Max---Or His Picture

By Octave Thanet
Author of
The Man of the Hour, The Lion's Share,
By Inheritance, etc.

A KNOCK sounded on the principal's door. "That's Florence," she thought; and she sighed in the same breath. The principal had secretly liked Florence Raimund, the best of her 200 girls, for three years, and sometimes she suspected that Florence knew it. Miss Wing sat at her desk. It was a large desk of oak, always kept in blameless order. No one could recall seeing more than one letter at a time lying on the blotter. Any others, yet unread, lay in the wicker tray to the left; the letters read, but not answered, were in the wicker tray to the right; the answered letters were in appropriate pigeonholes or in ashes, Miss Wing being a firm believer in fire as a confidential agent. About the desk hung the most interesting object in the room, to the schoolgirls; in fact, it would be hard to gauge justly the influence this one, mute and motionless, had over their young imaginations, or how far it was responsible for the rose-tinted halo that beyond doubt glorified the principal for them. The object was a picture, the picture of a young man in the uniform of a captain in the German cuirassiers. His thick light hair was brushed back from a fine and candid forehead. A smile creased his cheek under the warlike curl of his mustache. It was a smile so happy and so friendly in its happiness that it won the beholder. The eyes were not large, but even in the black and white of a photograph (the portrait was an ordinary cabinet carte) they seemed to sparkle. The young fellow's figure was superb and held with a military precision and jauntiness. One said, looking at the whole presence, "This man is a good fellow." Viewing him more closely, one might add, "And he is in love." The picture was framed handsomely in a gilded frame. On the desk below an exquisite vase of Venice lifted a single, perfect rose. For 15 years a flower had always bloomed thus. Miss Wing had hung the picture herself, 15 years ago. Then she was the new principal and the school was but half its size, and the village people exclaimed at trusting "such a girl" with so much responsibility. During those 15 years the new building had been built, the school had grown and flourished, and the gray had crept into Margaret Wing's bright hair. She had so often put on mourning for her near kindred that she had assumed it as her permanent garb. To the certain (and ecstatic) knowledge of the school she had refused divers offers of marriage from citizens of good repute and substance. But during all the changing years the picture had kept its place and the fresh flowers had bloomed below. No girl could remember the desk without the picture, and when the old girls visited the school their eyes would instinctively seek it in its old place, always with a little moving of the heart. Yet no one ever alluded to it to the principal, and no one, not her most trusted teacher nor her best-loved pupil, had ever heard the principal speak of it. The name of the pictured soldier, his story, his relation to Miss Wing; Miss Wing's nearest kindred and friends knew as much about all these as the school, and that was nothing. Nevertheless, the school tradition reported part of a name on the authority of a single incident. Years ago an accident happened to the picture. It was the principal's custom to carry it with her on her journeys, however brief; always taking it down and putting it back in its place herself. On this occasion the floor had been newly polished, and in hanging the picture her chair on which she stood slipped and she fell, while the picture dropped out of her grasp. One of the girls, who was passing, ran to her aid; but she had crawled toward the picture and would have it in her hands before she allowed the girl to aid her to rise—a circumstance, you may be sure, not likely to escape the sharp young eyes. Neither did these same eyes miss the further circumstance that the jar had shifted the carte in the frame and a line of writing, hitherto hidden, was staring out at the world. The hand was the sharp, minute German hand, but the words were English; the girl took them in at an eyeblink as she handed the picture to Miss Wing: "Thine for ever, Max." Miss Wing made no comment; perhaps she supposed that the girl had not seen, perhaps—in any case she was silent.

Of course, the new light flooded the school gossip immediately. But there never came any more; every new girl was free to work her own will on Miss Wing's romance. Was "Max" dead? Had they parted because of any act on the woman's part? Surely, he could not have been false, to receive that daily oblation of flowers. It was more likely that she thus expressed an imperishable regret. Youth, ever fanciful, played with all manner of dainty and plaintive variations on the theme. Its very mystery was its poignant charm; since each tender young soul created a new romance and a new appeal. Elusive and pathetic, it hovered on the edge of these young lives like the perfume of a flower. And its influence was the more potent that it asked for nothing. It is not too much to say that the spectacle of that gentle and reticent faithfulness was the strongest element in the school atmosphere. Certainly, because of it, Miss Wing had greater power over her scholars. She was a woman of ability and gentle force; by nature a little aloof, a little precise, able to feel deeply, but not able to express her sympathies or her pain. Without her mysterious sorrow she would have seemed to young girls a thought too admirable; they would have been chilled by her virtues; but as it was, their perception that she had lived deeply, that she had suffered, that she had been loved and had loved eternally, opened their hearts. They would have admired her, now they adored her. By degrees, and insensibly to herself, she became the confessor of her little world. After they left school her girls brought her their perplexities of the heart. Wives came to her with cruel dilemmas which they shrank from revealing to their own mothers—perhaps because the mothers could not be trusted to plead for the erring husband so well; for a woman who lives complains, not to be justified herself, but to hear her lover's misconduct excused and his love proved against her doubts. Before they left school the girls confessed their faults and failings and strivings of conscience with the same eagerness with which they asked counsel in their innocent romances of friendship or the sorrows of trigonometry, and they accepted any penance directed, not only with patience, but a kind of exaltation natural to youth, which finds a secret joy in the exercise of its own fortitude.

Today, however, Miss Wing sat before the picture which so many young eyes had studied with such vague, yet ardent, sympathy, and pondered over a confidence that had not come. The lack of its coming hurt her, and the tap on her door was welcome, for she thought. "It is she—coming to tell me. Oh, I hope he is the right man."

At her response the door swung open with a jerk and the dark-eyed girl who entered was catching her breath, although she tried to make the quick intakes noiseless. There was a look of pale resolution on her features.

"Have you come to let me congratulate you, my dear?" said the principal, rising. The girl colored scarlet. "I've come because I had to, because I couldn't deceive you," she blurted. "Miss Wing, it isn't so. I let Miss Parker think so, but I'm not engaged to him."

"Sit down, dear," said Miss Wing. The soft cadence of her voice did not roughen. She sat down when her guest sat, and leaned back in her desk chair, folding her slim, white hands. There were flashing rings on her hands; and the girls used to wonder which ring "Max" had given her. They favored the sapphire, set between two diamonds, because of its beauty ("a real Cashmere, you know"), and because, whither she wore other rings or not, this always kept its place.

"Now, tell me," said Miss Wing.

"I had a letter from him this morning; it was just a note in one of Helen Grier's"—the girl's lithe form was erect in the chair, every muscle tense; she looked past Miss Wing to the wall and spoke in toneless voice; no one could see that she was driving straight on to her purpose, over her own writhing nerves—"all he said was that he had been called back to Germany—"

"Is he a German? Miss Parker said his name was Cutler."

"It is Butler," the girl said, flinging her head back, while a spark crept into her liquid, troubled, dark eyes, "but he is a German. Don't you know the Butlers in 'Wallenstein?' You know he was a real man; and he founded a family. He—my—my friend is the Count von Butler." Miss Wing's chair, like other desk chairs, was set on a pivot; she turned very slightly and slowly, at the same time resting her elbow on the desk. The girl ventured a timid glance at her, and thought that she looked sterner, wherefor her heart sank, but she only continued the faster: "He isn't in America just to travel; he was sent by his government to watch the Cuban war. He's very brave; and he isn't a bit like a foreigner and hasn't any nasty supercilious notions about women. Mr. Grier says he has a future. And really, Miss Wing, he is just like a—a—a kind of knight."

"Where did you meet him?"

"At Helen's last summer. And he was going out to Minneapolis to see papa, I—I think. But he got a cable of his uncle's death. And his two little cousins died last year; so now he is the head of the family; and he must go to Germany at once. For his father is dead, you know. So he wrote (in Helen's letter, because he is so—so awfully proper!) asking to let him come here and take me to drive—in the American fashion. I know who put him up to that scheme; it was Helen. I had to ask Miss Parker, because you were out; and she said if he wasn't a relation or the man I was going to marry I couldn't go. 'Of course, if he were the man you expect to marry,' she said, and—and I—I said, 'But he is!' Just like that. I can't fancy how I came to say such a thing, but when it was said I didn't know how to explain; and I was so awfully ashamed; and, besides"—she lifted her eyes in the frank and direct gaze that Miss Wing always liked—"besides, I do want to see him."

"And do you expect him to ask you to marry him?" said Miss Wing, with a deepening of the color on her cheek, which went out suddenly like the flame of a lamp in the wind.

Florence Raimund blushed again, but this time she laughed: "I don't know. He is so awfully proper," said she, "and he hasn't had a chance to ask papa; but—I think he wants to."

"In that case isn't he the man whom you expect to marry?" asked Miss Wing dryly. "But it was deceiving her just the same. I am glad you came, Florence."

Here the girl looked up; and something in Miss Wing's eyes made her dash across the room to fling herself on her knees before that lady with an inarticulate gasp between a sob and a laugh, and the sentences came in a rush: "I had to come! I couldn't deceive you if I never saw him again. And besides, I hoped you would think of some way!"

"And you escape quite unpunished?" said Miss Wing gently.

At which the black head sank lower, while a smothered voice mumbled: "Do you think I—liked it, coming to tell?"

Miss Wing smoothed her hair. "It would have pained me very much if you had not come. Tell me, whether he sees you or not, will he write to your father? Do you think his feeling is so slight that a disappointment will turn it?"

The black head threw itself up bravely and the fearless young eyes met Miss Wing's pensive brown ones. "No, Miss Wing, I know it will make no difference."

Miss Wing stifled a sigh; it may be that she was not so sure of the firm purpose of a lover; she spoke more gently: "It is only the disappointment, then, if you can't see him?"

The girl's face quivered a little.

"Perhaps I am foolish," said Miss Wing, "but I think it would be a disappointment very hard to bear. Still, you must admit that parents do not send their children to school expecting them to become engaged to be married; on the contrary, there is a tacit pledge that we shall protect our wards from any entanglement. But this did not happen at school; the only question is, ought I to prevent it going any farther? My dear, do you have confidence in me?"

"Yes, Miss Wing," said the girl.

"Of course, I do not think that I ought to consent to your driving alone together."

The girl drew a long sigh. "I suppose not," she breathed, in dismal resignation.

"But I should like him to come here to see me, and then, if I find him to be what your father would approve, you may see him here, and we shall all have to explain things together, I fancy, to your father."

The girl drew another, a very different, sigh, and impulsively kissed Miss Wing's hand. She tried to speak, and could only murmur, "Oh, I do love you!"

"And so, if you will tell Graf von Butler—what is his Christian name, Florence?"

"Max," said the girl, very low, for she felt the presence of the picture, on which she had not once turned her eyes. Before she spoke, under a pretense of a pull at her skirt, she slipped her hand out of the hand with the sapphire ring. Yet her excited young nerves vibrated at the slight cough which came as the principal changed her position, before she said, in her usual tone: "It is a fine name. Well, Florence, you will tell Count Max von Butler that I shall hope to see him. And—will you trust me?"

The girl told her that she would trust her utterly, and she knew that it would be right; and oh, she was so happy. And she came back to say, with the tears in her eyes, "I shall be grateful to you as long as I live."

Miss Wing stood in the center of the room, smiling, until the door closed. But then in a second she was at the door, almost fiercely, but noiselessly, twisting the key in the lock. From the door she passed to the windows and dropped the shades. At last, safe from every chance of espial, she sat down again in her chair before the desk, leaned her elbows on the desk and looked desperately, miserably, into the joyous face of the picture. She did not speak, but her thoughts took on words and sank like hot lead into her heart. 'Max Butler! Max Butler! The little nephew he told me about. And he has been alive all these years, and happy, with little sons, while I—I have lied to these trusting girls. It was wicked and shameless. I deceived myself; then I deceived them. I wonder why. I knew what they were thinking. How dared I look that honest child in the face! I suppose she wonders like the rest why I have not told anyone of my romance. And it is simply that there was nothing to tell. Nothing." She looked into the soldier's happy eyes while her lips curled and she murmured, drearily and bitterly, "I haven't even the right to be angry with you, poor lad. What did you do? You are not my Max; I only made him up out of my heart—like children playing a game!" Her mind drifted dizzily through shapeless and inconsequent visions of the past. She was seeing again the grim pile of the ruined castle, the masses of broken shadow, the intricate carving on arch and architrave and plinth, the wavering mass of limbs and treetrunks on the green sward; and she, with her twisted ankle, was kneeling, trying to peer through the shrubbery for her lost companions. Did he come by chance? She had seen the handsome young officer daily, for a week. His great aunt was Margaret's right-hand neighbor at the pension table d'hote, a withered relic of Polish nobility with fine, black eyes in a face like a hickory nut, who wore shabby gowns and magnificent jewels, frankly smoked cigarettes and seemed to have a venomous tale ready to fit any name mentioned in conversation—with one exception, her nephew's. According to her, Max's father was a swine and his mother a fool and his brother a popinjay, and his sister had no respect for her betters; but Max had a heart. It was understood at the pension that she was arranging a great match for him. In spite of the general disapproval of his aunt he was a favorite, he was so simple, amiable and polite. Even the American professor admitted that for a man "who had won the iron cross in such a spectacular fashion, he was very modest and really more like an American that a German officer," thus paying the unconsciously arrogant compliment kept by every race for engaging aliens. Margaret's first sight of him was not under the shelter of conventionalities. It happened that the countess' ferocious pet (and the terror of the pension), a Great Dane, was trying to eat up a little girl, but unfortunately had begun with her petticoats. The court of the house was the scene of the fray; a large, timid cook, the only witness, was waving a copper kettle full of the meringue that she was beating, in one hand and the great wire whip in the other, while she shrieked impartially on heaven and the police. Margaret heard the din. She ran to the spot. Being a New England woman, she didn't scream; one swift glance went from the child's writhing body and the dog's horrible head to the wailing cook. In two strides she caught the kettle out of a fat and agitated German hand and hurled the whole sticky, white mass full at the dog's eyes; then, as the blinded and astonished beast flung his head back to howl, and spattered the world with meringue, she snatched up the child and sent her flying into the door and the cook. The dog was smeared with meringue, she was smeared, the child was smeared, the cook was smeared; and now a beautiful white and gold officer, who bounded over the wall and fell upon the dog with his saber and two heels, was smeared the most lavishly of all! No wonder Frau Muller (visible aloft, in an artless German toilet of curl and without her teeth), the countess (who was a gazing stock, for the same reason), and Augustine, her maid, the three Russians on the second floor, and the three Americans on the third, filled the windows with polyglot consternation! The consequence of it all was that when the Count von Butler was formally presented to Miss Wing that evening she blushed. She was too pale and listless to be pretty, but when she blushed she was enchanting. Remembering the meringue, she smiled and ventured an upward glance; and, for the first time in her life, met the admiration in the eyes of a man. At this time Margaret was 30 years old and had almost never been asked in marriage. She had spent most of the 30 years in a boarding school, as pupil or as teacher, and she had brought from her cloistered life a single vivid feeling, a passionate friendship which death had ended. The sapphire ring was her poor friend's last token.

To be thirty and never to have been sought like other girls leaves a chill in the heart. It may be lonely never to have loved, but it is bleak never to have been loved. Margaret remembered her delicate, girlish dreams with a recoil of humiliation; they seemed to her almost immodest. She thought she was too old to wear hats, and wondered whether she ought not to discard the pinks and light blues which poor Elly had liked on her for more sedate colors. But she wore pink after she met Max Butler. Yet he never saw her save in the presence of others. He was full of little, graceful attentions, but he showed the same attentions to the portly clergyman's widow and the meritorious but cross-eyed teacher of fifty, who formed Miss Wing's "party." It was only his eyes, his eyes always following her, approvingly, delighting, admiring, pleading, speaking to her as they spoke to no other woman. She told herself that it was just the pleasant, foreign way; and she wrote to her friends in America, "The German officers have very agreeable, deferential manners. I think they are much more gentle and polite and have a higher respect for women than the French or Italians." And he said no word, even of friendship, until that afternoon at the Heidelberger Schloss.

He came upon her almost immediately, scrambling up the bank at a rate which had worked woe to his uniform. He was torn, he was scratched, he was stained with mud and grass, and he was beaming with delight. "I have seen you from below," he exclaiming in his careful English, "so I came up. Will you excuse?" Then his mood changed, perceiving her plight, and he insisted on tearing his handkerchief into strips to bind her ankle. It seemed absurd to refuse his aid, which he offered quite simply; but his hands trembled a little over the knots. "It will be most easy, I think," said he, "that you should let me assist you a small way to the restauracion; so I can get the carriage, and you can have some ice-cream. Again, today, is it burned—"

She had laughed and said that she never had heard of burned ice-cream. He laughed, too, and explained that it was burned as a custard, and somehow under cover of this she let him put her hand on his shoulder and his arm about her waist. She was grateful to him for the matter-of-fact manner in which he did it all, saying, "You will have to be my comrade that has been wounded, and I will help him off the field; so I did, once, with my colonel; it is better than to wait until I could bring help." In this fashion they walked for some 20 minutes. They were minutes not entirely disfigured by her physical pain, for it was a comfort to be helped by so strong and kind a friend. The comfort brightened almost into pleasure as they drove homeward in a shabby droschky, with all the circuit of the horizon flooded with softest rose and gold, reflecting the cloudless glory of the west. Borne along through that unreal and lovely radiance, past the hills checkered with vineyards and ripening grain, which the sunlight blazoned in green and gold like the initials of an old missal, they talked as one friend would talk to another. At least that was her phrase, and she admitted to herself that she had not been so nearly happy since Elly died. "I didn't know a man could be so—so kind," she said.

He told her of his country and his home, and how he loved the hills that his fathers had always owned, and the rugged, simple, faithful people. He told her of the plans of his father and himself for them; he told her of his father, who had the best heart in the world, but was credited with a fierce temper simply because his voice was loud; and his mother, who was so gentle that everyone loved her; and his handsome sister, and his brother, who was a diplomat and far cleverer than he; and his little brother who died and would have no one carry him in his pain but Max ("Ah, he was the most clever and the most beautiful of us all!"), and Max, his little nephew, who looked like the dead boy. "I hope you will see my home and them all," he said. "Tomorrow I shall see them; then, the same day, I shall be back here—with you."

And then, by degrees, she won him to talk of his profession, of his hopes, his ambitions, his ideals; of all those intimate and cherished things which lie at the bottom of the soul and only rise for a friend's eyes. It seemed to her that she could read his character in the hints given by his words, as one would fill an outline sketch with perspective and details. There was certainly a fascination in this revelation; candor, after all, was a virtue, as well as reticence. Perhaps her new friend was a little mediaeval, but he was as refined as if he had been all modern.

By now they were rattling through the modern town of Heidelberg, the plain walls of which looked bare after the lawless pomp of carving and form on the old castle; they had not even the bizarre, affected grace of the architecture then decking American countrysides. But Margaret thought how homelike and honest the houses looked; staunch and trusty, like the German. Butler, just then, was praising American buggies, from which he made a general transition to the customs of society. "In America, is it not," he, "the young ladies drive alone with young ?"

"Yes, very often. But not with you.

"Oh, no, mein fraulein, this is the first time I am alone with a young lady!"

She had called herself old for so long that there was a distinct pleasure in being "a young lady" to him, and she had not time to remember it partook of the nature of deceit, because he sent a wave of confusion over her by continuing: "In America, also, one would propose marriage to a lady, herself, before to her father!"

"It is our custom," agreed Margaret, "but"—with her prim teacher's air—"your custom is far more decorous."

His face fell, then promptly brightened. "Perhaps it would be best to speak to both, so near the same time one can. But this is another thing you must explain me. How is it most preferable to the lady, that one shall write or shall come—"

"Oh, write," said Margaret quickly. How silly of her to suddenly feel so frightened; she wished that she were in a room and not in a carriage with him; involuntarily she shrank back into her own corner and she found that she was playing with the soiled and frayed edges of a tear in the cloth of the side curtain and watching her pearl-colored fingers. Those gloves she had put on new that day. How reckless! But she had not the resolution to desist. His voice dragged a little, "Ah, yes, if she would refuse, but if—not?"

"In any case," said she.

"Look!" he exclaimed, "at the sunset. Ah, is it not lovely?"

Of a sudden they were looking, not at the sunset, but into each other's eyes; and all about them was that wonderful, transfiguring glow, and it seemed as if there were nothing in the whole world that he had not said.

"Is it to the right, Herr Captain?" asked the driver, turning on his seat to divide a benign and semi-intoxicated smile between them.

Then it was hardly a moment until the yellow stucco of the pension jumped at their eyes around a corner, and there were the clergyman's widow and the teacher at the door. They fell upon the carriage in a clamor of explanation and sympathy; they were at her side when he bowed over her hand and kissed it, saying, "Aufwiedersehen."

That was all. There was never any more. He did not come again. Or if he came, she was not there, since the next day they were on their way to Bremen, summoned by cable to her sister's deathbed. She never heard from him or of him again. Yet she had left her American address with his aunt for any letters that might need to be forwarded, and a stiff little note of thanks and farewell—a perfectly neutral note such as any friend might give or receive. There followed weeks crowded with sorrow and business (the sister was a widow without children), and she shared her estate with her other and Margaret imputed her deep depression to natural and sufficient causes. She rated her sister's vanity in reading her own meanings into a young man's looks and his intelligent interest in with the New Englander's zest for self-knowledge. But one afternoon, without warning, there fell upon her a deep and hopeless peace. It was as if some invisible power controlled and changed all her thought. She knew that her friend was not faithless or careless; he was dead. the currents deep gently, thinking pitifully of his She began to w the loud voice and his fragile mother old father with t and brother and the little nephew. and the sister a murmured, wishing, for the first time in her life, to who always paid her toll of for them to them, s it and knew that she was sympathy, but dread the day at the castle and clumsy. She remembe word, each look. A sensation went over again each stand, full of awe and sweetness, possessed her. It was indescribable, unthinkable, as it was also irre other room, from which she went to a trunk in an contents, an took out her had not yet removed all th She said to herself that Heidelberg photographs. es of that day. In her she would look at the scen age of her own pictures search she came upon a pac of the day that she had which had come the morning any details of receiving them except that she had been at the photogra tion for them. When they pher's the day before and paid em into a tray. She came she was in too great agita e cartes out of the packing) to more than fling th through her fingers; could not tell why she took th she uttered a cry. envelope and ran them listlessly Max with the inbut at the last of the package e forever." It is The last carte was a picture of ing of the picture scription in his own hand, "Thi vanished; for in not exact to say that with the fin ion was too abso her doubt of his affection for her as the presence truth, she had no doubts, the possess e, comes on one lute. But the sight came upon her is no question of a mortal being, alive and visibl ally loved Max, when he enters a room. And there ath would have that it was a comfort; if she had re she could have at this time the knowledge of his de rld—no hope of been her cruelest shock; for then f life together. no hope to meet him again in the wo oung German; some explanation and the happiness o she admired But she was not in love with the y subtle attracshe was touched by his admiration, which might him tenderly, she felt the moving of a not love him. tion which she called friendship and etness in her pass into a keener feeling; but she did nore; she had Not then. Therefore, she felt a swe e not beloved pain; she could respect herself once r come to her, a new and mystical joy; for was sh now, to com above women? Had not her lover picture. She through what strange paths who may k e hung Max's fort her? This is the story of the rlor; and she could not tell it. Nor did she; but sh nd from that portrait on the walls of her little pa not influence hung opposite a picture of the castle; efore it. She day never a day passed that it did s of kindred her. She used to think her thoughts b her anxieties, came to it with her grief for the los es for others, and friends, with her loneliness, with ns. She was with her aspirations, her plans, her car have allowed her slowly dawning interests and affecti mself beyond a reticent woman, who might never rom Max. In her heart to expand to her husband h to the picture. a certain limit; but she hid nothing f she spoke his time she fell into the habit of talking oilets for him She called him Max. The first time r Max could adname she blushed. She made her the girls knew more than for the world, but whethe Her sense of mire them or not, it is certain tha her manner and every change in her pretty gowns she was a New having been loved had its effect on man who undera deeper effect on her heart. At 30 king and critical England nun; at 40 she was the wo ard her, without stands. The love which the shrin who understood, girl repelled at its first step tow knowing, the woman who pitied an d, "that in my old attracted, quite as unconsciously. e. But I like you "It is very queer, Max," she sa age men should want to marry m best."

Only the day before she had said that, and she had said, "I am happy Max. Isn t it strange! But I am." Only yesterday—and now there was nothing. The Max that she had grow to love with the gradual, imperceptible advance of affection, sweet to her shy nature—that Max had n ever been. No doubt all the while, over in Germany , a stout and phlegmatic German landlord had bee n caring for his vineyards and playing the war lord in the landwehr and living very comfortably with the dough-faced German girl whose hair was lighter than her complexion, whom the countess wanted to marry; a man as unlike the high-souled knight of her fancy as—as she, herself, was unlike the girl's image! Worst of all was her own weak, false behavior. "No," she cried, in an access of bitterness, "the worst is that I can't feel that the worst; I can only feel I have lost him, forever! I don't seem to mind that I have lost myself!"

Now she began to pace the room trying to think clearly. Was it her duty to tell Florence the story and let her tell the girls? The red-hot agony of the idea seemed to her excited conscience an intimation that it was her duty from which she shrank because she was a selfish, hysterical, dishonorable coward. Horrible as such abasement would be, if it were her duty, she could do it; what she could not, what she would not do, was to tear the veil from the pure and mystical passion which had been the flower of her heart. "Not if it cost me my soul," she said, with the frozen quiet of despair; "it is awful, but I can't do it!" One thing did remain; she could remove the picture. That false witness of what had never been should go. No eyes should ever fall on it again. It should never deceive more. She walked toward it firmly. She lifted her hand—and it fell. "I can't!" she moaned. "I'll do it tomorrow." She could not remember, in years, so weak a compromise offered her conscience.

But she felt a sense of respite, almost relief, once having decided, and she recovered her composure enough to go to her chamber and bathe her eyes. While she was thus engaged she heard a knock. "It is he," she said quietly; "well, the sooner the better."

It was he; he had come earlier than he expected, he explained; he was most grateful for Miss Wing's kind message. He looked like his uncle, as the members of a family will look alike. He was not so tall; he was not so handsome. Perhaps most people would call him more graceful. And his English was faultless; he must have spoken it from his childhood. In the midst of his first sentences, before they had permitted him to take a chair, his eyes traveled past Miss Wing's face. She perceived that he saw the picture; she knew that she grew pale, but, to her amazement, a calm like the calm which had wrapped her senses on the day of her finding the picture, closed about her again. "I beg your pardon?" said he.

"Yes, that is Count von Butler's portrait," said she, in a clear voice, without emotion. He was not so composed. "Then it was you," he said. Following her example, he took a chair and looked earnestly at the pictured face. "When Miss Raimund spoke of you so warmly I noticed that the name was the same and I determined to inquire, but it seemed to me unlikely. Yet it is. Miss Wing, I have a message to you, from my uncle."

She noticed that there were gold motes in the air, and his pleasant, blond face seemed to wander through them; the room was full of sunlight.

"I was with him when he died."

That was a strange thing to hear when the message of his uncle's death had come to him in another country; she hoped that her brain was not going to play her false.

"It was 15 years ago last July, you know. I never knew how many details you received, or only the bare fact in the papers."

"Fifteen years! fifteen years! What was that date he was giving? That was the day on which she sailed for America, the day after—what was that story he was telling of a visit and a fire and a child rescued and an accident? But still she listened with the same iron composure. The next words she heard distinctly.

"It was like him to lose his life that way; and he did not grudge it. Yet it was hard that I should be the only one of his blood with him. He could speak with difficulty when he told me to take a lock of hair and his signet ring to you. He dictated the address himself to me. 'You must be sure and take it,' he said. 'It is to the lady that I hoped would be my betrothed; you must tell grandmamma about it, too. She has my picture and she knows—but tell her'—and then, I think his mind must have wandered a little, for he smiled brightly at me, saying, 'I'll tell her myself', and then the doctors came. He said nothing more, only once, they told me, he murmured something about his betrothed. But I had the ring; he took it off his finger and kissed it and gave it to me. Child as I was, I knew that it was sacred. I wrapped it in the paper, and afterward I put the lock of hair beside it. So soon as I could I went to Heidelberg to the pension. You had gone and there was no address, no trace—"

"I left my address with the countess—"

"My aunt is dead," said the young German gravely. "I would not criticize her, but she had her own choice of a wife for my uncle; I do not think one could trust her with addresses."

"We all gave ours to her to give to Frau Muller."

"That is why, then, I could not find you. My grandmother also tried. But you were gone. I thought of the banks, long after, but I found nothing. Often it has seemed dreadful that you should learn of this only through the papers. But I could not tell whether—anything. When I came to America, I confess it was always in my mind. I always carried my uncle's little packet with me. I will have it sent to you."

"Excuse me," said Miss Wing gently. "Will you please bring me the glass of water—I—am afraid—I can't walk to it."

But she would not let him pour the water on his handkerchief to bathe her head. She sipped the water, and very pale, but quite herself, brought him back to his own matters. She found that it was a cousin, miscalled an uncle, in the German manner, who had died. It did not seem to her that Max's nephew could be unworthy of any girl; yet she conscientiously questioned him regarding his worldly affairs, for Florence was an only daughter whose father had great possessions and a distrust of adventurers, and at last she sent him forth to walk in the grove with his sweetheart. "And speak to her," she said, with a look that sank into his heart; "it is the American way; don't wait to write, the American way is best."

So, at last, she was alone. Alone with her lover who had always been true; whose love many waters could not quench, and it was stronger than death. She often pondered, afterward, whether there had not been some note written to her and sent with the photographs; whether the countess might not have tampered with the package, taking the note, but not suspecting the picture. But none of these puzzles troubled her today. She stood in front of the picture. All the years, an obscure and virginal shyness had withheld her from ever overstepping her first attitude. She told him every thought of her heart in regard to others and herself. He was her dearest friend. She called him "Max" and "my friend." Recalling the French use of the latter term, she used it sometimes with a little flutter of the heart. But those innocent endearments that a woman keeps for her lover's portrait—to make amends for not proffering them of free will to the poor fellow himself—these it would have shocked her to imagine. She never touched the picture, save reverently to dust it, to take it down when she went away, to replace it in its station when she returned. But now, trembling, yet not blushing, she took the picture into her hands. She looked long into its eyes; she kissed it with a light and timid kiss, and swiftly hid the smiling face against her heart, pressing the frame in both hands and touching it with her cheek bent over it, while she whispered: "You did tell me. You came back and told me. I love you. Max, my knight—my husband!"

[Copyright by the Bobbs-Merrill Company.]

©Maryland State Archives, msa_sc4150_1_215-0072