

A smile passed over the Disagreeable Man's face, one of his rare, beautiful smiles.

"Supposing you change your mind," he said quietly, "you will not find that I have changed mine."

Then a few minutes brought them back to Petershof.

CHAPTER XVIII.

A BETROTHAL.

HE had loved her so patiently, and now he felt that he must have his answer. It was only fair to her, and to himself too, that he should know exactly where he stood in her affections. She had certainly given him little signs here and there, which had made him believe that she was not indifferent to his admiration. Little signs were all very well for a short time ; but meanwhile the season was coming to an end : she had told him that she was going back to her work at home. And then perhaps he would lose her altogether. It would not be safe now for him to delay a single day longer. So the little postman armed himself with courage.

Warli's brain was muddled that day. He who prided himself upon knowing the names of

all the guests in Petershof, made the most absurd mistakes about people and letters too; and received in acknowledgment of his stupidity a series of scoldings which would have unnerved a stronger person than the little hunchback postman.

In fact, he ceased to care how he gave out the letters: all the envelopes seemed to have the same name on them: *Marie Truog*. Every word which he tried to decipher turned to that; so finally he tried no more, leaving the destination of the letter to be decided by the impulse of the moment. At last he arrived at that quarter of the Kurhaus where Marie held sway. He heard her singing in her pantry. Suddenly she was summoned down stairs by an impatient bell-ringer, and on her return found Warli waiting in the passage.

"What a goose you are!" she cried, throwing a letter at him; "you have left the wrong letter at No. 82."

Then some one else rang, and Marie hurried

off again. She came back with another letter in her hand and found Warli sitting in her pantry.

"The wrong letter left at No. 54," she said, "and Madame in a horrid temper in consequence. What a nuisance you are to-day, Warli! Can't you read? Here, give the remaining letters to me. I'll sort them."

Warli took off his little round hat, and wiped his forehead.

"I can't read to-day Marie," he said; "something has gone wrong with me. Every name I look at, turns to Marie Truog. I ought to have brought every one of the letters to you. But I knew they could not be all for you, though you have so many admirers. For they would not be likely to write at the same time, to catch the same post."

"It would be very dull if they did," said Marie, who was polishing some water bottles with more diligence than was usual or even necessary.

"But I am the one who loves you, Marie-

chen," the little postman said. "I have always loved you ever since I can remember. I am not much to look at, Mariechen: the binding of the book is not beautiful, but the book itself is not a bad book."

Marie went on polishing the water-bottles. Then she held them up to the light to admire their unwonted cleanness.

"I don't plead for myself," continued Warli. "If you don't love me, that is the end of the matter. But if you do love me, Mariechen, and will marry me, you won't be unhappy. Now I have said all."

Marie put down the water-bottles, and turned to Warli.

"You have been a long time in telling me," she said, poutingly. "Why didn't you tell me three months ago? It's too late now."

"Oh, Mariechen!" said the little postman, seizing her hand and covering it with kisses; "you love some one else—you are already

betrothed? And now it's too late, and you love some one else!"

"I never said I loved some one else," Marie replied; "I only said it was too late. Why, it must be nearly five o'clock, and my lamps are not yet ready. I haven't a moment to spare. Dear me, and there is no oil in the can; no, not one little drop!"

"The devil take the oil!" exclaimed Warli, snatching the can out of her hands. "What do I want to know about the oil in the can? I want to know about the love in your heart. Oh, Mariechen, don't keep me waiting like this! Just tell me if you love me, and make me the merriest soul in all Switzerland."

"Must I tell the truth," she said, in a most melancholy tone of voice; "the truth and nothing else? Well, Warli, if you must know . . . how I grieve to hurt you—" Warli's heart sank, the tears came into his eyes. "But since it must be the truth, and nothing else," continued the torturer, "well, Fritz . . . I love you!"

A few minutes afterwards, the Disagreeable Man, having failed to attract any notice by ringing, descended to Marie's pantry, to fetch his lamp. He discovered Warli embracing his betrothed.

"I am sorry to intrude," he said grimly, and he retreated at once. But directly afterwards he came back.

"The matron has just come up stairs," he said, and he hurried away.

CHAPTER XIX.

"SHIPS THAT SPEAK EACH OTHER IN PASSING."

MANY of the guests in the foreign quarter had made a start downwards into the plains; and the Kurhaus itself, though still well filled with visitors, was every week losing some of its invalids. A few of the tables looked desolate, and some were not occupied at all, the lingerers having chosen, now that their party was broken up, to seek the refuge of another table. So that many stragglers found their way to the English dining-board, each bringing with him his own national bad manners, and causing much annoyance to the Disagreeable Man, who was a true John Bull in his contempt of all foreigners. The English table was, so he said, like England herself: the haven of other nation's offscourings.

There were several other signs, too, that the

season was far advanced. The food had fallen off in quality and quantity. The invalids, some of them better and some of them worse, had become impatient. And plans were being discussed, where formerly temperatures and coughs and general symptoms were the usual subjects of conversation! The caretakers, too, were in a state of agitation; some few keenly anxious to be off to new pastures; and others, who had perhaps formed attachments, an occurrence not unusual in Petershof, were wishing to hold back time with both hands, and were therefore delighted that the weather, which had not yet broken up, gave no legitimate excuse for immediate departure.

Pretty Fraulein Muller had gone, leaving her Spanish gentleman quite disconsolate for the time being. The French Marchioness had returned to the Parisian circles where she was celebrated for all the domestic virtues from which she had been taking such a prolonged holiday in Petershof. The little French dan-

suese and her poodle had left for Monte Carlo. M. Lichinsky and his mother passed on to the Tyrol, where Madame would no doubt have plenty of opportunities for quarrelling: or not finding them, would certainly make them without any delay, by this means keeping herself in good spirits and her son in bad health. There were some, too, who had hurried off without paying their Doctors: being of course those who had received the greatest attention, and who had expressed the greatest gratitude in their time of trouble, but who were of opinion that thankfulness could very well take the place of franks: an opinion not entirely shared by the Doctors themselves.

The Swedish Professor had betaken himself off, with his chessmen and his chessboard. The little Polish governess who clutched so eagerly at her paltry winnings, caressing those centimes with the same fondness and fever that a greater gambler grasps his thousands of francs, she had left too; and, indeed, most of Bernadine's ac-

quaintances had gone their several ways, after six months' constant intercourse and companionship, saying good-bye with the same indifference as though they were saying good morning or good afternoon.

This cold-heartedness struck Bernardine more than once, and she spoke of it to Robert Allitsen. It was the day before her own departure, and she had gone down with him to the restaurant, and sat sipping her coffee, and making her complaint.

"Such indifference is astonishing, and it is sad too. I cannot understand it," she said

"That is because you are a goose," he replied, pouring out some more coffee for himself, and as an after thought, for her too. "You pretend to know something about the human heart and yet you do not seem to grasp the fact that most of us are very little interested in other people: they for us and we for them can spare only a small fraction of time and attention. We may, perhaps, think to the contrary, believing that we occupy an important position in their lives; until one day

when we are feeling most confident of our value, we see an unmistakable sign, given quite unconsciously by our friends, that we are after all nothing to them: we can be done without, put one side, and forgotten when not present. Then, if we are foolish, we are wounded by this discovery, and we draw back into ourselves. But if we are wise we draw back into ourselves without being wounded, recognizing as fair and reasonable that people can only have time and attention for their immediate belongings. Isolated persons have to learn this lesson sooner or later; and the sooner they do learn it the better."

"And you," she asked, "you have learnt this lesson?"

"Long ago," he said decidedly.

"You take a hard view of life," she said.

"Life has not been very bright for me," he answered. "But I own that I have not cultivated my garden. And now it is too late: the weeds have sprung up everywhere. Once or twice I have thought lately that I would begin to

clear away the weeds, but I have not the courage now. And perhaps it does not matter much."

"I think it does matter," she said gently, "but I am no better than you, for I have not cultivated my garden."

"It would not be such a difficult business for you as for me," he said, smiling sadly.

They left the restaurant and sauntered out together.

"And to-morrow you will be gone," he said.

"I shall miss you," Bernardine said.

"That is simply a question of time," he remarked. "I shall probably miss you at first. But we adjust ourselves easily to altered circumstances: mercifully. A few days, a few weeks at most, and then that state of becoming accustomed, called by pious folks, resignation."

"Then you think that the every-day companionship, the every-day exchange of thoughts and ideas, counts for little or nothing?" she asked.

"That is about the color of it," he answered, in his old gruff way.

She thought of his words when she was packing: the many pleasant hours were to count for nothing; for nothing the little bits of fun, the little displays of temper and vexation, the snatches of serious talk, the contradictions, and all the petty details of six months' close companionship.

He was not different from the others who had parted from her so lightly. No wonder, then, that he could sympathize with them.

That last night at Petershof, Bernardine hardened her heart against the Disagreeable Man.

"I am glad I am able to do so," she said to herself. "It makes it easier for me to go."

Then the vision of a forelorn figure rose before her. And the little hard heart softened at once.

In the morning they breakfasted together as usual. There was scarcely any conversation between them. He asked for her address, and she told him that she was going back to her uncle who kept the second-hand book-shop in Stone street.

"I will send you a guide-book from the

Tyrol," he explained. "I shall be going there in a week or two to see my mother,"

"I hope you will find her in good health," she said.

Then it suddenly flashed across her mind that he had told her about his one great sacrifice for his mother's sake. She looked up at him, and he met her glance without flinching.

He said good-bye to her at the foot of the staircase.

It was the first time she had ever shaken hands with him.

"Good-bye," he said gently. "Good luck to you."

"Good-bye," she answered.

He went up the stairs and turned round as though he wished to say something more. But he changed his mind and kept his own counsel.

An hour later Bernardine left Petershof. Only the concierge of the Kurhaus saw her off at the station.

CHAPTER XX.

A LOVE-LETTER.

TWO days after Bernardine had left Petershof, the snows began to melt. Nothing could be drearer than that process: nothing more desolate than the outlook.

The Disagreeable Man sat in his bedroom trying to read Carpenter's *Anatomy*. It failed to hold him. Then he looked out of the window, and listened to the dripping of the icicles. At last he took a pen and wrote as follows:

"LITTLE COMRADE, LITTLE PLAYMATE,
I could not believe that you were really going. When you first said that you would soon be leaving, I listened with unconcern, because it did not seem possible that the time could come when we should not be together; that the days would come and go, and that I should not

know how you were ; whether you were better, and more hopeful about your life and your work, or whether the old misery of indifference and ill-health was still clinging to you ; whether your voice was strong as of one who had slept well and felt refreshed, or whether it was weak like that of one who had watched through the long night.

“It did not seem possible that such a time could come. Many cruel things have happened to me, as to scores of others, but this is the most cruel of all. Against my wish and against my knowledge, you have crept into my life as a necessity, and now I have to give you up. You are better, God bless you, and you go back to a fuller life, and to carry on your work, and to put to account those talents which no one realizes more than I do ; and as for myself, God help me, I am left to wither away.

“You little one, you dear little one, I never wished to love you. I had never loved any one, never drawn near to any one. I have lived lonely all my young life ; for I am only a young

man yet. I said to myself time after time : ‘I will not love her. It will not do me any good, nor her any good.’ And then in my state of health, what right had I to think of marriage, and making a home for myself ? Of course that was out of the question. And then I thought, that because I was a doomed man, cut off from the pleasures which make a lovely thing of life, it did not follow that I might not love you in my own quiet way, hugging my secret to myself, until the love became all the greater because it *was* my secret. I reasoned about it too : it could not harm you that I loved you. No one could be the worse for being loved. So little by little I yielded myself this luxury ; and my heart once so dried up, began to flower again ; yes, little one, you will smile when I tell you that my heart broke out into flower.

“When I think of it all now, I am not sorry that I let myself go. At least I have learnt what I knew nothing of before : now I understand what people mean when they say that love adds a dig-

nity to life which nothing else can give. That dignity is mine now. Nothing can take it from me; it is my own. You are my very own; I love everything about you. From the beginning I recognized that you were clever and capable. Though I often made fun of what you said, that was simply a way I had; and when I saw you did not mind, I continued in that way, hoping always to vex you; your good temper provoked me, because I knew that you made allowances for me being a Petershof invalid. You would never have suffered a strong man to criticise you as I did; you would have flown at him, for you are a feverish little child: not a quiet woolly lamb. At first I was wild that you should make allowances for me. And then I gave in, as weak men are obliged. When you came I saw that your troubles and sufferings would make you bitter. Do you know who helped to cure you? *It was I.* I have seen that often before. That is the one little bit of good I have done in the world; I have helped to cure cynicism. You were shocked

at the things I said, and you were saved. I did not save you intentionally, so I am not posing as a philanthropist. I merely mention that you came here hard, and you went back tender. That was partly because you have lived in the City of Suffering. Some people live there and learn nothing. But you would learn to feel only too much. I wish that your capacity for feeling were less; but then you would not be yourself, your present self I mean, for you have changed even since I have known you. Every week you seemed to become more gentle. You thought me rough and gruff at parting, little comrade: I meant to be so. If you had only known, there was a whole world of tenderness for you in my heart. I could not trust myself to be tender to you. You would have guessed my secret. And I wanted you to go away undisturbed. You do not feel things lightly, and it was best for you that you should harden your heart against me.

“If you could harden your heart against me. But I am not sure about that. I believe that

. . . . Ah, well, I'm a foolish fellow : but some day, dear, I'll tell you what I think I have treasured many of your sayings in my memory. I can never be as though I had never known you. Many of your words I have repeated to myself afterwards until they seemed to represent my own thoughts. I specially remember what you said about God having made us lonely, so that we might be obliged to turn to Him. For we are all lonely, though some of us not quite so much as others. You yourself spoke often of being lonely. Oh, my own little one! Your loneliness is nothing compared to mine. How often I could have told you that.

"I have never seen any of your work, but I think you have now something to say to others, and that you will say it well. And if you have the courage to be simple when it comes to the point, you will succeed. And I believe you will have the courage, I believe everything of you.

"But whatever you do or do not, you will

always be the same to me : my own little one, my very own. I have been waiting all my life for you ; and I have given you my heart entire. If you only knew that, you could not call yourself lonely any more. If any one was ever loved, it is you, dear heart.

"Do you remember how those peasants at the Gasthaus thought we were betrothed ? I thought that might annoy you ; and though I was relieved at the time, still, later on, I wished you had been annoyed. That would have shown that you were not indifferent. From that time my love for you grew apace. You must not mind me telling you so often ; I must go on telling you. Just think, dear, this is the first love-letter I have ever written : and every word of love is a whole world of love. I shall never call my life a failure now. I may have failed in everything else, but not in loving. Oh, little one, it can't be that I am not to be with you, and not to have you for my own ! And yet how can that be ? It is not I who may hold

you in my arms. Some strong man must love and wrap you round with tenderness and softness. You little independent child, in spite of all your wonderful views and theories, you will soon be glad to lean on some one for comfort and sympathy. And then perhaps that troubled little spirit of yours may find its rest. Would to God I were that strong man!

"But because I love you, my own little darling, I will not spoil your life. I won't ask you to give me even one thought. But if I believed that it were of any good to say a prayer, I should pray that you may soon find that strong man; for it is not well for any of us to stand alone. There comes a time when the loneliness is more than we can bear.

"There is one thing I want you to know: indeed I am not the gruff fellow I have so often seemed. Do believe that. Do you remember how I told you that I dreamed of losing you? And now the dream has come true. I am always looking for you and cannot find you.

"You have been very good to me; so patient, and genial, and frank. No one before has ever been so good. Even if I did not love you, I should say that.

"But I do love you, no one can take that from me; it is my own dignity, the crown of my life. Such a poor life . . . no, no, I won't say that now. I cannot pity myself now . . . no, I cannot. . . ."

The Disagreeable Man stopped writing, and the pen dropped on the table.

He buried his tear-stained face in his hands. He cried his heart out, this Disagreeable Man.

Then he took the letter which he had just been writing and he tore it into fragments.

END OF PART I.