

I

She was walking slowly down the hill; not by the broad high road which wound its way towards the town, but by the narrow footpath between the trellises of the vines. Her little boy was with her, hanging on to her hand and walking all the time a pace in front of her, because there was not room on the footpath for them to walk side by side.

The afternoon was well advanced, but the sun still poured down upon her with sufficient power to cause her to pull her dark straw hat a little further down over her forehead and to keep her eyes lowered. The slopes, at the foot of which the little town lay nestling, glimmered as though seen through a golden mist; the roofs of the houses below glistened, and the river, emerging yonder amongst the meadows outside the town, stretched, shimmering, into the distance. Not a quiver stirred the air, and it seemed as if the cool of the evening was yet far remote.

Bertha stooped for a moment and glanced about her. Save for her boy, she was all alone on the hillside, and around her brooded a curious stillness. At the cemetery, too, on the hilltop, she had not met anybody that day, not even the old woman who usually watered the flowers and kept the graves tidy, and with whom Bertha used often to have a chat. Bertha felt that somehow a considerable time had elapsed since she had started on her walk, and that it was long since she had spoken to anyone.

The church clock struck—six. So, then, scarcely an hour had passed since she had left the house, and an even shorter time since she had stopped in the street to chat with the beautiful Frau Rupius. Yet even the few minutes which had slipped away since she had stood by her husband's grave now seemed to be long past.

"Mamma!"

Suddenly she heard her boy call. He had slipped his hand out of hers and had run on ahead.

"I can walk quicker than you, mamma!"

"Wait, though! Wait, Fritz!" exclaimed Bertha. "You're not going to leave your mother alone, are you?"

She followed him and again took him by the hand.

"Are we going home already?" asked Fritz.

"Yes; we will sit by the open window until it grows quite dark."

Before long they had reached the foot of the hill and they began to walk towards the town in the shade of the chestnut trees which bordered the high-road, now white with dust. Here again they met but few people. Along the road a couple of wagons came towards them, the drivers, whip in hand, trudging along beside the horses. Then two cyclists rode by from the town towards the country, leaving clouds of dust behind them. Bertha stopped mechanically and gazed after them until they had almost disappeared from view.

In the meantime Fritz had clambered up onto the bench beside the road.

"Look, mamma! See what I can do!"

He made ready to jump, but his mother took hold of him by the arms and lifted him carefully to the ground. Then she sat down on the bench.

"Are you tired?" asked Fritz.

"Yes," she answered, surprised to find that she was indeed feeling fatigued.

It was only then that she realized that the sultry air had wearied her to the point of sleepiness. She could not, moreover, remember having experienced such warm weather in the middle of May.

From the bench on which she was sitting she could trace back the course of the path down which she had come. In the sunlight it ran between the vine-trellises, up and up, until it reached the brightly gleaming wall of the cemetery. She was in the habit of taking a walk along that path two or three times a week. She had long since ceased to regard such visits to the cemetery as anything other than a mere walk. When she wandered about the well-kept gravel paths amongst the crosses and the tombstones, or stood offering up a

silent prayer beside her husband's grave, or, maybe, laying upon it a few wild flowers which she had plucked on her way up, her heart was scarcely any longer stirred by the slightest throb of pain. Three years had, indeed, passed since her husband had died, which was just as long as their married life had lasted.

Her eyes closed and her mind went back to the time when she had first come to the town, only a few days after their marriage—which had taken place in Vienna. They had only indulged in a modest honeymoon trip, such as a man in humble circumstances, who had married a woman without any dowry, could treat himself to. They had taken the boat from Vienna, up the river, to a little village in Wachau, not far from their future home, and had spent a few days there. Bertha could still remember clearly the little inn at which they had stayed, the riverside garden in which they used to sit after sunset, and those quiet, rather tedious, evenings which were so completely different from those her girlish imagination had previously pictured to her as the evenings which a newly-married couple would spend. Of course, she had had to be content.

She was twenty-six years old and quite alone in the world when Victor Mathias Garlan had proposed to her. Her parents had recently died. A long time before, one of her brothers had gone to America to seek his fortune as a merchant. Her younger brother was on the stage; he had married an actress, and was playing comedy parts in third-rate German theatres. She was almost out of touch with her relations and the only one whom she visited occasionally was a cousin who had married a lawyer. But even that friendship had grown cool as years had passed, because the cousin had become wrapped up in her husband and children exclusively, and had almost ceased to take any interest in the doings of her unmarried friend.

Herr Garlan was a distant relation of Bertha's mother. When Bertha was quite a young girl he had often visited the house and made love to her in a rather awkward way. In those days she had no reasons to encourage him, because it was in another guise that her fancy pictured life and happiness to her. She was young and pretty; her parents, though not actually wealthy people, were comfortably off, and her hope was rather to wander about the world as a great

pianiste, perhaps, as the wife of an artist, than to lead a modest existence in the placid routine of the home circle. But that hope soon faded. One day her father, in a transport of domestic fervour, forbade her further attendance at the conservatoire of music, which put an end to her prospects of an artistic career and at the same time to her friendship with the young violinist who had since made such a name for himself.

The next few years were singularly dull. At first, it is true, she felt some slight disappointment, or even pain, but these emotions were certainly of short duration. Later on she had received offers of marriage from a young doctor and a merchant. She refused both of them; the doctor because he was too ugly, and the merchant because he lived in a country town. Her parents, too, were by no means enthusiastic about either suitor.

When, however, Bertha's twenty-sixth birthday passed and her father lost his modest competency through a bankruptcy, it had been her lot to put up with belated reproaches on the score of all sorts of things which she herself had begun to forget—her youthful artistic ambitions, her love affair of long ago with the violinist, which had seemed likely to lead to nothing, and the lack of encouragement which the ugly doctor and the merchant from the country received at her hands.

At that time Victor Mathias Garlan was no longer resident in Vienna. Two years before, the insurance company, in which he had been employed since he had reached the age of twenty, had, at his own request, transferred him, in the capacity of manager, to the recently-established branch in the little town on the Danube where his married brother carried on business as a wine merchant. In the course of a somewhat lengthy conversation which took place on the occasion of his farewell visit to Bertha's parents, and which created a certain impression upon her, he had mentioned that the principal reasons for his asking to be transferred to the little town were that he felt himself to be getting on in years, that he had no longer any idea of seeking a wife, and that he desired to have some sort of a home amongst people who were closely connected with him. At that time Bertha's parents had made fun of his notion, which seemed to them somewhat hypochondriacal, for Garlan was then

scarcely forty years old. Bertha herself, however, had found a good deal of common sense in Garlan's reason, inasmuch as he had never appeared to her as, properly speaking, a young man.

In the course of the following years Garlan used often to come to Vienna on business, and never omitted to visit Bertha's family on such occasions. After supper it was Bertha's custom to play the piano for Garlan's entertainment, and he used to listen to her with an almost reverent attention, and would, perhaps, go on to talk of his little nephew and niece—who were both very musical—and to whom he would often speak of Fraulein Bertha as the finest pianiste he had ever heard.

It seemed strange, and Bertha's mother could not refrain from commenting now and again upon it, that, since his diffident wooing in the old days, Herr Garlan had not once ventured so much as to make the slightest further allusion to the past, or even to a possible future. And thus Bertha, in addition to the other reproaches to which she had to listen, incurred the blame for treating Herr Garlan with too great indifference, if not, indeed, with actual coldness. Bertha, however, only shook her head, for at that time she had not so much as contemplated the possibility of marrying this somewhat awkward man, who had grown old before his time.

After the sudden death of her mother, which happened at a time when her father had been lying ill for many months, Garlan reappeared upon the scene with the announcement that he had obtained a month's holiday—the only one for which he had ever applied. It was clearly evident to Bertha that his sole purpose in coming to Vienna was to be of help to her in that time of trouble and distress. And when Bertha's father died a week after the funeral of her mother, Garlan proved himself to be a true friend, and one, moreover, blessed with an amount of energy for which she had never given him credit. He prevailed on his sister-in-law to come to Vienna, so that she could help Bertha to tide over the first few weeks of her bereavement, besides, in some slight degree, distracting her thoughts. He settled the business affairs capably and quickly. His kindness of heart did much to cheer Bertha during those sad days, and when, on the expiration of his leave, he asked her whether she would be his wife she acquiesced with a feeling of the most pro-

found gratitude. She was, of course, aware of the fact that if she did not marry him she would in a few months' time have to earn her own living, probably as a teacher, and, besides, she had come to appreciate Garlan and had become so used to his company that she was able, in all sincerity, to answer "Yes," both when he led her to the altar and subsequently when, as they set off for their honeymoon, he asked her, for the first time, if she loved him.

It was true that at the very outset of their married life she discovered that she felt no love for him. She just let him love her and put up with the fact, at first with a certain surprise at her own disillusionment and afterwards with indifference. It was not until she found that she was about to become a mother that she could bring herself to reciprocate his affection. She very soon grew accustomed to the quiet life of the little town, all the more easily because even in Vienna she had led a somewhat secluded existence. With her husband's family she felt quite happy and comfortable; her brother-in-law appeared to be a most genial and amiable person, if not altogether innocent of an occasional display of coarseness; his wife was good-natured, and inclined at times to be melancholy. Garlan's nephew, who was thirteen years old at the time of Bertha's arrival at the little town, was a pert, good-looking boy; and his niece, a very sedate child of nine, with large, astonished eyes, conceived a strong attachment for Bertha from the very first moment that they met.

When Bertha's child was born, he was hailed by the children as a welcome plaything, and, for the next two years, Bertha felt completely happy. She even believed at times that it was impossible that her fate could have taken a more favourable shape. The noise and bustle of the great city came back to her memory as something unpleasant, almost hazardous; and on one occasion when she had accompanied her husband to Vienna, in order to make a few purchases and it so chanced, to her annoyance, that the streets were wet and muddy with the rain, she vowed never again to undertake that tedious and wholly unnecessary journey of three hours' duration. Her husband died suddenly one spring morning three years after their marriage. Bertha's consternation was extreme. She felt that she had never taken into consideration the mere possibility of such an event. She was left in very straitened circumstances. Soon, however, her sister-in-law, with thoughtful kindness, devised a means by

which the widow could support herself without appearing to accept anything in the nature of charity. She asked Bertha to take over the musical education of her children, and also procured for her an engagement as music teacher to other families in the town. It was tacitly understood amongst the ladies who engaged her that they should always make it appear as if Bertha had undertaken these lessons only for the sake of a little distraction, and that they paid her for them only because they could not possibly allow her to devote so much time and trouble in that way without some return. What she earned from this source was quite sufficient to supplement her income to an amount adequate to meet the demands of her mode of living, and so, when time had deadened the first keen pangs and the subsequent sorrow occasioned by her husband's death, she was again quite contented and cheerful. Her life up to then had not been spent in such a way as to cause her now to feel the lack of anything. Such thoughts as she gave to the future were occupied by scarcely any other theme than her son in the successive stages of his growth, and it was only on rare occasions that the likelihood of marrying a second time crossed her mind, and then the idea was always a mere fleeting fancy, for as yet she had met no one whom she was able seriously to regard in the light of a possible second husband. The stirrings of youthful desires, which she sometimes felt within her in her waking morning hours, always vanished as the day pursued its even course. It was only since the advent of the spring that she had felt a certain disturbance of her previous sensation of well-being; no longer were her nights passed in the tranquil and dreamless sleep of heretofore, and at times she was oppressed by a sensation of tedium, such as she had never experienced before. Strangest of all, however, was the sudden access of lassitude which would often come over her even in the daytime, under the influence of which she fancied that she could trace the course of her blood as it circled through her body. She remembered that she had experienced a similar sensation in the days when she was emerging from childhood. At first this feeling, in spite of its familiarity, was yet so strange to her that it seemed as though one of her friends must have told her about it. It was only when it recurred with ever-increasing frequency that she realized that she herself had experienced it before.

She shuddered, with a feeling as though she were waking from sleep. She opened her eyes.

It seemed to her that the air was all a-whirl; the shadows had crept halfway across the road; away up on the hilltop the cemetery wall no longer gleamed in the sunlight. Bertha rapidly shook her head to and fro a few times as though to waken herself thoroughly. It seemed to her as if a whole day and a whole night had elapsed since she had sat down on the bench. How was it, then, that in her consciousness time passed in so disjointed a fashion? She looked around her. Where could Fritz have gone to? Oh, there he was behind her, playing with Doctor Friedrich's children. The nursemaid was on her knees beside them, helping them to build a castle with the sand.

The avenue was now less deserted than it had been earlier in the evening. Bertha knew almost all the people who passed; she saw them every day. As, however, most of them were not people to whom she was in the habit of talking, they flitted by like shadows. Yonder came the saddler, Peter Nowak, and his wife; Doctor Rellingner drove by in his little country trap and bowed to her as he passed; he was followed by the two daughters of Herr Wendelein, the landowner; presently Lieutenant Baier and his *fiancée* cycled slowly down the road on their way to the country. Then, again, there seemed to be a short lull in the movement before her and Bertha heard nothing but the laughter of the children as they played.

Then, again, she saw that some one was slowly approaching from the town, and she recognized who it was while he was still a long way off. It was Herr Klingemann, to whom of late she had been in the habit of talking more frequently than had previously been her custom. Some twelve years ago or more he had moved from Vienna to the little town. Gossip had it that he had at one time been a doctor, and had been obliged to give up his practice on account of some professional error, or even of some more serious lapse. Some, however, asserted that he had never qualified as a doctor at all, but, failing to pass his examinations, had finally given up the study of medicine. Herr Klingemann, for his own part, gave himself out to be a philosopher, who had grown weary of life in the great city after having enjoyed it to satiety, and for that reason had moved to the

little town, where he could live comfortably on what remained of his fortune.

He was now but little more than five-and-forty. There were still times when he was of a genial enough aspect, but, for the most part, he had an extremely dilapidated and disagreeable appearance.

While yet some distance away he smiled at the young widow, but did not hasten his steps. Finally he stopped before her and gave her an ironical nod, which was his habitual manner of greeting people.

"Good evening, my pretty lady!" he said.

Bertha returned his salutation. It was one of those days on which Herr Klingemann appeared to make some claim to elegance and youthfulness. He was attired in a dark grey frock coat, so tightly fitting that he might almost have been wearing stays. On his head was a narrow brimmed brown straw hat with a black band. About his throat, moreover, there was a very tiny red cravat, set rather askew.

For a time he remained silent, tugging his slightly grizzled fair moustache upwards and downwards.

"I presume you have come from up there, my dear lady?" he said.

Without turning his head or even his eyes, he pointed his finger over his shoulder, in a somewhat contemptuous manner, in the direction of the cemetery behind him.

Throughout the town Herr Klingemann was known as a man to whom nothing was sacred, and as he stood before her, Bertha could not help thinking of the various bits of gossip that she had heard about him. It was well known that his relations with his cook, whom he always referred to as his housekeeper, were of a somewhat more intimate nature than that merely of master and servant, and his name was also mentioned in connexion with the wife of a tobacconist, who, as he had himself told Bertha with proud regret, deceived him with a captain of the regiment stationed in the town. Moreover, there were several eligible girls in the neighbourhood who cherished a certain tender interest in him.

Whenever these things were hinted at Herr Klingemann always made some sneering remark on the subject of marriage in general,

which shocked the susceptibilities of many, but, on the whole, actually increased the amount of respect in which he was held.

"I have been out for a short walk," said Bertha.

"Alone?"

"Oh, no; with my boy."

"Yes—yes—of course, there he is! Good evening, my little mortal!"—he gazed away over Fritz's head as he said this—"may I sit down for a moment beside you, Frau Bertha?"

He pronounced her name with an ironic inflection and, without waiting for her to reply, he sat down on the bench.

"I heard you playing the piano this morning," he continued. "Do you know what kind of an impression it made upon me? This: that with you music must take the place of everything."

He repeated the word "everything" and, at the same time, looked at Bertha in a manner which caused her to blush.

"What a pity I so seldom have the opportunity of hearing you play!" he went on. "If I don't happen to be passing your open window when you are at the piano—"

Bertha noticed that he kept on edging nearer to her, and that his arm was touching hers. Involuntarily she moved away. Suddenly she felt herself seized from behind, her head pulled back over the bench and a hand clasped over her eyes.

For a moment she thought that it was Klingemann's hand, which she felt upon her lids.

"Why, you must be mad, sir," she cried.

"How funny it is to hear you call me 'Sir,' Aunt Bertha!" replied the laughing voice of a boy at her back.

"Well, do let me at least open my eyes, Richard," said Bertha, trying to remove the boy's hands from her face. "Have you come from home!" she added, turning round towards him.

"Yes, Aunt, and here's the newspaper which I have brought you."

Bertha took the paper which he handed to her and began to read it.

Klingemann, meanwhile, rose to his feet and turned to Richard.

"Have you done your exercises already?" he asked.

"We have no exercises at all now, Herr Klingemann, because our final examination is to take place in July."

"So you will actually be a student by this time next year?"

"This time next year! It'll be in the autumn!"

As he said this Richard drummed his fingers along the newspaper.

"What do you want, then, you ill-mannered fellow?" asked Bertha.

"I say, Aunt, will you come and visit me when I am in Vienna?"

"Yes, I should like to catch myself! I shall be glad to be rid of you!"

"Here comes Herr Rupius!" said Richard.

Bertha lowered the paper and looked in the direction indicated by her nephew's glance. Along the avenue leading from the town a maidservant came, pushing an invalid's chair, in which a man was sitting. His head was uncovered and his soft felt hat was lying upon his knees, from which a plaid rug reached down to his feet. His forehead was lofty; his hair smooth and fair and slightly grizzled at the temples; his feet were peculiarly large. As he passed the bench on which Bertha was seated he only inclined his head slightly, without smiling. Bertha knew that, had she been alone, he would certainly have stopped; moreover, he looked only at her as he passed by, and his greeting seemed to apply to her alone. It seemed to Bertha that she had never before seen such a grave look in his eyes as on this occasion, and she was exceedingly sorry, for she felt a profound compassion for the paralysed man.

When Herr Rupius had passed by, Klingemann said:

"Poor devil! And wifie is away as usual on one of her visits to Vienna, eh?"

"No," answered Bertha, almost angrily. "I was speaking to her only an hour ago."

Klingemann was silent, for he felt that further remarks on the subject of the mysterious visits of Frau Rupius to Vienna might not have been in keeping with his own reputation as a freethinker.

"Won't he really ever be able to walk again?" asked Richard.

"No," said Bertha.

She knew this for a fact because Herr Rupius had told her so himself on one occasion when she had called on him and his wife was in Vienna.

At that moment Herr Rupius seemed to her to be a particularly pitiful figure, for, as he was being wheeled past her in his invalid's chair, she had, in reading the paper, lighted upon the name of one whom she regarded as a happy man.

Mechanically she read the paragraph again.

"Our celebrated compatriot Emil Lindbach returned to Vienna a few days ago after his professional tour through France and Spain, in the course of which he met with many a triumphant reception. In Madrid this distinguished artist had the honour of playing before the Queen of Spain. On the 24th of this month Herr Lindbach will take part in the charity concert which has been organized for the relief of the inhabitants of Vorarlberg, who have suffered such severe losses as a result of the recent floods. A keen interest in the concert is being shown by the public in spite of the fact that the season is so far advanced."

Emil Lindbach! It required a certain effort on Bertha's part to realize that this was the same man whom she had loved—how many?—twelve years ago. Twelve years! She could feel the hot blood mount up into her brow. It seemed to her as though she ought to be ashamed of having gradually grown older.

The sun had set. Bertha took Fritz by the hand, bade the others good evening, and walked slowly homewards.

She lived on the first floor of a house in a new street. From her windows she had a view of the hill, and opposite were only vacant sites.

Bertha handed Fritz over to the care of the maid, sat down by the window, took up the paper and began to read again. She had kept

the custom of glancing through the art news first of all. This habit had been formed in the days of her early childhood, when she and her brother, who was now an actor, used to go to the top gallery of the Burg-Theater together. Her interest in art naturally grew when she attended the conservatoire of music; in those days she had been acquainted with the names of even the minor actors, singers and pianists. Later on, when her frequent visits to the theatres, the studies at the conservatoire and her own artistic aspirations came to an end, there still lingered within her a kind of sympathy, which was not free from the touch of homesickness, towards that joyous world of art. But during the latter portion of her life in Vienna all these things had retained scarcely any of their former significance for her; just as little, indeed, as they had possessed since she had come to reside in the little town, where occasional amateur concerts were the best that was offered in the way of artistic enjoyment. One evening during the first year of her married life, she had taken part in one of these concerts at the "Red Apple" Hotel. She had played two marches by Schubert as a duet with another young lady in the town. On that occasion her agitation had been so great that she had vowed to herself never again to appear in public, and was more than glad that she had given up her hopes of an artistic career.

For such a career a very different temperament from hers was necessary—for example, one like Emil Lindbach's. Yes, he was born to it! She had recognized that by his demeanour the very moment when she had first seen him step on to the dais at a school concert. He had smoothed back his hair in an unaffected manner, gazed at the people below with sardonic superiority, and had acknowledged the first applause which he had ever received in the calm, indifferent manner of one long accustomed to such things.

It was strange, but whenever she thought of Emil Lindbach she still saw him in her mind's eye as youthful, even boyish, just as he had been in the days when they had known and loved each other. Yet not so long before, when she had spent the evening with her brother-in-law and his wife in a restaurant, she had seen a photograph of him in an illustrated paper, and he appeared to have changed greatly. He no longer wore his hair long; his black moustache was curled downwards; his collar was conspicuously tall, and his cravat twisted in accordance with the fashion of the day. Her

sister-in-law had given her opinion that he looked like a Polish count.

Bertha took up the newspaper again and was about to read on, but by that time it was too dark. She rose to her feet and called the maid. The lamp was brought in and the table laid for supper. Bertha ate her meal with Fritz, the window remaining open. That evening she felt an even greater tenderness for her child than usual; she recalled once more to memory the times when her husband was still alive, and all manner of reminiscences passed rapidly through her mind. While she was putting Fritz to bed, her glance lingered for quite a long time on her husband's portrait, which hung over the bed in an oval frame of dark brown wood. It was a full-length portrait; he was wearing a morning coat and a white cravat, and was holding his tall hat in his hand. It was all in memory of their wedding day.

Bertha knew for a certainty, at that moment, that Herr Klingemann would have smiled sarcastically had he seen that portrait.

Later in the evening she sat down at the piano, as was a not infrequent custom of hers before going to bed, not so much because of her enthusiasm for music, but because she did not want to retire to rest too early. On such occasions she played, for the most part, the few pieces which she still knew by heart—mazurkas by Chopin, some passages from one of Beethoven's sonatas, or the Kreisleriana. Sometimes she improvised as well, but never pursued the theme beyond a succession of chords, which, indeed, were always the same.

On that evening she began at once by striking those chords, somewhat more softly than usual; then she essayed various modulations and, as she made the last triad resound for a long time by means of the pedal—her hands were now lying in her lap—she felt a gentle joy in the melodies which were hovering, as it were, about her. Then Klingemann's observation recurred to her.

"With you music must take the place of everything!"

Indeed he had not been far from the truth. Music certainly had to take the place of much.

But everything—? Oh, no!

What was that? Footsteps over the way....

Well, there was nothing remarkable in that. But they were slow, regular footsteps, as though somebody was passing up and down. She stood up and went to the window. It was quite dark, and at first she could not recognize the man who was walking outside. But she knew that it was Klingemann. How absurd! Was he going to haunt the vicinity like a love-sick swain?

"Good evening, Frau Bertha," he said from across the road, and she could see in the darkness that he raised his hat.

"Good evening," she answered, almost confusedly.

"You were playing most beautifully."

Her only answer was to murmur "really?" and that perhaps did not reach his ears.

He remained standing for a moment, then said:

"Good night, sleep soundly, Frau Bertha."

He pronounced the word "sleep" with an emphasis which was almost insolent.

"Now he is going home to his cook!" thought Bertha to herself.

Then suddenly she called to mind something which she had known for quite a long time, but to which she had not given a thought since it had come to her knowledge. It was rumoured that in his room there hung a picture which was always covered with a little curtain because its subject was of a somewhat questionable nature.

Who was it had told her about that picture? Oh, yes, Frau Rupius had told her when they were taking a walk along the bank of the Danube one day last autumn, and she in her turn had heard of it from some one else — Bertha could not remember from whom.

What an odious man! Bertha felt that somehow she was guilty of a slight depravity in thinking of him and all these things. She continued to stand by the window. It seemed to her as though it had been an unpleasant day. She went over the actual events in her mind, and was astonished to find that, after all, the day had just

been like many hundreds before it and many, many more that were yet to come.