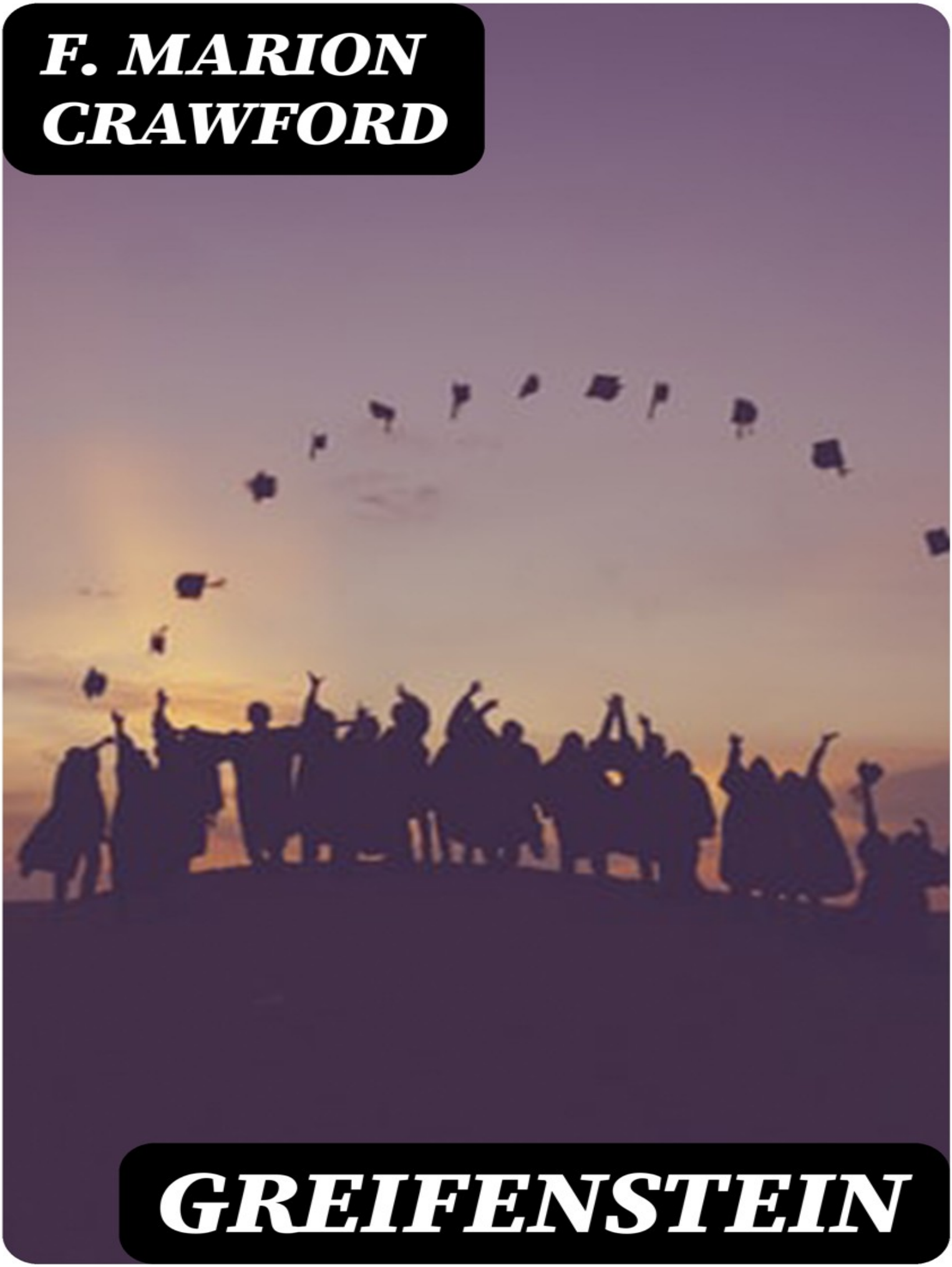
F. MARION CRAWFORD



GREIFENSTEIN

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Greifenstein

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CHAPTER I

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Frau von Sigmundskron was not really much past middle age, though the people in the village generally called her the old baroness. Her hair was very white and she was thin and pale; her bold features, almost emaciated, displayed the framework of departed beauty, and if her high white forehead and waxen face were free from lines and wrinkles, it must have been because time and grief could find no plastic material there in which to trace their story. She was a very tall woman, too, and carried her head erect and high, walking with a firmness and elasticity of step such as would not have been expected in one whose outward appearance conveyed so little impression of strength. It is true that she had never been ill in her life and that her leanness was due to the most natural of all causes; but these facts were not patent to the observer, and for reasons which will presently appear she herself would have been the last to mention them. There was something, too, in the look of her blue eyes, shaded by long brown lashes which had retained their colour, that forbade any expression of sympathy. The least experienced of mankind would have seen at a glance that she was the proudest of women, and would have guessed that she must be one of the most reticent. She moved and spoke as though Sigmundskron were still what it had been in former days, and she had brought up her only child to be as much like herself, as it was possible that anything so young and fair could resemble what was already a type of age and gravity.

Poverty is too insignificant a word to describe the state in which the mother and daughter lived, and had lived for many years. They had no means of subsistence whatever beyond the pension accorded to the widow of Lieutenant von Sigmundskron, ‘fallen on the field of honour,’ as the official report had expressed it, in the murderous war with France. He had been the last of his name and at the time of his death had no relations living; two years earlier he had married a girl as penniless and as noble as himself, and had lived to see a daughter born, destined to inherit his nobility, his penury, and the bare walls of his ancestral home.

Sigmundskron had been a very grand castle in its day, and the half-ruined walls of the old stronghold still rose majestically from the summit of the crag. Indeed the ruin was more apparent than real as yet, and a few thousands judiciously expended upon the masonry would have sufficed to restore the buildings to their original completeness. Many a newly enriched merchant or banker would have paid a handsome price for the place, though the land was gone and the government owned the forest up to the very foot of the rock. But the Lady of Sigmundskron would rather have starved to death in her vaulted chamber than have taken half the gold in Swabia to sign away her dead husband’s home. Moreover, there was Greif, and Greif was to marry Hilda, after which all would be well again. Greif, with his money, would build and restore and furnish the old castle, and bring back the breath of life into the ancient halls and corridors. But in order that Greif might marry Hilda, it was necessary that Hilda should grow up beautiful, and to grow up at all, it was necessary that Hilda should be fed.

It had come to that, to the very question of food, of mere bread to eat. There was not enough for two, but Hilda must not starve. That was the secret which no one, not even Hilda herself must ever understand. During the first years, it had not been so hard to live. There had been a few poor jewels to sell, a few odds and ends that had brought a little money. While Hilda was a little child it had been easier, for she had needed but few clothes and, being little, had needed to eat less. But at last there had come a day when Frau von Sigmundskron, not so thin nor so pale as now, had seen a hungry look stealing into the eyes of the fair-haired girl. It was little enough that they had between them, but the mother said to herself that she could keep alive with less. The careful economy which bought nothing not capable of sustaining life and strength could go no further. There were but so many pence a day for food, and to expend more to-day was to starve tomorrow. From that moment Frau von Sigmundskron began to complain of headache, and especially of loss of appetite. She could not eat, she said. She did not think there was anything the matter, and she would doubtless be better in a few days. But the days ran on to weeks, the weeks to months, and the months to years, and Hilda grew tall and fair, unconsciously eating her mother’s portion of the daily bread. No hermit ever lived upon so little as sufficed for the baroness; no perishing, shipwrecked wretch ever measured out so carefully the ounce of biscuit that must maintain life from day to day; no martyr ever submitted more patiently and silently to his sufferings. But Hilda grew, and the years sped on, and Greif would come in time.

Greif, upon whom such great hopes were centred, was a distant cousin as well as a neighbour. The relationship was on the side of Hilda’s mother, whose grandfather had been a Greifenstein, and who might have been expected to accept some assistance from her rich connexions, especially as she was quite willing that her daughter should marry their only son. But the baroness was a woman whose pride forbade her to accept under the pressure of necessity what had not been offered freely in other times. It must be admitted also that the Greifensteins, though well aware that the Sigmundskrons were extremely poor, were far from suspecting that they were in need of bread. They knew that the castle was still the unhampered property of the two ladies, and they supposed that if things were really in a bad state, the baroness would raise money upon it. She never alluded to her affairs when she was with her relations, and excused herself from asking them to stay with her, on the ground of her poor health. On rare occasions Greifenstein and his wife drove over to the castle, and were invariably admitted by the same soberly-dressed, middle-aged woman, who showed them into the same old-fashioned room, whence, having made their visit, they returned to the outer gate by the way they had come. That is all they ever saw of Sigmundskron. Twice in the year, also, Hilda and her mother were invited to stay a fortnight at Greifenstein, but no one would have supposed from their behaviour that the luxury of the latter place surprised them, or seemed in any way preferable to what they enjoyed at home. Hilda’s education had not been neglected. Among her earliest recollections was her mother’s constant injunction never to make

remarks upon what she saw in other houses. The child was not long in learning what the warning meant, and as she had inherited a plentiful share of her mother’s pride she almost unconsciously imitated her mother’s behaviour. Greif himself was the only person who might have known something of the true state of the case; but as he had been accustomed to be in love with his cousin ever since they had been children he would have feared to hurt her feelings by asking questions. For Hilda was reticent even with him, not from any shame at the idea of being thought poor, but because she was too proud to have it thought that either she or her mother could ever need the help of the Greifensteins.

Furthermore, if the baroness’s reluctance to ask for assistance has not been sufficiently explained, there is one more consideration which might alone have sufficed to account for her conduct. Between her and Greif’s mother there existed a great and wholly insurmountable antipathy. She could not understand how Greifenstein could have married such a woman. There was a mystery about it which she had never fathomed. Greifenstein himself was a stern, silent man of military appearance, a mighty hunter in the depths of the forest, a sort of grizzled monument of aristocratic strength, tough as leather, courteous in his manner, with that stiff courtesy that never changes under any circumstances, rigid in his views, religious, loyal, full of the prejudices that make the best subjects in a kingdom and the bitterest opponents of all change.

In appearance and manner Frau von Greifenstein presented the most complete contrast to her husband. She

had been pretty, fair and sprightly in her youth, she was now a faded blonde, full of strange affectations and stilted sentiments. Possessing but indifferent taste, she nevertheless devoted much time to the adornment of her person. She was small of stature, but delicately made, and if her nervous desire to please had granted to her outward personality a moment’s repose during the day, she might still have passed muster as a fairly good-looking woman. Unfortunately she was animated by an unceasing activity in trivial matters, and was rarely silent. Some women make one think of a printed page in which there are too many italics, and too many useless marks of exclamation. At first, their constant cries of admiration and outbursts of enthusiasm produce a vague sense of uneasiness in the listener, which soon develops to a feeling of positive distress and generally ends in a real and deep-rooted dislike. At the beginning one looks about anxiously for the object which could produce so grotesque a smile. There is nothing, for the conversation has been as lead, but the smile does not subside; it only passes through the endless variations that succeed each other from the inane grin to the affected simper which is meant to be tender. The whole face moves perpetually, as the facial muscles of a corpse, excited by an electric current, seem to parody all the expression of living human sentiment.

But Frau von Greifenstein was not in reality so foolish as might have been thought. Her silliness was superficial. One part of her life had been full of strange circumstances, and if the whole truth were told it would appear that she had known how to extract a large amount of personal advantage

from situations which to many persons would have seemed hopeless. She and her husband rarely left their castle in the Black Forest, and it might naturally be supposed that their life there was exceedingly dull and monotonous. In her own heart Clara von Greifenstein recognised that her present luxurious retirement was a paradise compared with the existence she must have led if she had not known how to help herself at the right moment. During the earlier years of her marriage, the recollection of her antecedents had been so painful as to cause her constant anxiety, and at one time she had even gone so far as to keep a sum of money about her, as though expecting to make a sudden and unexpected journey. But five and twenty years and more had passed, without bringing any untoward incident, and she felt herself very secure in her position. Moreover a son had been born to her and was growing up to be very like his father. Without Greif there is no knowing what turn affairs might have taken, for although Clara’s husband maintained towards her the same stiffly considerate behaviour which had always characterised him in their relations to each other, he certainly admitted to himself that she was not growing old gracefully; and it is even possible that, in some remote glen of the forest, his grave features may have occasionally allowed themselves a look of sorrowful regret, or even of actual repugnance, when he thought of his wife’s spasmodic smiles and foolish talk. Possibly, too, he may have sometimes speculated upon her probable condition before she had married her first husband, for he himself had found her a widow of apparently little more than five and twenty years of age. But if any suggestion at all derogatory to

Greifenstein had presented itself to his mind, his pride would assuredly have lost no time in smothering the thought. Was she not the mother of Greif? And besides, if all were to be told, was there not an unpleasantly dark spot in his own family, in the shape of his half-brother, Kuno von Rieseneck? Indeed the existence of Kuno von Rieseneck, concerning whom Clara knew nothing, was the reason why Greifenstein had lived for so many years in the country, only travelling outside of Germany when he travelled at all. He wondered that his wife, being ignorant of the story, should be willing to share the solitude of the Black Forest without a murmur, and her submission in itself suggested that she, too, might have some good cause for preferring a retired life. But if he had been satisfied with what he knew of her five and twenty years ago, he was not the man to allow himself any dissatisfaction now that Clara was the mother of that stalwart young fellow who was heir to all the Greifenstein property.

In the month of July Greif was to come home from the University, and immediately afterwards Hilda and her mother were to come over for their half-yearly visit. The ancient place where this family meeting was convened was so unlike most castles as to deserve a word of description.

The Swabian Black Forest is literally black, save when the winter snow is heavy on the branches of the huge trees and lies in drifts beneath them, covering the soft carpet of fir needles to the depth of many feet. The landscape is extremely melancholy and in many parts is absolutely monotonous. At intervals of several miles the rock juts suddenly out of the forest, generally at places where the

Nagold, more a torrent than a river, makes a sharp bend. Many of these steep and stony promontories are crowned by ancient strongholds, chiefly in ruins, though a very few are still in repair and are inhabited by their owners. The name of Greifenstein will not be found on any map of the district, but those who know that wild and unfrequented country will recognise the spot. The tumbling stream turns upon itself at a sharp angle, swirling round the base of a precipitous and wedge-like cliff. So steep are the sides that they who chose the summit for a fortress saw no need of building any protection, save one gigantic wall which bestrides the wedge of rock, thus cutting off a triangular platform, between the massive bulwark and the two precipices that meet at the apex of the figure. This single fortification is a solid piece of masonry, enormously thick and of great height; its two extremities being surmounted by pointed towers, connected by a covered walk along the top of the wall, which, even at that height, is fully six feet wide and nearly a hundred in length. This was the rampart behind which the Greifensteins had dwelt in security through many generations, in the stormy days of the robber barons. So sure were they of their safety, that they had built their dwelling-place on the other side of the bulwark in a manner that offered no suggestion of war or danger. The house was Gothic in style, full of windows and ornamented with spacious balconies and much fine stonework. The three-cornered platform was converted into a flower-garden, surrounded by a parapet. Protected on the north side by the huge wall, and fully exposed to the southern sun, the plants throve in an almost artificial spring, and in the summer jets

of water played in the marble basins and cooled the hot, pine-scented air.

One narrow gate, barely wide enough for two persons to pass abreast, gave access to this paradise through the grey, window-less mass of masonry by which it was separated from the melancholy forest without. One small building only was visible on the side of the woods, scarcely fifty yards from the gate. This was a small, square, stone tower, half overgrown with brush and creepers, and evidently abandoned to decay. It was known in the family and neighbourhood as the ‘Hunger-Thurm,’ or Hunger Tower, as having been used as a place for starving prisoners to death, in the fine old days when the lords of Greifenstein did as they judged good in their own eyes. Frau von Sigmundskron used to look curiously at the grey building when she was staying with her relations. She could have described the sufferings of the poor wretches who had perished there as well as any one of themselves or better. Not twenty miles from all the luxury that dwelt behind that lofty bulwark, she had been starving herself for years in order that her only child might live. And yet the well-fed woodmen touched their caps and their rosy wives and daughters curtsied to the ‘Lady Baroness’ who, as they told each other, spent her life in the towers of Sigmundskron hoarding untold wealth which would one day belong to the golden-haired Lady Hilda. They knew, for the knowledge could not be kept from them and their kind, how very few were the silver pieces which were ever seen in the hands of old Berbel, when she came down to the village market to buy food, and they naturally concluded that the baroness was a miser even like

some of themselves, keeping her store of gold in a broken teapot somewhere among those turrets in a spot known only to the owls. It is also possible that Berbel—her name was Barbara—encouraged the idea, thinking it better that her beloved mistresses should be thought avaricious than poor. The burgomaster of the hamlet, who had to take off his coat in order to sign his name when that momentous operation was unavoidable, but who was supposed to know vastly more than the schoolmaster, used to talk about certain mines in Silesia, owned by the Sigmundskrons; and once or twice he went so far as to assure his hearers that gold and even diamonds were found there in solid blocks as big as his own Maass-Krug, that portentous jug from which he derived inspiring thoughts for conversation, or peaceful satisfaction in solitude, as the case might be. All, however, agreed in predicting that things would go much better when the young gentleman of Greifenstein was married to the young lady of Sigmundskron.

On that warm afternoon in July when Greif was expected, his father took his gun, though there was little to shoot at that season, and sallied forth on foot along the broad road that led to the distant railway station. The portly gatekeeper smiled pleasantly as he stood looking after his master. For many years, whenever the student was to come home, old Greifenstein had gone down that road, in the same way, without a word to any one, but having that same twinkle of happy anticipation in his eyes, which was never seen there at any other time. Very generally, too, the laden carriage came rumbling up to the gate with Greif’s belongings, and an hour or two passed before father and son emerged on

foot from the first trees of the forest. To-day also, the master had started betimes and it would be long before he heard the horses' bells below him in the valley. He walked quickly, as active men do when they are alone, and there is no one to hinder them, stopping now and then to see which way a hare sprang, or pausing to listen when his quick ear caught the distant tread of a buck. He knew that he might walk for miles without meeting a human being. The road was his, the land was his, the trees were his. There was no felling to be done in the neighbourhood, and no one but himself or his men had any right to be prowling about the woods. In the perfect solitude his features relaxed a little and their expression changed. The glad anticipation of the meeting with his son was still in his eyes, but in the rest of his face there was a weary look which those who knew him best would not have recognised. He was thinking how different life would seem if Greif and he were to be the only inhabitants of the old home during the next dozen years. Then he stiffened his neck suddenly and strode on.

At last the far off tinkling of bells came up to him from the depths of the forest, with the dull thud of horses' hoofs that echoed among the trees. He quickened his pace, knowing at how great a distance the sounds could be heard. Ten minutes elapsed before the carriage came in sight, and then almost instantly a loud shout rang through the woods, followed by an answer from old Greifenstein, deeper, but quite as strong.

'Father!'

'Greif!'

Greif had leaped down from his place and was running up the hill at a pace that would have tried the horses. In a moment more the two tall men were in each other's arms, kissing each other on the cheek.

At three and twenty the student looked as much like his father as a young and fair man can look like an elderly dark one. Their features were the same, both had the same sinewy firmness of build and the same eyes; but Greif's close-cut golden hair and delicate moustache gave him a brilliancy his father had never possessed. He seemed to bring the light with him into the deep shade of the glen where they met. One looking at him would have felt instinctively that he was made to wear the gleaming uniform of a Prussian Lifeguard, rather than the sober garments of a civilian. As a matter of fact, he was dressed like an Englishman, and would probably have been taken for one, to his own intense disgust, in any European crowd.

'And how is the mother?' he asked in a somewhat formal tone, as soon as the first embrace was over. He had been brought up with dutiful ideas.

'Your mother is exceedingly well,' answered Greifenstein, whose manner also stiffened perceptibly. There was a moment's pause.

Perhaps it was in the hope of dissipating that awkward feeling which somehow or other always made itself apparent when the Lady of Greifenstein was mentioned, that her husband pulled out his case and offered Greif a cigar.

'I have brought you a pipe,' said the latter, and as the carriage came up to where they were standing he snatched

his bag off the back seat. ‘It will make you feel young again,’ he laughed, as he took a paper parcel from the receptacle. ‘It is a “Korps” pipe, colours and tassels and all.’

Greifenstein, one of whose favourite hobbies was the advantage of pipes in general, was as delighted as a boy with the little gift, and instantly produced a huge silver tobacco box out of the depths of his shooting coat, from which he began to fill the china bowl.

‘Thank you, my boy,’ he said as he drew the air through the unlighted pipe to assure himself that there was no obstruction.

Then he took out an old-fashioned flint and steel, lighted a bit of tinder with a practised hand and laid it upon the tobacco. He made a sign to the coachman, who urged his sturdy Mecklenburg horses up the hill and was soon out of sight. The two men walked slowly forwards and smoked in silence for a few minutes.

‘When is Hilda coming?’ asked Greif at last, when he thought he had allowed a decent interval to elapse before putting the question which chiefly interested him.

‘She will come to-morrow, with her mother,’ replied Greifenstein, not noticing, or pretending not to notice, the faint blush that rose in his son’s face.

‘I suppose we must wait another year,’ remarked Greif with a sigh. ‘It seems absurd that at my age I should not have finished my education.’

‘You will be glad, when you are married, that you have your military service behind you.’

‘I do not know,’ answered the young man absently.

‘You do not know!’ exclaimed his father in surprise. ‘Would you like to go and live with Hilda in a garrison town while you served your year as a volunteer?’

‘I was not thinking of that. I have thought lately that, after all, I had better take active service. Would you object?’

Greifenstein was taken by surprise and would possibly have uttered a loud exclamation if he had not long ago schooled himself to be incapable of any such breach of gravity. But he did not answer the question.

‘Father,’ began Greif again after a pause, ‘is it true that you ever had a brother?’

Greifenstein’s tough face turned slowly grey.

‘A half-brother,’ he answered with an effort. ‘My mother married again.’

Greif glanced sideways at his father and saw that he was oddly affected by the inquiry. But the young man had his own reasons for wishing to know the truth.

‘Why have you never told me that I had an uncle?’ he asked.

‘He is no uncle of yours, my boy, nor brother of mine!’ answered Greifenstein bitterly.

‘I fought about him the other day. That is all,’ said Greif.

‘He is not worth fighting for.’

‘Then the story is true?’

‘What story?’ Greifenstein stopped short in his walk and fixed his sharp eyes on his son’s face. ‘What story? What do you know?’

‘A man told me that your brother had been discharged from the army with infamy—*infam cassirt*—and condemned to imprisonment, for betraying some arsenal or armoury

into the hands of the rebels in 1848. I told him—well—that he lied. What else could I say? I had never heard of the scoundrel.'

'You were quite right,' answered Greifenstein, who was very pale. 'I never meant that you should know, any more than your mother. That is the reason why we live in the country all the year. But I thought it would come—I feared that some one would tell you!'

'I do not think that any one will repeat the experiment,' observed Greif, turning away and looking down at the torrent, which was visible between the trees. 'And what has become of this Herr von Rieseneck, if that was his name?'

'He is alive and well. Rich, for anything I know to the contrary. He escaped from the fortress where he was confined and made his way to South America. I had not seen him for some time before that disgraceful affair. We had quarrelled about other matters, and he had entered the Prussian service.' 'I wish you had told me about him before.'

'Why should I? Do you think it is a pleasant subject for conversation? As his name was not mine, thank God, there was a chance that you might never know nor hear of him.'

'I see why you do not wish me to enter the army.'

'Yes,' answered Greifenstein laconically, and he once more walked forward.

For some time neither spoke. Greifenstein's profound hatred of his dishonoured brother was too deeply stirred to allow of his continuing the conversation, and in a different way the younger man was quite as much affected as his father. When the student with whom he had fought had cast in his teeth the evil deeds of Kuno von Rieseneck, he had

unhesitatingly denied the story, thinking it a merely gratuitous insult invented on the spur of the moment. No one present during the altercation had thought fit to confirm the tale, and Greif had wreaked his vengeance upon his enemy in the most approved fashion, in the presence of the assembled ‘Korps.’ But the words had taken effect and he had determined to learn from his father’s lips whether they had any foundation in fact. Being satisfied of the truth of the story, however, his mood changed. No one who has not studied the character of the German gentleman—the old-fashioned Edelmann—will readily understand how directly he feels himself injured by the disgrace of a relative even very distantly removed. He has often little enough in the world but his name and his pride of caste, but as compared with the former he holds his life as of no value whatsoever, and where the latter is concerned he will suffer much rather than offend the exclusiveness of his class by derogating from the most insignificant of its prejudices. He is not afraid of poverty. No one can maintain the position of a gentleman with more exiguous resources than often fall to his share. Rather than leave the smallest debt of honour unpaid, he will unhesitatingly take his own life. That a man should suffer himself to live after doing such a deed as had broken Kuno von Rieseneck’s career seems to him a crime against humanity. He is often called avaricious, because, like Frau von Sigmundskron, he is often very, very poor; but he has never been called a coward, nor a traitor, by any man, or class of men, who knew him. All gentlemen throughout the world are brothers, it is true, for to be a gentleman is to be brave, honest, courteous, and nothing more. But the

gentlemen of different nations are like brothers brought up in different schools. An Englishman who should demand satisfaction by arms, of another Englishman, for a hasty word spoken in jest, would be considered a lunatic in the clubs, and if he carried his warlike intentions into effect with the consent of his adversary, and killed his man, the law would hang him without mercy as a common murderer. On the other hand, a German who should refuse a duel, or not demand one if insulted, would be dismissed from the army and made an outcast from society. And these things do not depend upon civilisation, since modern Germany is probably more civilised than modern England. They depend upon national character.

When Greif heard of his uncle's existence, and, at the same time, of his disgrace, it seemed to him that a cloud had descended upon his own brilliant future. He had long nursed in secret his desire for a military life, and had often wondered at his father's unwillingness to discuss the matter. He now suddenly understood the true state of the case and realised, by the measure of his disappointment, the magnitude to which his hopes had grown. But there was something more than this in the despondency which seized upon him so quickly and would not be thrown off.

'Does Hilda know this?' he asked, at length giving expression to his thoughts.

Greifenstein did not answer at once.

'I do not think her mother would have told her,' he said after a time. 'But her mother knows.'

'And my mother does not?'

'No, nor never shall, if I can help it.'

If the two men spoke little on their homeward walk it was not for lack of sympathy between them. On the contrary, if anything could strengthen the strong bond that united them, it was the knowledge that they had a secret in common which they must keep together.

CHAPTER II

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To suppose that Hilda, at eighteen years of age, was like the majority of young girls as old as she, would be to imagine that human character is not influenced by its surroundings. She was neither a village Gretchen, such as Faust loved and ruined, nor was she the omniscient damsel of modern society. During the greater part of her existence she had lived without any companions but her mother and the faithful Berbel. But she had grown up in a wild forest country, in a huge dismantled stronghold, of which the windows looked out over the tumbling torrent, and across endless thousands of giant trees, whose dark tops rose like sombre points of shadow out of the deeper shade below. Even the sky was not blue. Half a kingdom of firs and pines and hemlocks drank the colour from the air and left but a sober neutral tint behind. The sun does not give half the light in the Black Forest that he gives elsewhere. As Hilda had never, within her recollection, seen an open plain, much less a city, her idea of the world beyond those leagues of trees in which she lived was not a very accurate one. She could hardly guess what the streets of a great town were like, or what effect a crowd of civilised people would produce upon her sight. And yet she was far from ignorant. There were books enough left at Sigmundskron for her education, and the baroness had done what was in her power to impart such instruction as she could command. Hilda had probably read as many books as most girls of her age, and had read them more carefully, but she was very far

from loving study for its own sake. Her time, too, was occupied in other ways, for she and her mother did most things for themselves, as was to be expected in a household where want reigned supreme over the hours of every day, from sunrise to sunset.

The necessity for maintaining appearances was small indeed, but such as it was, neither mother nor daughter could avoid it. No one could predict what day the Greifensteins would choose for one of their occasional visits, and in the time of the vacations no one could foresee when Greif might make his appearance, striding over the wooded hills with his gun and his dog to spend a quiet afternoon with Hilda in their favourite sunny corner at the foot of the dismantled tower. When poverty is to be concealed, his shadow must not be caught lurking at the door by chance visitors. Nor was it only out of fear of being surprised by her relations that the quiet baroness insisted that Hilda and even Berbel should always be presentable. Her pride was inseparably united with that rigid self-respect which, in the poor, alone saves pride from being ridiculous. It was indeed marvellous that she should succeed as she did in hiding the extremity of her need from the Greifensteins, but it must be remembered that she had never been rich, and had learned in early youth many a lesson, many a shift of economy which now stood her in good stead. The Germans have a right to be proud of having elevated thrift to a fine art. From the Emperor to the schoolmaster, from the administration of the greatest military force the world has ever seen to the housekeeping of the meanest peasant, a sober appreciation of the value of money is the prime rule by which everything

is regulated. Frau von Sigmundskron had made a plan, had drawn up a tiny budget in exact proportion with the pension which was her only means of subsistence, and thanks to her unfailing health had never departed from it. The expenditure had indeed been so closely regulated from the first, that she had found it necessary to limit herself to what would barely support life, in order not to stint her child’s allowance. Being by temperament a very religious woman, she attributed to Providence that success in rearing Hilda for which she might well have thanked her own iron determination and untiring efforts. If ever a woman deserved the help of Heaven in consideration of having bravely helped herself, the baroness had earned that assistance. So far as the ordinary observer could judge, however, she had obtained nothing from the world save a reputation for avarice. Hilda was too much accustomed to the state of things in which she had grown up, to appreciate her mother’s sacrifices, or to feel towards her anything like warm gratitude. She herself did all she could, and that was not little, in the struggle for existence. It is even possible that she was more grateful to Berbel, than to the baroness herself. For Berbel voluntarily shared privations, to which the two ladies were obliged to submit. Berbel was faithful, devoted, uncomplaining, cheerful; and she was all this, not for the sake of a servant’s pay, since her wages were infinitesimally small, but out of pure affection for her mistress.

Berbel had been the wife of Lieutenant von Sigmundskron’s servant, who had fallen beside his master, rifle in hand, his face to the enemy. Mistress and maid were left alike widows on the same day, alike young and

portionless, the only difference being that Frau von Sigmundskron had Hilda, while poor Berbel was childless. Then Berbel refused to go away, once and for ever, and the officer’s widow accepted the lifelong devotion offered her, and the three cast in their lot together, to keep themselves alive as best they could beneath the only roof that was left to them.

Frau von Sigmundskron had been very much surprised when, on a sunny June morning, three years before the time of which I write, Greifenstein had appeared alone, arrayed in the most correct manner, instead of being clad in the shooting coat he usually wore. She had been still more astonished when he formally proposed to her an engagement by which Greif should marry Hilda so soon as he had finished his studies at the University. He told her frankly why he desired the alliance. She knew of Rieseneck’s disgrace, and she would understand that the story was an injury to Greif. On the other hand he, Greif’s father, had never done anything to be ashamed of, and the lad himself was growing up to be a very fine fellow and would be rich—Greifenstein did not state the amount of his fortune. He apprehended that his cousin would consider Greif a good match from a worldly point of view. Furthermore, though barely twenty, the young man was deeply attached to Hilda, who was just fifteen, The attachment was evidently likely to turn into love when both should be three or four years older. If Frau von Sigmundskron would consent, a preliminary, verbal agreement might be made, subject to the will of the two children when the right time should come, it being

essentially necessary, as Greifenstein remarked in his stiffest manner, that two young people should love each other sincerely if they meant to marry.

The baroness opened her clear blue eyes very wide, as though she had seen a coach and four laden with sacks of gold driving through the old gates of the castle. But she was far too well bred to burst into tears, or to exhibit any embarrassment, or even an improper amount of satisfaction. She replied that she was much obliged; that she was poor, and that Hilda would inherit nothing whatsoever except Sigmundskron, a fact which her cousin must please to understand from the first; that, if the absence of any dower were not an obstacle, it was not for her to create difficulties; and, finally, that she believed Hilda to be quite as much attached to Greif, as Greif to her. Thereupon Berbel was sent to fetch a bottle of wine—there had been half a dozen bottles in the cellar thirteen years ago, and this was the first that had been opened—and Greifenstein refreshed himself therewith and departed, as stiffly, courteously and kindly as he had come.

Greif had come over as often as he pleased during his vacations, and had written whenever he liked during his terms. Never having seen any one at home or abroad whom he considered comparable with Hilda, he had grown up to love her as naturally as he loved the pine-scented air of his home, the warm soft sun, or the still beauty of the forest. Hilda was an essential part of his life and being, without which he could imagine no future. Year by year it grew harder to say good-bye, and the happiness of meeting grew deeper and more real. There was a pride in the knowledge

that she was for him only, which played upon the unconscious selfishness of his young nature and gave him the most profound and exquisite delight. At three and twenty he was old enough to understand the world about him, he had accomplished his year of obligatory service in the army, and had come into contact with all sorts of men, things and ideas. He was himself a man, and had outgrown most boyish fallacies and illusions, but he had not outgrown Hilda. She was there, in the heart of the forest, in the towers of Sigmundskron, away from the world he had seen, and maidenly ignorant of all it contained, waiting for him, the incarnation of all that was lovely, and young, and fair, and spotless. He pitied his fellow-students, who loved vulgarly whatever came into their way. He could not imagine what life would be without Hilda. It was a strange sort of love, too, for there had been no wooing; they had grown up for each other as naturally as the song-bird for its mate. There had been no hindrances, no jealousies, no alternate hopes and fears, none of those vicissitudes to which love is heir. Nothing but the calamity of death could interfere with the fulfilment of their happiness, and perhaps no two beings ever loved each other from whom death seemed so far.

Hilda was happy, too, in her own way, for what she knew of the outer world was what she saw through Greif's eyes. To him the greatest of all blessings would be to come back to the forest and never to leave it again, and Hilda argued that the world could not be worth seeing, if the woods were so vastly preferable as he seemed to think. She felt herself to be what she was in his imagination, a part of the nature in which she had grown up, as much as the oldest and

tallest fir tree on the hillside. People who spend all their lives in unfrequented regions, feel a sense of property in the air, the earth and the water, which city-bred folks cannot readily understand. They have such an intimate, unconscious knowledge of the seasons, the weather, the growth of plants and the habits of animals, that it seems to them as though their own hearts beat in every corner of the world around them, and as though all the changes they see from day to day were only manifestations of their own vitality. They may not see, or know that they see, beauties which amaze the wanderer who visits their wilderness, but they feel them as he never can, and feed on them as he cannot feed. Their senses, not dulled by daily close contact with thousands of indifferent and similar objects, nor by the ceaseless chatter of their fellow-beings, see sights and hear sounds altogether beyond the perceptions of gregarious man. The infinite variety of nature, as compared with the pitiful monotony of the works of humanity, produces in their minds an activity of an especial kind. They do not know what mental weariness means, nor the desire for nervous excitement. The succession of morning and evening does not bore them, for it is a part of themselves, like hunger and the satisfaction of appetite, thirst and the refreshing draught from the spring. They are good, though their virtues be negative, and they are happy, for they have never heard of unhappiness. Their existence is the very opposite of ours, full where ours is empty, empty where ours is crowded to overflowing. They are never alone, for the world is their companion, they are never hurried, for they move with time itself, whereas our existence is but one long effort to outrun