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A German Girl in America - K 2075

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Chapter VII

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Chapter. VII

When Elsa found herself in the open air, the shades of evening had already begun to descend upon the city, and the street-lamp was being lighted at the corner of Fourth and Poplar-street. From either of these thoroughfares swept a cold blast, which nearly upset the slender girl, as she stood waiting for the street car.

Half an hour later she was standing in front of Mrs. Bittersweet's house, longing to steal quietly up to her room and "to cry it out" she knew not what. - But the parlor was brightly lighted, and the sound of laughter and conversation came to her as she ascended the steps. She hoped to escape the observation of Mrs. Bittersweet and her guests, but scarcely had she touched the bell when the door was opened, and that lady herself, with outstretched arms,

greeted her effusively and helped her to take off her wraps. Then with her right forefinger extended in mock caution she whispered in German: "Now bless your dear little heart! just think a moment and tell me whom of all people in the world you would like best to see at this moment;" and then in a louder voice, she continued: "I ought to let you suffer a little as a punishment for having kept this conquest a secret from me. But I will be merciful. Now just guess who is here."

Elsa remained silent for a moment - and then answered:

"I cannot imagine who has taken the trouble to look me up." Then she colored up to her temples, and a rapturous vision rose before her. "Is it a gentleman?" she asked falteringly.

"Oh, you are beginning to own up!" Mrs.

Bittersweet replied.

"Is he young, tall, with brown hair and eyes," Elsa whispered with a throbbing heart; "and yet it is not possible - not possible!" she added bowing her head as if from shame and pressing both her hands upon her heart.

"Oh you precious little hypocrite!" Mrs. Bittersweet exclaimed. "Of course he is tall - and very interesting," she added rapturously, "but you know as well as I that the Dutch East-Indian man is not dark, but light."

Elsa started as if stung by an adder. "How dare he come here?" she exclaimed indignantly, drawing herself up to her full height.

Mrs. Bittersweet was sure she understood the girl's attitude and in a different tone she answered:

"Oh you girls always imagine that you are not giving a man any encouragement,

but in this case you have let him gaze too long and deeply into those brilliant hazel-eyes of yours, and now he cannot leave this country, before having gazed into them still longer, and sounded their depth, perhaps. - But he can tell you better than I why he came; so please walk in!" And as she spoke she opened the door and with her arm around Elsa's shoulders she ushered her into the parlor.

The man who arose as they entered was certainly not past middle age and yet he had the air of never having been young. His hair was thin and of no definite colour, his look wary, his lips drawn together as if he were always on the defensive, and this expression accorded well with his vigorous energetic movements. Judging from his salutation one would have thought him

an old friend, but Elsa who had never been able to think of him without repugnance, acknowledged his greeting so coldly that he immediately assumed a different attitude and the look and tone of passionate but subdued emotion.

"Ah, the pleasure of seeing you again, Miss Heller!" he murmured; then he paused and pressed his hand upon his heart, as if overpowered by his feelings.

"I thought you had long ago sailed from San - Francisco," Elsa remarked. "It was your intention, I believe, to start from that port."

He bowed.

"You seem to have forgotten the pledge I gave you at our parting," he said.

"A pledge? I know of no pledge," she interposed emphatically.

"Never mind, Miss Heller! It was in spite of your remonstrances; for I had promised myself that I would seek and find you even were you to go to the North pole. Had you gone in that direction it would not have been much more difficult to trace you. — I knew your friend, Madame Liska, would have your address, but I did not know hers, and I spent a long time trying to find it. At last — whom should I meet one day in a New-York street-car, but Liska herself —"

"And she gave you my address?" Elss interrupted incredulously.

"Not immediately; she has her reasons, of course, for not wishing me to disturb her schemes. It was only when I assumed an air of indifference, saying it might be too late anyhow to see you before my departure, as my passage was engaged for an

early date, that she confessed that you were staying with Mrs. Bittersweet. You must have known that I would come," he added in a low insinuating voice; "are you not glad to see me?"

He continued to gaze fixedly at her, and while she was conscious of a desire to ask him to take himself out of her presence, she realised also that something prevented her from giving utterance to her desire.

Mrs. Bittersweet had passed into the back parlor from which the view was cut off by heavy curtains. But the sound of subdued conversation assured Elsa of the proximity of others and this knowledge seemed to liberate her will power from the thralldom of the man who had never once withdrawn his gaze.

"Why do you come here to annoy me thus,

Mr. Van Der Keltten?" she supplicated.

His look changed, but he was still regarding her with dilated eyes and nostrils.

"Why have I come?" he repeated, "because I want your love, yourself, and I will have you."

"Never!" Elsa spoke the word with so much emphasis, that he rose to his feet, and as he did so his whole manner changed. He advanced a step toward the girl, saying:

"You little know how easily I might overcome your resistance, but I prefer that you should overcome it yourself."

A look of disdain was the only answer Elsa vouchsafed, and collecting himself he resumed his seat.

Elsa had risen also and now she moved toward the fire-place, resting her right arm on the mantel-piece.

"Rest assured," she said, "that my feelings will never change."

"Once I might have believed that," Van Der Velt answered languidly, "but - but other women have said the same and have changed their minds. It is a woman's privilege, you know."

"I mean what I say," Elsa retorted firmly.

"Doubtless," he responded, "but you have seen others obey my will, and you were always afraid to trust yourself to my influence."

Elsa turned angrily toward him.

"It was not fear," she exclaimed, "it was simply because I did not wish to be a subject for hypnotic experiments. You might spend your time more profitably than by experimenting upon those weak enough to yield to your power. You might - at least - take men."

The sound of the closing of a door was now

heard, and Mrs. Bittersweets's caller having departed, that lady appeared in the opening of the portiere, where she remained a second in an attitude which said plainly: "Am I intruding?"

Elsa walked toward her and took her hand. She wished to emphasize as decidedly as possible her desire to keep her hostess with her. At the same time she dreaded the possibility of her becoming acquainted with Van Der Veltens' object in calling.

Hospitality was, however, Mrs. Bittersweets's strong point, and her invitations were given upon the spur of the moment without any thought as to consequences. She did not care for rank or wealth, what she dearly loved was genius not yet developed, and she was continually discovering in her protégé's promises of a great future, which, though they had been rarely realized, she always believed in, attributing their lack of recognition

to unfavorable circumstances.

Mrs. Bittersweet had also meant to be very kind to Elsa, and the latter was not ungrateful, although from their first meeting a barrier had seemed to separate them, a barrier which she had no desire to remove, and the existence of which Mrs. Bittersweet had no idea. But at that moment, when Van Der Veltens eyes were fixed upon her with such an expression of sinister admiration, the proximity of even Mrs. Bittersweet was reassuring. She tried to make the latter understand that she did not care for the man's company, but Mrs. Bittersweet, as usual, proved very obtuse. Van Der Veltens, apparently, had made himself most agreeable to her during the time preceding Elsa's arrival and without seeming to do so, he must have taken pains to make known the interest he took in the young girl.

The morning look in Elsa's eyes was entirely lost upon Mrs. Bittersweet, and it is possible that the latter did not even feel the restraining pressure of the girl's hand. "We shall hope to see you very often, Mr. Van Der Velden," she said very cordially.

"You are very kind," he murmured, bowing low, but never once removing his gaze from Elsa.

"I am most irregular in my habits," Mrs. Bittersweet continued. "My friends have to take their chances of finding me at home; but Miss Heller is at home most of the time, and I am sure she will be glad to see you."

Elsa's fingers contracted around those of Mrs. Bittersweet, and then her hand dropped as she recognized the impossibility of making the widow comprehend how unwelcome the presence of the stranger was to her.

"Mr. Van der Velden's affairs demand his speedy return," she said coldly, regarding the man steadily in order that he might clearly understand his dismissal.

"Very true," he responded blandly, "but if I could dispose of my interests in the Spice Islands I think I might find this country very agreeable, for a while at least."

"That would be delightful," Mrs. Bittersweet assured him.

"For me, at least," he assented with another bow, evidently intended for an acknowledgment of her cordiality, but which did not prevent him from noticing the look of hopeless alarm in Elsa's eyes.

If it was his intention to bring matters to a climax in which Mrs. Bittersweet's blind admiration and Elsa's helpless fear would fully reveal themselves, he could not

have succeeded better.

"Good evening, Miss Heller," he said in a tone whose mock humility barely disguised his exaltation. Then bowing very low over the widow's hand he bent his lips to it and passed out.

Chapter VIII.

A few days after his sudden appearance the Dutchman called upon Mrs. Bittersweet alone. Elsa was not at home, but she gathered from the animation of the widow that the latter had been very much pleased with her visitor. But when she made some remarks to the effect that she intended to invite Van der Velden for New-years eve, Elsa, with flashing eyes, declared under such circumstances, she would not be one of the party.

Without any attempt at self-control the