine thus, when she gifted you with this great and daring beauty of yours. You will outdo them all, as was prophesied of you in your childhood."

Suddenly a light broke upon her.

"Never, never!" she cried in an almost unearthly tone, hiding her face in her hands. "Never! that can never be!"

"I thought as much," said he, turning coldly from her. "Your way of loving is a strangely selfish one; you can sacrifice nothing either to your father or to your lover."

"Father, I will do anything for you but that! I will work for you, and stay by you, and not forsake you in your poverty. . . No other thought will make me faithless to

my self-imposed task, but don't ask me to do that!"

"And *that* is the only thing which can help me," said Karsten, pushing her roughly away from him. "All the rest are useless and empty words; but I thought as much. I felt sure that you would keep your pride and leave your father to his fate."

"But, indeed, father, I can do something better," she said imploringly. "I have learnt a good deal, and God has given me talents which I can turn to account; I will look out for a situation, and all I earn shall be for you."

"The few thalers you would earn thus would not be of much use to me," he said with a harsh and bitter laugh. "For God's sake, spare me such high-flown speeches!"

"Remember how my mother was always against it."

"Your mother would have stood by me in every difficulty, and would have sacrificed everything to me," he answered, eluding the remark. "She also broke off with a great deal in order to be mine, and to share that position which you despise. How can a word from her, spoken in such totally different circumstances, have more weight with you than your father's shame?"

Nora had thrown herself on to the floor and knelt at her father's arm-chair, as if thus imploring a merciful God not to lay the cross too heavily upon her shoulders. It was a death-like agony she was going through, and yet something whispered to her that she owed it to Curt and to herself not to give way. "Oh, rather die, rather die!" she muttered.

"And if I implored you to do it?" said her father suddenly laying his hand upon her head. "Understand me well! I am lost unless you do this for me."

"Rather die! rather die!" she repeated unconsciously, as if those were the only words which her agonised heart could utter.

"Yes, rather die than bend one's pride. . . You may be right," he said in a changed tone, and without one word more he left the room.

CHAPTER XV.

It was some time before Nora noticed that her father had left her. Her hands pressed before her face, she remained in her kneeling posture—broken down, inanimate—she knew not for how long. She tried to recall her father's words, but they seemed so confused, so difficult to understand, that she gave the attempt up in despair. One thought alone took shape and form in her mind, and that was that she must remain firm before every prayer and every temptation, and that no power on earth should induce her thus to debase herself. There arose in her a deep indignation against her father who had supposed her capable of consenting to such a thing. How could this thought have crossed his mind? Who could have whispered such treasonable advice into his ear? Her secret instinct told her that Landolfo had been at work in the affair. But enough of that! She would not waste her thoughts upon the whys and wherefores; but would only try to imagine how this dreadful misfortune could be avoided. There came over her an immense

longing for advice and sympathy, and she knew she could find both in the man she loved.

This was certainly an event which would excuse her breaking through the prohibition of communicating with him. The very idea of writing to him soothed her. She moved to go to her room, for she heard steps on the staircase, and a voice calling her. She disappeared softly through a side door, in order to avoid meeting any one at such a moment. As soon as she had reached her room a loud knock was heard at the door, and, before she had time to inquire who the intruder was, Landolfo stood before her with an agitated and perturbed countenance.

"Miss Nora, you here?" he asked hastily. "And your father, where is he?"

Nora drew herself proudly up, and looked in cold astonishment at the unwelcome visitor. But he stood his ground firmly, and something in his voice forced her into listening to him.

"Where is your father?" he cried again. "I know that he has been with you, for he had important matters to discuss with you. Did you satisfy him? In what mood did he leave you?"

Nora stared at him as if in a dream, and only shook her head silently.

"Ah, ah! So that's the position of affairs, is it?" said Landolfo ironically. "You have sent your father away without giving him even this drop of comfort. Uncommonly touching! You don't seem to be aware that men, who stand on the brink of ruin, are capable of anything. Once more, Miss Nora, where is the director?"

Nora turned deadly pale, and laid her hand on her forehead, as if trying to gather her scattered thoughts. "I don't know, I don't know," she stammered. "What do you mean? What are you alluding to?" Then, suddenly, as if the power of thought had returned to her, she added hastily, "We must look for him directly. He went out into the garden after our conversation."

"Into the garden? What direction did he take? He surely did not go alone?" inquired Landolfo in a rough tone. "Mrs. Karsten and I naturally thought you were together. We could not suppose that you would have left your father to himself in the hour of misfortune. Anyhow the consequences rest upon your head!"

"My God! My God!" Yes; she understood now what he meant; and before her eyes arose the images of those poor wretches she had read about, who had preferred death to ruin. And had not her father's last words been "Rather die!"

She flew like a hunted deer across the many windings of the park, calling loudly, "Father, father." Almost unwittingly that certain spot near the stream forced itself upon her mind with fearful tenacity. The slippery soil, the rotten bridge, the broken branches, and the deep bed of the stream—she tried not to think of them, and yet could think of nothing else.

"Do you really think that your father was on his way to the town?" asked Landolfo breathlessly, as she suddenly took the short cut which led there across the wood. "He knew that I was there."

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