

"Still at Breslau, thank God!" was the countess' exclamation when Alexis' letters arrived, and with a tender, caressing touch the countess broke the seal. A moment later there was a faint cry, a fall—the *gnädige Frau* had fainted. The count and Barmann, who were near by, rushed to her assistance.

A glance at his son's letter, which had fallen from her hand, and the count knew why. Alexis announced that he was transferred into the Black Dragoons—a regiment that had obtained the sobriquet of the Black Deaths, because they neither gave quarter nor obtained any, a regiment that was supplied and reinforced by volunteers, because through its savage daring and cool desperation it was chosen to lead forlorn hopes and all the most dangerous attacks, therefore after a long campaign it was but the skeleton of a company that was crowned with the laurels whose roots were planted in many graves.

After Barmann had assisted to carry the countess to her room, Ulrich came to him and said, "Come to Lise—I fear she is dead." In a few curt lines Alexis had informed Lise that in a day or two he would be at the seat of war, and as it was not at all likely that he should return, he took this last opportunity to wish her joy of her marriage. Lise had not fainted, like the countess, but she had seemed to fall into a stupor. Ulrich had fetched the *Frau Pastorin*, and when the two men reached the cottage the doctor had arrived. He shook his head gravely, and declared it was the effect of a shock upon an enfeebled system. She must have been ill for some time past.

While at the cottage Lise lay white and still on her little bed, the count and Marie were restoring the fainting mother at the castle. As the countess rallied and her opening eyes fell upon the sorrow-stricken face of her husband, she realized what had come to pass. The truth roused and braced her failing strength, and seizing the count's arm, she cried, "The Black Deaths! Alexis! Merciful God! Let us go—now, at once, to save him!"

They tried to soothe her. But she pushed them aside and rang her bell. "My cloak—Marie, do you hear? Am I to be obeyed or not?" and her voice was shrill with anger. "The carriage—at once, with all haste," was her order to the servant. Then she turned to her husband and said bitterly, "If it had not been for that wretched, miserable girl, Lise—Alexis would never have done this."

"Thekla!" cried the count. "Take care what you say—at this moment, perhaps, Lise is dead."

The countess was fastening her cloak; her fingers stopped; she stared at her husband—Lise—dead? In an instant she knew what this would mean. To go to Alexis with such news would be to fix this resolution of his. She knew her son well. Although she would not acknowledge it even to herself, she believed in the depth and sincerity of this his first love. Lise's death would be the worst thing that could happen to them all. She must be saved.

"Come," she said calmly to the count, tying her cloak, her resolution taken. "Before anything can be done we must go to Lise."

Ulrich was tenderly bathing Lise's forehead, the good little anxious pastor's wife fanning her the while, when old Katchen came to him and whispered that the countess begged him to go to her, at once. She was in the garden.

She was standing in the flood of sunlight which poured upon the grass plat—looking at the peaceful, home-like flower beds, at the rustic seat under the tree—knowing that till she died this place would live in her memory with these cruel hours of her first great grief.

When Ulrich, cool, collected, came up to her, she felt a sudden rush of hope and confidence, she burst into tears, and holding out her hands to him, said almost deliriously, "You are good—you are strong—be merciful and save him."

Ulrich half supported her to the seat. Then he kindly said a few soothing words and asked what he could do. He supposed she knew that Lise was dangerously ill?

"She is not dead?"

"No, but she may die." The countess stared at Ulrich through her tears. She had felt from the first that there was something strange about this man; she could not understand him. She vaguely wondered at his self-possession. "It was the bad news about Count Alexis which gave her the shock," continued Franz.

"Then you know all?" said the countess.

He gave a half-smile, and said he believed he knew—all.

Then the countess poured forth a passionate appeal, mingled incoherent praises of himself, of Alexis, even of Lise, urging him to save them both, to sacrifice himself, to prove himself a true hero.

"Enough," he said, staying the tirade with a gesture that was so suggestive of disgust that the half-frantic mother blushed and shrank back; "these matters require but few words, madam. Whatever has to be done must be done at once."

"Will you go to Alexis—tell him that Lise is dying, and bring him to her?"

From the moment the countess summoned him he had guessed what she wanted of him. "I will go," he said. "And at once," he added, glancing at his watch.

"But," he continued, with suppressed fierceness, "I wish you, madam, to understand that it is not for your sake I do this—nor for your son's, although he has behaved well—nor for Lise's" (he spoke the name with a tender reverence, raising his cap); "it is for simple justice. I do not dare to take young lives out of God's hands and sport with them to please my pride or my selfishness. I have known that which you have known—that your son and Lise love each other with the true, pure affection which is God-given. I saw them together, and recognizing the Almighty will, would have interfered but to bring them to the happy union which is the eternal intention in their regard. It is for this alone I act as I do," and with a low bow he was gone.

The astonishment of the countess was so intense that it did her good. There was another feeling mingled with this, which shamed her and made her think of others rather than of her own selfish anxieties—she saw in Franz