

A FAMILY FEUD

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A family feud by Ludwig Harder & A. L. Wister

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LUDWIG HARDER & A. L. WISTER

A FAMILY FEUD

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AFTER THE GERMAN

OF

LUDWIG HARDER

BY MRS. A. L. WISTER

TRANSLATOR OF "THE SECOND WIFE," "ONLY A GIRL," "THE OLD MAN'S SECRET," ETC.



PHILADELPHIA

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A FAMILY FEUD.

CHAPTER I.

THE scene of our story is a province of Germany which, but moderately provided with railways, and almost secluded from the busy traffic of the present century, may be regarded as the very paradise of a landed aristocracy. It was towards the close of the summer; the sun was declining in the west,—its rays beamed with mocking splendour full in the faces of the light-haired, dull-faced peasants, who were occupied in gathering in their master's grain, and stole brightly from the busy harvest-fields into the gray stillness of the old mansion-house of Buchdorf, which lay with its front looking abroad into the green alleys of the park, while the windows at the back opened upon the spacious ill-paved court-yard surrounded by the farm-buildings and opening into the ancient avenue of lindens.

For miles around, forests, pasture-land, and cultured fields all belonged to the Arning estate. Its present possessor was a childless man of fifty-five, sturdy and well built in figure, with a sunburned face and blue eyes that beamed with good humour. He troubled himself not at all about the world in general, and very little indeed about the smaller world of his own estates, of which he, Kurt von Arning, owned four,—Ermsdal, the only one strictly entailed in the male line, Buchdorf, Harsbye, and Grasort. He had taken up his abode in Buchdorf, the largest of the four, and there he lived from

year's end to year's end, content to be left in the peaceful enjoyment of his arm-chair after a somewhat stormy experience of married life. He was a genial companion, given to hospitality, and, even where it cost him trouble, the most benevolent of masters and landlords.

Thus it is easy to understand that throughout the province, and, indeed, wherever his name was known, Kurt von Arning was an object of cordial good will,—although the measure of respect accorded him among his tenantry was not immense. The centre around which everything upon the estates revolved, the master whom all obeyed without a murmur, was Otto von Arning, Kurt's young cousin, the boy whom he had declared the heir to all his possessions.

Before we say anything about this cousin, let us give our moment's attention to the recent history of the main branch of the Von Arning family. For generations its chief had always occupied its entailed property of Ermsdal, and both family and estate had deteriorated, until Kurt's father changed the whole aspect of affairs by boldly setting at naught aristocratic prejudices and marrying a bourgeois heiress, who added Buchdorf, Harsbye, and Grasort to the family possessions. Kurt was the sole offspring of this union, and upon his marriage, when scarcely twenty-one, he received from his father Grasort as a wedding-gift. Here he passed nearly twenty years as unhappy as every man must be who wakes from a dream of boyish passion to find himself mated with a thoroughly uncongenial companion. At the age of forty he returned to Buchdorf, a childless widower, only just in time to close the eyes of the father whom he had tenderly loved, and who had survived his wife but two short years. As the child of a bourgeois mother, Kurt could not inherit the worthless estate of Ermsdal. That passed to the baby Otto von Arning,—sole child of a cousin, who, left an orphan at an early age, had been adopted as it were by the old baron, and had been to

Kurt, during all his boyhood and early manhood, as a brother. The most devoted affection had subsisted between the two; indeed, on one occasion when the lads were hunting together, Kurt owed his life to Ludwig von Arning's intrepid affection. When Kurt left Buchdorf upon his marriage, Ludwig had remained there a prop and stay to his adopted parents' declining years,—only leaving them three years before the old baron's death for a residence in the capital, where the Von Arning influence procured him a post under government, upon his marriage to the high-born but needy Augusta von Tretten. The confinement of a city life, however, and the pressure of new duties, ill suited a man whose youth had been passed amid the fresh air and healthy occupations of the country. Ludwig von Arning survived but by a few months his wife, who had died a year after the marriage in giving birth to the little Otto. Kurt's affection and care soothed his cousin's last moments. No blow could have struck more heavily the warm-hearted, easy baron than the loss of this companion of his youth. The dying man's whole thought was for his boy Otto, and Kurt gladly made him a solemn promise to regard him as his own son, and to see that his future was such as befitted their ancient name. Thus, when Baron Kurt found himself a childless man alone at Buchdorf, well cured, as he thought, of all desire for matrimony, he took to his home and heart the orphan Otto von Arning, who, with his dead mother's elderly sister, Bernhardine von Tretten, took up his abode beneath his cousin's roof, and was regarded by all as his future heir. In the care for this boy the kindly, indolent widower had hitherto found all the occupation he desired either for head or for heart.

Fräulein von Tretten was a canoness of a poor and strict order in H—; a woman of about Baron Kurt's age, although looking much older in spite of faultless teeth and hair still so dark as to seem in certain lights blue-black. Above this hair

the white muslin high cap of her order showed in strong contrast. She wore stiff cuffs of snowy linen around her large bony wrists, and the collar above her coarse woollen gown was of the same material. Everything about this woman, from her expressive but unattractive face to her deep harsh voice and the slight trace of hair on her upper lip, was stiff, ungainly, and unfeminine.

Fourteen years had passed since the death of Baron Kurt's father. It was, as we have said, a sunny afternoon in August, and Kurt, who troubled himself not at all about seed-time or harvest, was absent upon one of his frequent visits to the capital.

In an apartment which opened by folding-doors upon a great stone terrace overlooking the court-yard there sat, behind an antique table covered with deeds and papers, young Otto von Arning, now just about completing his sixteenth year. He would have been thought much older; in his large gray eyes there were discernible great determination and force of intellect, but very little of boyish enthusiasm. Undeveloped as his features yet were, there was no denying their expression of pride, perhaps not unmingled with a slight degree of youthful arrogance.

Upon the table before him lay open his cousin's ledgers for the past year. He had undertaken to overlook and arrange them, and was evidently absorbed in his work, for his rather pale face had become slightly flushed as he bent over the books and the columns of figures grew rapidly beneath his pen. It was a figure to interest the observer,—this grave young fellow, with manly resolve visible through all the boyishness of his age.

Such was, doubtless, Aunt Bernhardine's opinion as she sat opposite her nephew at the other end of the room, the inevitable knitting-needles clicking in her busy fingers, her small black eyes resting from time to time with an intense gaze that

was part tenderness, part expectation, upon the writer at the table. She had already made several attempts to attract Otto's attention, but young Arning seemed quite lost to the outer world. He sat motionless, except for an impatient toss back now and then of the lock of dark hair which fell too low upon his broad white forehead. Deep silence reigned in the room, broken only by the buzzing of the flies, the click of the knitting-needles, and the scratching of Otto's pen upon the paper. The cuckoo upon the old-fashioned clock in the corner had shrilly declared it to be seven o'clock, and Aunt Bernhardine had remarked, "The heat has lasted a long while to-day"—Otto seemed to have heard neither; but suddenly a slight bustle in the court-yard, the cautious dragging forth of a wagon, arrested his attention.

He hastily sprang up and went out on the veranda. The steward and several labourers were dragging a large wagon from the carriage-house.

Otto leaned over the balustrade of the veranda. "What are you doing there, Herr Warne?" he called down.

The man whom he addressed was evidently annoyed by the question; but he replied, "We are going out once more, Herr Baron."

"It is a holiday evening." And Otto took out his large silver watch, the terror of every one employed upon the estate, for it was as punctual to the minute as its master.

"True, Herr Baron," the steward replied, swallowing his vexation, "but old Schäfer thinks we shall have a storm, and he is weather-wise. In an hour we can get in all the grain on the lower meadow, and then——"

"No matter for that," Otto said, with a shrug; "my cousin desires that the holiday evenings should be rigidly observed; and, besides, is there not to be a wedding in Buchdorf to-night?" And he turned towards the peasants, who were enjoying the steward's discomfiture.