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SELF-DOOMED

A Novel



By B. L. FARJEON

AUTHOR OF "BLADE-O'-GRASS" "LONDON'S HEART" "LOVE'S HARVEST"
"GREAT PORTER SQUARE" ETC., ETC.

Books you may hold readily in your hand are the most useful, after all
DR. JOHNSON

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XIII.

SELF-DOOMED.

CHAPTER I.

**MASTER FINK RELATES CERTAIN INTERESTING PARTICULARS
CONCERNING HIS APPRENTICE, GIDEON WOLF.**

I am truly glad to see you; this meeting has warmed my heart. It is one of life's pleasantest experiences to shake the hand of an old friend, and to learn from his own lips that he has not forgotten you in his wanderings. I am sorely grieved to hear that you have lost your faithful mate, the dear woman who was your companion for so many years. Be comforted; we shall meet them again, these beloved ones. Resignation, friend, resignation. There are griefs which all mortals have to bear. Happy the man in whose heart shines the bright star of Hope, and who derives consolation from it. It is a solace born of Faith the comforter, and it is beyond price.

You are anxious to know what has become of my people? Name them, friend. Gideon Wolf, my apprentice? And pretty Katrine Loebeg, too--you are curious about her? Strange that you should bring their names into association, for when you last visited me, twelve years ago, there was nothing between those two; I may say that with confidence. Indeed, it is scarcely possible there could have been, for Katrine was but thirteen. A beautiful maiden, truly, but her heart was not then ripe enough for love; she was a mere child. Twelve years ago! Ah me, ah me! How time flies! The three best seasons have passed over my head, and I am in the winter of my life. But I feel young sometimes even now--yes, indeed, I am good for many a year, I hope. I am fond of life, and I have much to be grateful for, though I stand alone in the world, without wife or child.

Gideon Wolf and Katrine Loebeg! Gracious heavens, the contrast! Truly a wolf and a lamb; a hawk and a dove; a poisonous weed and a pure white lily. But you were as much a stranger to those two when you were here last as you are at the present moment. Old Anna was my house-keeper then. You remember Anna; you had good jokes with her, and she liked you; she said you were a proper man. Where is she now, you ask? In her grave. She served me faithfully, and lived till she was nearly eighty. Ah, she was a treasure--you don't often meet with such. Everything went on in the house from hour to hour, from day to day, from week to week, like a well regulated clock. And what beautiful stews she made! Never, never shall I taste the like again. I have another house-keeper now. Hush! She is here.

* * * * *

She has gone, and will not trouble us again tonight. You are thoughtful--you observed something strange in her. Her dead-white face, her long silvery hair, her great fixed eyes have impressed you. Why, yes--she never seems to see anything that is before her, but to be forever gazing into a world invisible to all other human beings. What she beholds there, Heaven only knows, though I sometimes fancy I can see with my mind's eye the terrible scene which shall abide with her to the last hour of her life, and the figures who played their parts therein. On rare occasions I have heard her addressing them, but in a tone so low that her words have not reached my ears. To me she never speaks except upon the duties of the house, or in reply to a question I ask her. You will scarcely believe that she was beautiful once--very, very beautiful--and

that she might have picked and chosen. No, she was never married. What a pitiful look in her eyes? Yes, yes; it is enough to move one to sadness. What is it you desire to know? Is she in her right mind? No, she is mad!

Yes, she is mad, but she is perfectly harmless, and goes about her duties well enough in her dull, monotonous way, and is a good cook, too, but not so good as Anna. That is not to be wondered at. There never was another cook like Anna. My mouth waters when I think of her. This one is not old. You will scarcely credit it--she is not yet six-and-twenty. Ah, you may well open your eyes. But if you will consider a little, you will not be able to recall the memory of any old woman whose white hair was so thick and abundant, and who wore it loose, as this young one does, almost to her knees. Not many years ago her hair was golden brown, and we used to gaze upon it and upon her with delight and admiration--for her eyes were the brightest of any, and her face had a beautiful color in it.

Fill your pipe again, and draw closer to the fire. How the wind shrieks without! There are angry spirits abroad; it is a mercy we are comfortably housed. So! Settle yourself in your arm-chair, and I will tell you the story of Gideon Wolf, who worked for me till he was twenty-four years of age, and who was not satisfied with the fruits of honest labor, because it did not enable him to grow rich in a month. That was his sole idea of happiness--riches, nothing but riches. The flowers of the fields, the fragrance of the hedges, the singing of the birds, the beauty of the heavens, all the wonders of nature--they were naught to him. He set up an idol for himself, and he worshipped it with all his might. Did a carriage roll past the door, he would look up from his work with discontent in his eyes, and an expression on his face which said, as plainly as if he had uttered the words aloud, "Why haven't *I* a carriage? Why should *I* walk, while others ride?" Did a gentleman in a fine coat enter my shop to leave his watch to be cleaned, there on Gideon's face was always the same miserable expression.

"Master Fink," he said, "the poor are much to be pitied."

"So are the rich, Gideon," I answered. "I doubt whether of the two, the poor have not the most reason to be grateful."

"Grateful!" he cried. "For what? For having so little, while the rich have so much?"

"Every back to its burden," I said. "Go on with your work, my lad, and make the best of things. You will be the happier for it."

But it was not in his nature to follow such good advice. Did he drink beer he turned it sour by grumbling that it wasn't wine. He envied everybody who had finer things than he could afford to buy, and the jingling of silver in other people's pockets sent the blood rushing angrily through his veins. I knew that he hungered for money, but I was not afraid that he would rob me. I was a sharp blade at my business, and my property was safe from his itching fingers. Let a spring, a pair of hands, the smallest of wheels be missing, and I was sure to find it out. He was aware of this; I had taken some pains to make him understand it. Besides, if he had robbed me of all I possessed it would not have contented him. That is one of the curses of such natures as his--never to be satisfied, never to be even grateful.

When his apprenticeship was out I still employed him, paying him piece by piece for the work he did. Had I paid him a regular wage he would have got the advantage of me. He did not earn a great deal; after deducting what was due for his board and lodging there was seldom at the end of the week more than a florin for him to receive. He spent upon his clothes more than he was warranted in doing, for he aped the fashions of his betters. It was money thrown away; the finest clothes in the world could not make Gideon Wolf look like a gentleman. Then he indulged in a terrible vice which eats into the soul of a man--he was a gambler. He had a poor mother, fifty miles away, who, he would declare with a hypocritical look at the rafters, depended upon him for support. With what a long face would he come to me and say,

"Master Fink, my dear mother is sick--very, very sick! I beg of you to lend me five florins to send her. It will be an act of true charity. You can put it down to my account. Do not fear that you will lose anything by me. One day I shall be rich, and I will repay you every florin."

But he gave his mother nothing; it was within my knowledge that during all the years he was in my service he had not sent her the smallest coin. Sometimes it was not for his mother that he begged money of me.

"Ah, what an adventure, Master Fink--what a sad, melancholy adventure!" he would say, bursting in upon me suddenly.

"What is the matter, now, Gideon?" I would ask, preparing for the shock.

"Oh, the world--the cruel, cruel world!" he would moan. "You know, Master Fink, that I went from here with three florins in my pocket, which I intended to pay Muller the tailor off the just debt I owe him."

"Proceed, Gideon."

"On the outskirts of the town I met a poor unfortunate woman--"

"On the outskirts of the town, Gideon? That is not the way to Muller's shop."

"Muller was not in when I called, so, the day being fine, I took a walk through the woods. Was it good or bad fortune, Master Fink, that the idea came into my head of walking through the woods?"

"Until you further enlighten me I cannot say."

"You shall hear all. In the woods I met this poor unfortunate woman. She had no shoes to her feet, and only a thin torn dress upon her body; and oh, Master Fink, she had a baby in her arms who was sobbing for want of food. The wretched creature told me her sad story, and begged me, if I had a mother of my own, to save her child from starvation. What could I do? I am poor--yes, I am poor, and the money in my pocket really belonged to Muller, but could I resist so heart-rending an appeal? Could *you* have resisted it? No, you are too humane, and because I am not rich, am I to be deprived of the pleasure of doing a good action? I did as you would have done. Without considering how I should replace the three florins I gave them to the poor woman, who crawled away, calling down blessings on my head."

"You want me to lend you three florins to pay Muller."

"Yes, Master Fink, to lend it, not to give it. You must not rob me of the pleasure of doing an act of charity."

To these and numberless other stories I would listen, without troubling myself to contradict him. What would have been the use? As long as I kept Gideon with me it was best not to come to words with him, and I bore with many things of which I did not approve. Occasionally I lent him a portion of what he asked for, taking care that he did not get too deeply in my debt, and I used to think with wonder of the amazing amount of deceit that could be hidden in the breast of one human being.

I see in your eyes the question, Why, if I did not like Gideon Wolf, did I continue to employ him? Why did I keep him, an indifferent workman, in my shop, when there were so many better men looking for work who would have been grateful to me all the days of their lives if I had taken them on? For it is not workmen that are difficult to find; it is masters. Well, there was a strong human reason, and I may speak of it now because it will hurt no one. It was not for the sake of Gideon Wolf, but for the sake of his mother, that I kept him with me.

Friend, I am going to open for you a chapter of my life which few have read.

CHAPTER II.

A LOVE-CHAPTER IN THE LIFE OF MASTER FINK.

The village in which I was born lies fifty miles from this spot, and is one of those places hidden in odd nooks and corners which the busy world seems either to have forgotten or to regard as of too slight importance to take any notice of. It moves neither backward nor forward; it is the same to-day as it was a hundred years ago. Its houses, its roads, its little shops, its bits of garden, its church, are the same now as then, and, unless something startling occurs, will be the same at the end of another hundred years. There are families living there at this moment whose great-great-grandfathers lived there--in the self-same cottages, grown now so old that their walls are rotting and crumbling away. The people, with scarcely an exception, are all of them poor, and live a life of contentment. As I should have done perhaps--my family for five generations having done so before me--had it not happened that I fell in love with Louisa Wagner.

I have spoken of the beauty of Katrine Loebeg. Louisa Wagner was even more beautiful. Do not think I say so because I loved her; it was universally acknowledged; and just in the way Katrine was sought after here so was Louisa sought after in the village in which I was born. I may say, without running the risk of being thought vain, that I was a well-looking lad. It is undoubtedly a fact that I was industrious, and not given to tippling. From my father I learned the mysteries of the art of watchmaking. Our family had been the village watch and clock menders for generations. There was, however, not enough business in that line to be picked up among the scanty and poor population to support us, so my grandfather, and my father after him, took to cobbling boots and shoes to eke out a living. I also learned to cobble, and was no mean hand at it. We were, therefore, the village watch-menders and cobblers, and managed to rub on, chiefly, it must be owned, by the patching of leather, which is a degree or two lower in the social scale than the art which teaches you how to put together the delicate works of a watch.

Louisa Wagner was the only child of a laborer on the private estate of the owner of the village lands, and in falling in love with her I fell in love with a girl in my own station in life.

Heavens! how beautiful she was! Her cheeks were handsomer than the handsomest peach, her eyes were as bright as the brightest stars, her skin was as soft as the softest velvet. To me what a vision of brightness! Where on this earth was to be found her equal? In my belief, nowhere. That is the way of lovers for a time. No feeling so potent as that which agitates the heart of a young man as he contemplates the being upon whom he has set his affections. Gradually the change comes, as we all live to learn. The heavenly light fades slowly away, and life's hard lessons, no less than the strange workings of the human heart, recall us to a sterner reality. Happy those who find themselves cast upon a peaceful shore, where they can enjoy the calmer and more enduring affection which sometimes follows the subsidence of love's delirium!

For weeks and weeks I nursed my passion, fed on it, was made happy by it. Louisa Wagner did not appear to look on me with coldness; nay, she seemed flattered by my ardent glances, and, as I believed, had a feeling stronger for me than that of ordinary friendship. That she should love me with such devotion as I loved her was not to be thought of. This love of a young man when it is pure, as mine was, ennobles him, and beautifies all surrounding things. I sang at my work, though it was even so mean as the patching of boots. Louisa had two pairs of boots, and I soled and heeled them, one after the other, and my heart went into the stitches. I held them in my hands and kissed them--yes, I am not ashamed to confess it, I kissed them in a kind of rapture. I took them to bed with me. By the side of my bed hung a cage with a linnet in it. I told the bird in a whisper that the boots belonged to Louisa--ah, what foolish, foolish things we do when the fever is upon us!--and the linnet trilled out its joyfullest notes. I laughed, I chirruped, I shed tears, and when I knelt at my bedside and repeated my prayers, I pressed Louisa's boots to my heart. Upon the soling and heeling of those boots I would have liked to challenge the world. Surely such excellent workmanship could not have been produced by other hands than mine. Louisa Wagner thought so, and said so, as she took them from me and examined them.

"You will see," I said, "they will last for years."

"They are beautifully done," she said, and I fancied she gave me an admiring glance; "such fine stitches! You are really clever."

"I can earn a living," I said, and my voice trembled because of the meaning I wished to convey in the words.

"But," she said, "I cannot pay you for them for a long, long while. You will have to wait."

"In money," I said, "you can never pay me."

"Oh yes, I can, Gustave Fink," she replied.

"No," I insisted, "indeed you never can."

"Why?" she asked.

"I did not do them for money. I wish you to accept them from me; it will make me very proud."

She thanked me quite readily, saying, "Well, if you will have it so, Gustave Fink," and gave me the sweetest smile.

I ran home in a tremor of delight, carrying her smile with me. It is a fact. Her smiling face was before me all the way.

Of course I told my linnet the news--how that Louisa had accepted my work, and paid me for it with the sweetest smile--and the bird sang gayly, and the rhythm and the tenderness of the song found an echo in my heart. Up to this point the linnet was my sole confidant. Not to another creature did I breathe my secret. None the less did I look upon myself as Louisa Wagner's accepted lover. After what had passed--which, as you see, I magnified into the most ridiculous importance--how could it be otherwise? I was satisfied, I was happy. That when I could find courage to speak plainly to her she would place her hand in mine, and permit me to touch her lips with mine, I entertained not the slightest doubt.

I was a proud young fellow the following Sunday when I saw her walking in the boots I had repaired for her, and which looked like new. She wore a new cotton dress, and a bit of new ribbon round her white throat, and I settled it in my mind that they were worn for me. No man has ever tasted a greater happiness than I did on that day. But I could not find courage to speak to Louisa of the love which made my heart like a garden of sweet flowers. I walked by her side and was contented.

Ah, how it all comes back to me! The meeting at the church door, the walk through the church-yard and the village till we came to her father's cottage, the stupid talk about the boots!

"I never felt so comfortable in my life," she said; "they are as easy as if I had worn them for years. And they do not make my feet look large."

Her feet look large! In my eyes they were the feet of a princess. Now, as she put out her foot, and I was gazing at it in a sort of rapture, who should come up to us but a neighbor of mine, a wheelwright, Steven Wolf by name.

I can see the picture as plainly as if it were bodily before me in the room. I turn towards the fire, and I see the picture there in the glowing coals.

"The prettiest foot in all the village," cried Steven Wolf, "and the prettiest mouth, and the loveliest eyes!"

His voice jarred upon me. It was like the voice of a brawler calling out in the church and interrupting the service. No wonder, I thought, that Louisa should blush as he gazed boldly at her. His look was a profanation. To save the girl I loved from further indignity I bade her good-bye and left her. Turning my head for a moment as I walked away, it pierced my heart like the thrust of a needle to see that Steven Wolf had followed her into her father's cottage.

I have called Steven Wolf a wheelwright. Well, he might be that for two days in the week; for the other five an indolent sot. He bore a bad character in the village, and there was much suspicious talk concerning him. How could Louisa's father encourage such a character at his hearth? But I could not forget that old Wagner and Steven Wolf were by no means on unfriendly terms. They were often seen together. "When Louisa is mine," I thought, "and I have the right to protect her, she shall have nothing to say to this vagabond." When Louisa was mine! Ah, fraught with happiness was the future I mapped out! I resolved to speak to her soon--before the end of the week, if I could find an opportunity.

On the Monday Steven Wolf thrust his head into my little shop, where I sat working.

"What a fine pair of soles you put on Louisa Wagner's boots!" he cried. "Here--mend mine at the same price." And he flung down a pair.

I threw them back at him with passionate words. He picked them up and walked off, laughing heartily. In the evening of the same day I saw him and Louisa walking together, and I made the acquaintance of that torturer, jealousy. There was no sleep for me that night. When I came upon them Louisa did not see me, but he, looking me full in the face, gave me a malicious, triumphant smile to feed upon. I did feed upon it for days and days till I could bear it no longer, and determined to know the best or the worst that could befall me.

I spoke to Louisa; I declared my love for her; I told her I was able to support her, and I asked her to be my wife. She answered me in the kindest manner, and I learned that she had already promised to become the wife of Steven Wolf. I stood transfixed; my life seemed most suddenly and horribly to have come to an end.

"Do not hate me," she said. "I am very, very sorry!"

"I cannot hate you," I replied. My voice was so strange in my ears that I could scarcely believe it was I who was speaking. "I shall love you all my days."

"We are still friends," she said, holding out her hand.

"Yes," I said, sadly, "we are still friends. It is not possible I could ever be your enemy."

I took her hand, and held it in mine. Tears gushed from my eyes as I felt the sympathetic pressure of her fingers.

"You will see some other girl whom you will love," she said. "You are a good man; every one speaks well of you; your wife will be proud of you."

"I shall never marry," I said, "I love only one."

Our conversation was interrupted by Steven Wolf, who stole abruptly upon us.

"No poaching!" he cried. "Respect the rights of property."

"It is not in that way," I said, and I confess that at that moment I felt a deadly hatred towards him, "I should speak of the girl I was going to marry."

"You choose your way," he retorted, "and I will choose mine. Not a bad way, is it?"

And he put his arm round Louisa's waist. Her eyes were cast down; she never looked at me.

"Words are wasted between us," I said. "Farewell, Louisa Wagner. May you be happy."

He sent a shout of mocking laughter after me.

"Truly," I could not help thinking, "in good feeling I have the advantage of you."

I suffered terribly, and for some time my mind was plunged into such darkness that I could see no gleam of goodness in all the wide world. That is the selfish view we take of things when

sorrow comes to our door. "Why," I asked myself, "does Louisa Wagner marry that brute and gambler instead of an honest, hard-working youngster who not only loves but respects her? For what reason does she prefer him to me?" If I could have answered those questions I might be able to tell you more than I know of the workings of a woman's heart. It is beyond me, and beyond you, and therefore I have kept myself free from woman's power from that day to this. I recovered my peace of mind, and so that it might not again be disturbed by the sight of the woman I loved, I left my native village with my knapsack on my shoulders, and came here, where I set up in business for myself as a watch-maker, and have jogged on ever since, with a fair share of happiness and content. There is no condition of life in which a man has not good reason to be grateful. I have grown to know this, and it has been of value to me in my reflections upon life's trials and disappointments. I have my work, I have my connection, I owe no one a florin, I am at peace with the world. That is happiness enough.

CHAPTER III.

RELATES HOW GIDEON WOLF BECAME MASTER FINK'S APPRENTICE.

Year after year passed peacefully and prosperously over my head until eighteen years had gone by. I was fortunate in many ways--in making friends, in earning respect, in forming a connection, and in obtaining the services of old Anna, who served me so long and so faithfully. Her age and her lack of beauty saved me from much anxiety. She had no wooers, no men dancing at her heels; I doubt, if I myself had offered to marry her, whether she would have accepted me. Not that such an idea ever entered my head. Heaven forbid! I had too great a respect for her years.

One morning, at the end of this time, a woman entered my shop--a pale, thin, elderly-looking woman, with an expression of intense weariness on her worn face. She gazed at me wistfully, and I at her in pity.

"Master Fink?" she said.

"Yes," I said, "I am he."

As I spoke I recognized her, changed as she was. My old sweetheart, Louisa Wagner, stood before me. It saddened me to look at her. Her eyes were dim, her hair was nearly white; and my hair was still brown, and my eyes clear and strong, and in my heart some gladness reigned. Ah me! Time's hand had weighed heavily upon her during the eighteen years which had flown by since last I saw her. Had, then, all the flowers of her life withered? No--one still bloomed, and brought joy to her; but this I had yet to learn. No joy was now in her face, only deep anxiety and weariness. I saw that she was ready to faint from fatigue.

"Have you come specially to see me?" I asked.

"Yes," she sighed.

"Where from?"

"From our native village."

"You have ridden here?" I said.

"No," she replied, faintly, "I walked."

"Walked!" I exclaimed. "Why, it is fifty miles!"

"Yes," she murmured, "it is fifty miles. What a long, long road! But I am here at last, thank God!"

I divined that it was no light errand that had brought her to me, and it was evident that her strength was spent. It was as much as she could do to prevent herself from sinking to the ground. I hastily summoned Anna from her kitchen, and bade her attend to my visitor. A heart of quick sympathy beat in my old Anna's breast, and without asking who the woman was she administered to her wants. It was not without difficulty that this was accomplished, for Louisa was so eager to disclose her errand that, had she been allowed to have her way, she would not have tasted food until she had acquainted me with her mission. But Anna insisted, and so did I, and she had not the strength to reject the kindly offices which were forced upon her. When she had drunk a basin

of nourishing soup which Anna prepared--I never really knew what soup was till Anna made it for me; what a treasure that woman was!--I told her I was ready to listen to her.

"I have come to you for help," she said.

"I will give it to you," I replied, "if it is in my power."

She bent her head humbly and gratefully.

"You can see," she said, "that I am very poor."

"I grieve, to see it."

And indeed my heart bled for her. Had the picture of her as she was at that time presented itself to me eighteen years before, with the words, "This is what the beautiful girl by your side will become in a few years," I should have laughed at it in derision as a monstrous impossibility. Her eyes that were bright as the stars, her cheek that rivalled the peach in delicate bloom, her skin that was soft as velvet, where were they now? Ah, Beauty, Beauty, be not over-vain and confident! Old Father Time has tricks in store for you of which you do not dream as you walk, lithe and proud and happy, through the flowery paths of youth. Be humble, maiden, and grateful for your fair outside, and pray to God not to weigh you down with care and trouble.

These thoughts crossed my mind as I gazed at the pale, thin woman who had walked fifty weary miles to beg me to assist her.

Presently she disclosed what she wished me to do for her.

Her husband, Steven Wolf, had been dead six years, having done his best during his life to imberber her days. She did not tell me this; she did not say that he had ill-treated her, had passed his hours in the ale-house, had made her slave for him, had never given her a loving word after the first few months of their marriage; but it was the truth. He had led her a life of misery, and, when he died, left her in the direst poverty. She took up her burden meekly, and battled on as women do, more bravely than men, and did her duty to the uttermost extent of her power. Her parents were dead, and she had no friends in a position to help her. Indeed, she led me to infer, more from the construction I placed upon her words than from the words themselves, that the friends of her girlhood had fallen off from her--driven away, of course, by the vagabond she had married. But she had one treasure, one dear, priceless treasure, which compensated for all her suffering, which kept hope alive even in her sad life. She had a child, a boy, and his name was Gideon. Two other children had been born to her, but she had lost them, and Gideon was the only one left. A heavenly light came into her eyes as she spoke of him; color touched her cheeks; her skin seemed to grow whiter and smoother. There, in the mother, I saw once again, for a brief space, the presentment of the beautiful girl I had loved in my youth. She told me much of her darling that interested me--how brave he was, how truthful, bright, intelligent--how that he was the pride of her life, and the best son a loving mother was ever blessed with.

"He is growing fast," she said, her eyes beaming with pride, "and, please God, in a few years will be a fine handsome man. I wish to perform my duty by him; I wish him to learn a trade from an honest master who will set him a good example. Your father, Gustave Fink, was an upright, just man, and it was his example that helped you to become one yourself. In our little village there is no opportunity for a lad to learn a trade that will advance him in the world. He must learn it elsewhere, and my prayer is that I may live to see my boy prosperous and honored, with a wife and children about him who shall look up to him with love and respect, and with his old mother sitting perhaps in a corner of his fireside, praising the good Lord for the blessings he has showered upon her. Ah, what happiness, what happiness!"

Her slight form shook, and her face was bedewed with tears, as she spoke of this happy future.

"Do you propose," I asked, "to leave the village yourself, if you find a master elsewhere for your son?"

"Oh no," she replied with eager haste; "I should be a clog upon him, a burden; he could not support me, and it might be that I should not be able to support myself among strangers. No, I must stop in the old place, where I can manage to make a living, and I will wait patiently till my son is a man, and says, 'Mother, come to me; I have a home for you.' Oh, Gustave Fink, you took a bold step when you left our village, a bold right step, for the world has prospered with you."

"I acknowledge it gratefully," I said.

"This shop is your own--you are the master here."

"It is my own--I am the master here."

"Be my son's master! Teach him your trade--let him profit by your example; counsel him, guide him! You will lose nothing by it, he is so good, so quick, so willing, so obedient! If you searched the whole world through you would not find another lad so bright, so easy to teach and mould. Ah, Gustave Fink, I beg of you, I implore you!"

So eager was she, so fearful lest I should refuse her, that she would have knelt to me had I not prevented her.

My mind had been made up while she was speaking. Long before she finished her appeal I knew what proposal she was about to make to me, and I had resolved to do as she wished me to do. Do not misunderstand me. I was not influenced by any stupid sentimentality in the matter. No, no all that had passed away, and I was now a practical man who would not permit sentiment to interfere with his business. I had a shrewd eye for a good bargain, and here was one unexpectedly offered to me. Besides, was it not a fine revenge?

Louisa Wolf," I said, "I will do what you desire your weary journey shall not be fruitless. I will take your son as my apprentice, and will do my best by him."

She simply said, "God will reward you!" and then she turned aside, and cried quietly to herself.

She remained with me for quite three hours, resting herself for her return journey home, and she accepted a trifle of money to assist her on her way. Not a word of the days that were gone was spoken by either of us--that will show you that there was no sentiment mixed up with this affair. I did not mention the name of Steven Wolf, nor did she, nor did the slightest reference to the love I had borne for her escape our lips. What we thought, we thought. It is necessary sometimes to keep a strict watch over tongue and mind, so that our worldly calculations may not be upset. Her lips quivered as she pressed my hand and bade me good-bye; but it was not I who caused her emotion; it was the thought of her son Gideon, from whom she was so soon to be separated.

CHAPTER IV.

MASTER FINK HAS A SINGULAR DREAM.

But although in our waking hours we are generally successful in keeping the workings of our mind in check, it is different when we are asleep. Then we are the slaves, and imagination is the master, the magician which plays us the most extravagant pranks. It is like sitting in a theatre, witnessing the representation of a play which sways us this way and that, which makes us laugh, which makes us weep, which makes us enjoy, which makes us suffer.

On the night following Louisa's departure I dreamed of the old days and of Louisa in the pride of her beauty. I was sitting on my low stool, soling and heeling her boots, golden boots, with jewels round the eyelet holes. A silver hammer was in my hand, and as I tapped and tapped and drove in the shining nails, musical notes rang out.

"Louisa is yours she loves you, loves you, loves you!"

And then the linnets which hung above me in a crystal cage piped sweetly,

"Let me out--let me out!"

I opened the door of the cage, and straight through the window flew the little bird--through the open window, from which I saw the church and the churchyard so closely associated with one memorable Sunday in my life. And who should come dancing towards me over the tombstones but Louisa, dressed in the self-same dress she had worn on that Sabbath, and with the self-same bit of ribbon at her throat. The linnets, wheeling round and round her pretty head, encircled it with thin lines of light, and still in the musical ringing of the silver hammer I heard the song,

"She loves you, loves you, loves you!"

Suddenly we were walking in a great field of flowers, and I was gazing in rapture at Louisa's golden boots. A thousand linnets were singing above us, the flowers were whispering around us, Louisa's hand was resting in mine.

"Then it is all a dream these eighteen years," I said to her.

And she answered, "Yes, it is all a dream. How could you be so foolish as to believe that I loved any man but you? What proof of my love shall I give you?"

"Make this field of flowers," I said, "grow above our heads, so that we shall be hidden from the world, and there shall be only you and I."

Immediately the flowers began to grow higher, higher, higher, shutting out the light till we were in almost perfect darkness, and then the linnet came and perched on my shoulder, and whispered,

"She is fooling you! She is not a young girl at all; she is an old witch! Put me in your waistcoat-pocket, and you will see what she really is."

I did so, and the linnet ticked like a watch:

"She loves--not you--not you--not you. She loves--a wolf--a wolf--a wolf."

And through a pathway of light in the field of flowers ran Louisa, changed into a shrivelled old woman with gold boots on her feet, and after her raced Steven Wolf, who, catching her, flung her high in the air. I rushed with fury upon the monster, and he raised a great sheet of bright brass, and crashed it on my head--

Bang! The din was enough to drive one crazy, and Louisa screaming at the top of her voice as she spun round and round in the air, with her golden boots--

Bang! Bang! Bang! I jumped out of bed in a fright, and ran to the bedroom door and threw it open; and there I beheld old Anna sitting in the passage outside, crying in her loudest voice that every bone in her body was broken, while a lot of my best plates and dishes, all in little pieces, lay around her. She was coming down-stairs with a trayful of crockery in her arms when she tripped, and fell all the way down. That was the end of my dream. I could not help laughing heartily at it, which made old Anna cross-tempered the whole of the day.

After breakfast I thought over my interview with Louisa, and of the new apprentice who would soon take up his abode with us. How his mother would grieve at parting from him! It would never have done for me to have married that trustful woman. She was so unworldly that she had never even asked me whether Gideon was to receive any wages during the seven years of his apprenticeship. It was an act of folly which would have made me angry had she been my wife; but she had been another man's, and he had broken her heart. That was as clear as the light which, shining through my shop-windows, had exposed her gray hairs to the eyes of one who, years ago, was ready to die for her. To think that, at any time of his life, a man should be so simple as to have such ideas!

So Gideon Wolf came to me, and, being duly apprenticed, lived with me and learned my trade. Old Anna was against it from the first. I had taken the important step without consulting her, and the moment she set eyes on Gideon she prophesied that evil would come of his residence in the house.

"Have not things gone on well enough to please you, Master Fink?" she asked.

"They have always gone on well," I replied.

"Then you must be growing avaricious in your old age," she remarked.

"Old age has not come upon me yet, Anna," I said, "and if I had a grain of avariciousness in my body I would pluck it out by the root."

Anna was as much a companion as a servant, and I had too great a respect for her to be angry at anything she said.

"Why do you make the change, then, Master Fink?" I could not answer her without deceiving her, so I merely shrugged my shoulders and smiled.

"Ah, you may smile," she continued, "and make light of it; but that won't alter what's done. Tell me one thing, Master Fink."

"I will tell you many, Anna that is, as many as I can."

"When you have a watch in good going order, one that has not lost or gained a minute for years, that you can depend upon as you can depend upon the sun, is it the act of a good workman, out of simple wilfulness, to take it to pieces and put it together again?"

"I understand your meaning, Anna, but rely upon me--I have a good reason for what I have done. Let us not anticipate evil. Go down to your kitchen, and prepare for me my favorite dinner, French beans stewed sweet and sour. You have not your equal in that dish; you really make me enjoy my life."

Before many months had passed I shared Anna's fears respecting Gideon Wolf. Little by little it was made clear to me that he had a thoroughly bad nature, that he was sly, greedy, envious, small-minded, mean-spirited. Occasionally I sent his mother a small sum of money which I said was due for services he had rendered; and you may be sure, in addition to this, that I paid him fair wages. But had I known how he would turn out, I would as soon have taken the son of the Arch Fiend himself for my apprentice as the son of Louisa Wolf. Too late did I discover that I had made a bad bargain.

CHAPTER V.

RELATES HOW GIDEON WOLF WAS SEEN BY OLD ANNA PLAYING CARDS WITH THE DEVIL.

He grew into a tall, thin, sallow-faced young man, about as ill-favored as one of Pharaoh's lean kine; with large splay feet; with sandy hair; with a nose which looked as if it had been broken in the middle by a violent blow; with eyes as dull as the eyes of a fish; with a voice in which was never heard a note of natural gayety. Such men are a mistake in the world, and how any young woman can be drawn to them is a mystery which I defy students of human nature to satisfactorily explain. A mother's love for her ugly bantling is easily understood, but a fine young woman's, with bright eyes in her head, for such a scarecrow as Gideon Wolf is beyond ordinary comprehension. Yet they draw prizes these crooked-grained ones, while better men are left to sigh in vain.

You have already heard how Gideon passed through his apprenticeship, and how I continued to employ him as a workman when his time was out. He was twenty-two years of age when, on a certain evening, old Anna, who had been out marketing, burst in upon me with a plump goose in her hand, and cried in a great heat,

"Fine doings, Master Fink, fine doings! It is high time the world came to an end."

"What, in Heaven's name, has put you in such a fever?" I inquired, looking up from the newspaper in which I was reading an account of a wonderful ox, which had a man's head growing out of one shoulder and a turtle out of the other. "Ah," I cried, in sudden fear, "that goose! You have been cheated. It is not a fresh goose; it ought to have been eaten days ago, and the dealer will not change it. Give it to me--I will go to him myself--"

"No need to trouble, Master Fink," said Anna, in a slightly acid tone; "the goose is a good goose, and I bought it cheap. I should like to see the dealer who could take me in. Look at it."

I did more than look at it. I poked its ribs; I felt its fat breast; my eyes glistened.

"Already, Anna," I cried, joyously, "already I smell the stuffing!"

"I don't deny it; I am fond of good cooking. It is nothing to be ashamed of; we were sent into the world to eat, as well as to do other things, and it is right that we should enjoy it."

"It is not the goose that has put me in a fever," said Anna, "it is Gideon Wolf."

I pricked up my ears. "Has he been behaving rudely to you, Anna?"

"What!" she screamed, in a voice so shrill that I jumped in my chair. "He! A lamp-post like him! If he dared, I'd box his ears till I set them on fire!"

I laughed quietly; I could not help it, her indignation was so comical. "Well, then," I asked, wiping my eyes, for I had brought the tears into them, "what has he done?"

Her reply was brief and startling: "Gideon Wolf is courting."

"It is not possible," I cried; "you must be dreaming."

"I don't dream," said Anna, "with my eyes wide open. This very evening, not ten minutes ago, as I was coming home, after buying the goose, I saw him with his arm round her waist."

"Bound the goose's waist!" I exclaimed, for really she was beginning to confuse me.

She looked at me solemnly, reproachfully. "Pray to-night, Master Fink," she said, "to be forgiven for making a joke of my words!" And she was about, to leave me.

"Stay, Anna," I said, conscience-stricken, "and pardon me. With his arm around whose waist?"

"Round Katrine Loebeg's," replied Anna, sorrowfully. "The child--the poor, misguided child! It was only yesterday I was nursing her on my knee and tossing her in the air."

Anna was deeply moved, and I scarcely less than she, at this disclosure. It was hardly to be believed that a fresh young heart like that which beat in the breast of pretty Katrine Loebeg should have given itself up to this scarecrow. But it was true. Gideon Wolf had cast a spell upon

her, and she was as secure in his wiles as a trout on a hook. Sweet Katrine Loebeg! whom I looked upon almost as a child of my own, who could have chosen from the best, and for whom many a manly heart was aching! An orphan, too, with no father to protect her, and no mother to warn her of the pitfalls which lie in the path of unsuspecting, innocent maidenhood. That made it worse--a thousand times worse. What could there be in Gideon Wolf to attract that young soul? What unholy arts had he used to draw her to him? Incredible as it seemed, it was most unhappily true that he had infatuated her, and was paying court to her.

"Did you speak to them, Anna?" I asked.

"No; they did not see me."

"But surely, Anna, this was not done in the open street!"

"No; that's where the villainy of it is. You know the archway on the right hand side of the Court of Public Justice. At this time of the day scarcely any one passes through it. I should not have done so had I not wanted to go to the Blind House to give Mother Morel her paper of snuff. She is ninety-eight, but her nose is in splendid condition. It is the only sense she has left to enjoy. She is blind, she is deaf, she mumbles so that it is impossible to understand a word she says, and she has scarcely any feeling in her. Her nose is the only thing she has left which convinces her that she still belongs to this world; it is her sole comfort. Well, when I went through the archway no one was there, and outside the archway there were only the pigeons picking up the crumbs; but when I came back from the Blind House, there, in the darkest corner of the archway, was your treasure, Gideon Wolf--"

"Don't call him my treasure," I interrupted, mildly; "I have not a high opinion of him."

"Why did you take him as your apprentice, then? I warned you how it would be."

"Is it possible," I cried, testily, "to find in this world a woman who will tell a story without flying round it in every direction but the right one? Get out of that archway, Anna."

"There was Gideon Wolf in the very darkest part of it, with his arm round Katrine's waist. And unless my ears are mistaken, I heard the sound of a kiss."

"When two young people are together like that, Anna, it is not an unlikely thing to happen."

"Well," she asked, sharply, "what are you going to do about it?"

"That is a difficult question to answer. What can I do?"

"There is no difficulty. You must prevent it from going any further."

"How, Anna? In what way? Gideon is no longer my apprentice he is his own master; he is an independent workman."

"A fine workman he has turned out to be!" she cried, scornfully. "Over and over again have I said to myself, 'Why does Master Fink keep such a creature in the house? Why does he not bid him pack and be off?' It would not be believed if people knew all."

She was not in the secret of the little romance that was played when Gideon's mother and I were boy and girl together. I had the greatest confidence in Anna, but this sentiment of my youthful days I had not divulged to any one. Besides, if in an unguarded moment I had confided in Anna I am doubtful whether she would have sympathized with me. She would not have looked at it through my spectacles. She might even have lost confidence in me, and that was a risk I did not care to run.

"You manage your kitchen," I said to this faithful old servant, "and I will manage my shop. Every one knows his own business best. If I took the liberty of suggesting to you how you should cook that plump goose you have in your hand, I should not be surprised to feel it flying about my head, dead as it is."

"From the first day I came here," said Anna, and there was really a touch of pathos in her voice, "everything has gone right in my kitchen. Never a joint have I spoiled, nor a bird, nor has an ounce of fat or a slice of bread been wasted. Out of what has been saved by careful management we have even been able to feed the beggars. Go down-stairs now, and you will see the saucepans, and the pans, and the moulds shining like new silver, and if you find a speck of dust on a plate or a glass you may cut off my head."

It was true, every word of it, and I should have melted into tears had it not been for the tragic tone in which my good Anna said I might cut off her head.

"And why," she continued, and now her voice began to swell, "do I tell you this? To praise myself--to make you think I am a miracle of a woman? No, Master Fink, you know better than that. I am no miracle; only an ordinary creature, who is contented when things go on in a quiet and honest fashion. It is to prove to you how easy it is for one pair of hands to do a thing well, and for another pair to make everything go wrong. Had I taken an apprentice, some wench who thought more of her own stomach than her master's, your meat would have been undone or done

to rags, and your favorite dishes burned to a cinder. But I would have no apprentice; the work I had to do was done, and that was enough for me. I was not going to bring confusion upon the house. And your shop, before you took Gideon Wolf into it, was like my kitchen, a model. You got up in the morning, you had your meals in peace, you did with your own one pair of hands every bit of work there was to do, you were putting by money, and this house was a house of truth and honesty. No lies to disturb us then, Master Fink; no deceit, no treachery, no unholy work--"

"Stop, Anna," I exclaimed, "for Heaven's sake, stop! Everything you have said is true, except the last. Whatever else takes place in the house, there is no unholy work going on in it."

"I tell you, Master Fink," said Anna, and her voice became so solemn that I felt the hair rising on my head, "that there is unholy work being carried on in your house. The Evil One visits it regularly!"

I stared at her with my mouth wide open. Had the most savory morsel been popped into it at that moment I should not have been able to move my jaws; there it would have remained, uneaten.

"Explain to me what you mean," I managed to murmur.

"Explain to me," she retorted, "what Gideon Wolf means, by getting up in the middle of the night to play cards with the Devil!"

You may imagine my astonishment; you might have thrown me from my chair to the ground with your little finger. "Playing cards in the middle of the night with the Devil!" I gasped.

"Yes, Master Fink, with the Devil. Doesn't Gideon Wolf sleep in the next room to mine, and isn't there a hole in the wall behind the curtains of my bed, into which I have stuffed a piece of soft rag, and tied it with a string to my pillow, so that it can't be taken out on the other side without disturbing me? Well, then. The first time I saw anything of Gideon Wolf's unholy work was six months ago, when, waking up in the middle of the night, I heard him talking to Some One in his room. My room was dark--I have nothing on my conscience, and can sleep without a light--but in his the candle was burning, as I saw when I quietly took the rag out of the hole and peeped through. There was no harm in my doing it--I am old enough to be his grandmother. I knew that, lawfully, there should be only you, me, and Gideon in the house. You were asleep down-stairs. Who could it be, then, that Gideon Wolf was talking to? It was my duty to see, and I am thankful that I am not a coward. Gideon was sitting in his shirt-sleeves at his little table; his back was towards me, and, as I have told you, there was a candle alight. He was shuffling and dealing out a pack of cards, talking all the time in a voice you never heard, Master Fink, all the years he has been with you. It was not a natural voice; the bad passions expressed in it made me shudder. He dealt cards to himself and to Whoever it was that sat opposite to him. I did not see the Being he was playing with, but it could be nobody but Satan, who has the power of making himself invisible to any person he pleases--and he didn't choose to show himself to me. But Gideon saw him clearly enough, for he spoke to the Fiend, and shook his fist at him, and swore at him, and when he was winning, grinned in his face--a diabolical grin, such as I never saw on the face of a proper man. Now and then I thought I heard a faint, wicked laugh from the Fiend, but I could not make sure of it. Gideon kept an account of something--of his winnings and losings, I suppose--on pieces of paper, upon which he wrote figures at the end of every game. 'That makes five hundred,' Gideon said; 'that makes a thousand; that makes fifteen hundred; that makes two thousand. Where am I to get the money from? How am I to pay you?' I knew how he would have to pay; it was his soul that was being gambled away. It was when Gideon was speaking in that way that I thought I heard the laughing of the Fiend. This went on for nearly an hour, I should say, and then Gideon Wolf, dashing the pack of cards against the wall, rose from the table with a face as white as my table-cloths. Something seemed to vanish out of the room, and Gideon, after muttering to himself for a minute or two, burned all the little pieces of paper at the candle, and gathering the ashes put them in the stove. Having done this with great care, he collected the pack of cards, blew out the candle, and went to bed. The next morning when I went to his room I looked into his stove, and there I saw the burned ashes of the pieces of paper, and I knew I had not been dreaming."

"But, Anna," I said, "why have you not told me this before?"

"Because," she replied, "you make a scoff of sacred things--for which I am afraid you will be punished unless I pray you off; and I try hard to--yes, Master Fink, I pray for you every day of my life."

"You do me a great wrong," I said; "never in my life have I scoffed at sacred things."

"You don't believe in the Devil," she said, shaking her head dolefully.

"Not in the way you do, Anna. But it would be foolish for us to discuss religious matters. When you find me doing an evil action, then will be the time to pray for me. Did you ever see Gideon play cards again in that way?"

"A dozen times at least. Sometimes he wins, sometimes he loses. When he wins there is an unholy light in his eyes; when he loses he curses and swears and walks up and down the room, clinching his fists and waving them in the air. But if I had not seen what I have seen it would not

alter my opinion of him. If he were an honest man--which he is not and a handsome man--which he is not and if he didn't play cards with the Devil--even then he is no fit lover for an innocent girl like Katrine Loebeg. And so I shall tell her, whether she likes it or not."

"Do so," I said, "and I will also speak to her."

"It is your duty, Master Fink. You knew her father, and respected him. If he were alive this day he would take that comrade of the Evil One by the neck between his finger and thumb and send him spinning into the gutter. If I were a man I'd do it myself. You seem to know very little of this Gideon Wolf of yours. I'll tell you something else concerning him. Who do you think he goes to see every Friday night, as regularly as clock-work?"

"I cannot guess."

"Pretzel the miser, who lives in the Temple--Pretzel, your enemy with the evil eye, who hasn't a friend in the world but Gideon Wolf--Pretzel, that the little children run away from when he shows his ugly face, and that the very dogs in the streets snarl and bark at! Now I've given you a good stomach full, Master Fink, and I wish you joy of your apprentice."

Anna was very unjust to me, but I ascribed it to her excited feelings. She made amends to me that very night, by placing before me for supper the goose she had bought for the next day's dinner. Ah, if women only knew the effect of such a thing upon a man's spirits! The very smell was enough to dispel anger and vexation. If a young girl were to come to me for counsel before she was married, if she were to ask me how she could chain her husband to her, how she could make him love her all the days of his life, I should say to her, "Look after his stomach, my child. Make him nice stews and savory dishes. When he cuts into the beef with the knife you have sharpened for him, let him behold the gravy running out of it. It softens the heart. And when you give him a roast goose, be sure that you give him plenty of stuffing with it." But no one could roast a goose like old Anna. No one, no one! Upon her tombstone ought to have been cut the words, "Here lieth a woman who could roast a goose to perfection, and who made the finest stews in the world."

When Anna placed that goose before me I gave utterance to a long, deep sigh of satisfaction, and I looked at her with a smile in my eyes. Her face lighted up in an instant. You should have seen it; it was like the sun breaking out. Did I not know in my inmost soul that she had been suffering because she believed she had done me an injustice? And in an instant everything was cleared up through the savory steam--more eloquent than the finest words that rose from the hot roast goose.

But there is never joy without sorrow. Gideon Wolf came into the room just as I put the knife into the breast.

"A hot roast goose!" he cried, gleefully. "If I like one thing better than another it is a hot roast goose for supper."

And he drew his chair close to the table, and held out a plate.

I could not take my knife out of the breast, the fattest slices of which I intended for my own eating, and help him to the long joint of the leg. Sadly I laid the fat slices on his plate, and when he said, "Don't trouble about the stuffing, Master Fink I'll help myself;" I submitted without a word, but in silent wrath. He devoured the best part of that goose, and nearly the whole of the stuffing. What could be expected of such a gourmand? As for Anna, she went out of the room in such a state of vexation that I am sure she could not have got a wink of sleep that night.

CHAPTER VI.

PRETZEL THE MISER, WITH THE EVIL EYE.

Of Anna's revelations, those which troubled me most were that relating to Pretzel the miser, and that relating to Katrine Loebeg. Of the intimacy which she had discovered, by means of a hole in the wall, between the Devil and Gideon Wolf I soon disposed. The world abounds in men who feed on delusions, and who find their greatest comfort therein. The majority of these men are beings who hunger after what is not within their reach, or who are envious of their neighbors. Gideon Wolf, hungering for wealth, and seeing no practical road to its swift attainment, flew to his imagination for the realization of his desire. He played cards in the solitude of his room with a Shadow, and won of it or lost to it great sums of money. There is a certain distinction, and also a certain comfort, in this delusion. Imaginary millions are involved in

the turning up of a card, and the high play affords a triumph when a fortune is won, and a scarcely less enjoyable despair when it is lost. So much for Gideon Wolf's folly in playing cards with the Devil. That I did not believe in the personality of the Evil One was, in my old Anna's eyes, a terrible sin. She herself had the firmest belief that he walked the earth, a solid body, horns, hoofs, tail, and all complete. No, the Devil did not trouble me, but Pretzel the miser did.

This Pretzel was, in my opinion, the most abominable man in the town. He was a miser, and a moneylender at exorbitant interest. One hundred, two hundred, even four hundred per cent., did not satisfy him; he was never satisfied till he had extracted the last copper from the unhappy people who went to him for assistance. A little, thin, dried-up old man, with a joyless laugh. Out of his whole body I do not believe you could have squeezed a teaspoonful of blood. The number of people he had ruined! I could not count them. And all done under the shadow of the law. Yes, he was always, always right, and his victims always, always wrong. The judges and the lawyers all declared so--not because they wished to favor him, but because they were compelled to go by the letter of the law. "I want nothing more than my rights," he would say; "look at my bond." And there was never a flaw in it, never the smallest crevice that a poor wretch could creep through to escape from his clutches. All, gracious heaven! A heartless money-lender's bond. That it is necessary he should be upheld in it--that he should be allowed to prey, to blast, to ruin, to destroy! Is there no such thing as moral justice in this strangely constituted world? Public opinion. Yes, yes. But what do men like Pretzel care for public opinion? Could they not, if they pleased, buy up all the corn and the oil? If I had a son, never, never should he become a money-lender! I would sooner see him dead at my feet. "Look at my bond," says the money-lender; "ask my debtor if he denies his signature." "Take what you demand," says the judge. And helpless women and children stand by, wringing their hands and weeping tears of blood. The money-lender sees not, hears not. He takes what he demands, and when the Sabbath comes he kneels in church, and prays and humbles himself. It is a cheap way of buying himself off. Though if the truth were known, and if the workings of a man's soul could be brought into view, the heart and the mind of the ruthless schemer would be seen to be full of triumphant figures all the time his lips are moving with meaningless prayer.

Not that Pretzel ever went to church, or ever prayed, or ever knelt to any God but Money. No, no: there was no mock humility about Pretzel. He gloried in his deeds, and when ruin overtook those unfortunate ones who had been drawn into his web, he would heap reproaches upon them for their unworldliness and their want of prudence. It was they who were the wrongers, not he. "See what you have done," he would say; "see what you have brought upon your poor families!" Can a more fiendish taunt be imagined?

Of every person, with one single exception, with whom Pretzel had dealings he got the advantage. That exception was myself. No one but I, in all the town, who had borrowed money of him, could say, "I have gained something from dealing with Pretzel." To hear that, and to be compelled to acknowledge that it was true, cut him to the soul. You may guess how he hated me.

It happened in this way: Old Pretzel did not always wait for customers; if they did not come to him he went to them; he made business, I have heard him say. It was not always, "I beg, I implore of you, good Pretzel, to lend me a hundred forms; it will save me from ruin. For the sake of my wife and children do this good deed!" It was he who sometimes said, "Why don't you borrow two hundred, three hundred, five hundred florins of me? It will help you on. You can buy fresh stock with it, and turn it twice over before I come to you for payment. You will grow rich, instead of being poor all your life. I would not do this for every one, but I take an interest in you. Think of it, for the sake of your wife and children. Think well of it; the money is ready for you, and it won't run away." He would cast his eyes upon a tradesman who was getting along comfortably, and when he had calculated how much he was worth, he would go to him and tempt him to borrow, putting all sorts of baits in his way. And he did it so cleverly that the victim could scarcely ever remember how the whole thing was done, and how it happened that ruin suddenly fell upon him like a clap of thunder.

Pretzel came to me--it was in the first year of Gideon Wolf's apprenticeship; that is how those two became acquainted, by Pretzel visiting my shop. Pretzel's words, when they were uttered in the presence of Gideon Wolf, fell upon a rich soil. Well, he came to me many times, admired my workmanship, admired my stock--I believe he knew to the smallest coin what it would fetch in the market--and would say,

"You ought to have a fine plate-glass window to your shop. It would draw custom. A fine plate-glass front, with glass shelves in it, and your beautiful watches and chains all set out in blue velvet eases. How they would glitter! It would make people's mouths water. Everybody in the town would come to look, and a great many would be tempted to buy. You would do three times the trade you are doing now. You would be able to buy the newest-fashioned goods; you would grow rich."

"But it would cost a great deal of money," I would answer, "to make these alterations."

"What does it matter," he would urge, "how much it would cost if you got it back five times, ten times over?"

"But I haven't any spare cash, Pretzel; all that I am worth lies in my stock. True, I do not owe anything; what I have is all my own."

"Really, Master Fink, you don't owe anybody anything--that is an absolute fact, eh?"

"It is an absolute fact, Pretzel."

Then he would laugh slyly, and say, "An honorable, straightforward man like you could easily borrow what he wants. Ah, how people would stare! They would clap their hands, and say, 'What a wonderful man Master Fink is--what a wonderful, wonderful man!' You would be looked up to, much more than you are now, though you stand well. Yes, Master Fink, such is the power of money that you would be made a magistrate."

I thought, "Ah, if I were a magistrate, and you were brought before me, I would make short work of you, Miser Pretzel." And I wondered to myself why he was so anxious to lend money to me who had always spoken of him as a villainous usurer.

Day after day, week after week, he continued to pester me and try to inflame my ambition with his cunning speech, until it entered my head to set a trap for him. I told him, much as I should like to take his advice, that it was not in my power, because, in an unlucky moment of my life, I had vowed never to borrow money at interest. He opened his eyes very wide at this I don't suppose he ever had such a thing said to him before. He tried to reason me out of my vow, but I said it was of no use, and that nothing should ever tempt me to break it.

"Have you ever known me to forfeit my word?" I asked. "Is it likely, then, that I should break a solemn oath? I admit that it was foolish, that I am bound by it."

He did not annoy me for a little while after this, but more than once I saw him looking in at my shop-window, counting with his eyes the watches and chains and trinkets therein displayed. Ha, ha! He was going to walk straight into the trap. All this time I did not hold my tongue concerning him I spoke of him freely to the neighbors as an abominable usurer, hoping that what I said would reach his ears. Whether it did or not he exhibited no ill-will towards me, but nodded and smiled in a friendly way when we met. And one morning he entered my shop, and said,

"Master Fink, I will do you a service against your will. I will compel you to become a rich man you shall make great profits you shall rise in the town we want men like you to take the direction of affairs. You shall borrow of me the money needed for alterations and improvements, and I will charge you no interest--only, of course, you shall sign a bond to pay me on a stated day. That is but fair."

"Indeed, indeed, I do not care for it," I said.

"Am I not already sufficiently well off?"

"No, you are not," he persisted. "I will do you this kindness, so that people shall say, 'Pretzel is a good fellow; we have been mistaken in him.' Oh, I know what some of them think of me!"

"The devil is never so black as he is painted," I said, saucily.

"Ah, Master Fink," he said, without a trace of displeasure in his face, "you will have your joke, you will have your joke."

"Yes," said I to myself, "and I intend to enjoy it, and profit by it."

But although he urged and urged, I would not immediately do as he wished; I drew him on, and within a week, so eager was he to have his fingers in my pie, he had lent me three thousand florins for two years, without interest. He plumped the money on my counter, and I signed a bond, undertaking to repay it in hard coin on a certain date, and giving Pretzel the power, in case it were not refunded to the minute, to seize my goods and furniture, and sell me up stock and block. In the bond Pretzel had inserted words to the effect that the money was to be handed to him at exactly twelve o'clock in the morning by his own watch.

"Mind," he said, with a little chuckling laugh, "if you are a minute later than twelve o'clock by my watch I shall take possession of all your goods."

"Yes, yes," I said, "I understand. At twelve o'clock on that day you shall receive the money you are kind enough to lend me without interest."

His evil eye never had a slyer, wickeder look in it than when he shook hands with me and wished me good-luck and good-day, leaving his three thousand florins behind him. With his money tied up in a bag I went immediately to the State Bank and deposited it upon interest, and there I let it remain, without Pretzel or any person outside the bank knowing anything of the transaction. From time to time Pretzel looked in, and asked when my plate glass and my new-fashioned goods were to arrive. I put off his questions with an awkwardness which I intended he should notice. He did notice it, and after some time had passed he said,

"The new watches and chains are a long time coming; I am quite anxious to see them. Remember, I lent you the money to purchase them with."

"No," I said, and I pretended to be much confused, "you did not lend me the money to purchase them with; you simply lent me the money. That is stated in the bond, and it is not stated

in what manner I should employ what I borrowed of you. A good speculation offered itself to me, and I have invested in it."

"Master Fink," he said, severely, "it was understood, if the money was spent, that it should be spent in purchasing new stock, so that you might increase your trade."

"I cannot deny it," I answered, "but it was only understood; it was not written down."

"You stand by the bond?"

"To the letter."

"That is well, as far as it goes; but a speculation carries risk with it. How if yours should turn out bad?"

I made a gesture of despair, clasped my hand to my forehead, and said, dolefully,

"I should be ruined! Yet, no; you are my friend; you would never take my goods from me; you would give me time to repair my losses."

His eyes travelled round my shop; there was a malicious expression in his weazen face.

"The devil is never so black as he is painted, is he, Master Fink?" he said, with a wicked grin.

Thereafter he would ask me, whenever he saw me, "And how is the famous speculation getting on, eh?"

"Don't ask me, don't ask me," I would sigh. "How fortunate for me that I am in the hands of a man like yourself--in the hands of a friend! Never have I beheld your money since the day on which you lent it to me."

Which was as true as anything I ever spoke in my life. His money did not trouble me; it was safe enough in the State Bank.

So the first year passed, and six months of the second, Pretzel never ceasing to question me about my famous speculation, and I never ceasing to express my despair. During the last few months he was in the habit of coming to me with his watch in his hand, and saying,

"Master Fink, I wish you to regulate my watch."

And I regulated it for him, on an average, once in every week.

On the day before the money was to be repaid I went to the bank, and drew it out in hard coin, and received, also, the interest--with which interest I purchased, as I had previously determined, the handsome lever-watch I have ever since worn, and the handsome gold chain you see round my neck.

The morning arrived. I had a friend to breakfast with me, who was to witness what was about to take place. Suspecting some trick, and wishing to be prepared for it, I had arranged that this friend was to come to me at seven o'clock in the morning, and to stay till the affair was over. I expected that Pretzel would present himself at about a quarter to twelve, but to my astonishment he entered my shop as half a dozen clocks on my shelves chimed a quarter to ten. He was accompanied by a lawyer.

"Good-morning, Master Fink," he said.

"Good-morning," I said.

Heavens! How cunning and sharp and sly and malicious was his look!

"You know what to-day is?" he asked.

"Yes," I replied, "it is Wednesday."

"Right; it is Wednesday; and the date, Master Fink, the date is that on which you are to repay me my three thousand florins."

"Ah," I cried, "it is true, it is true! How could it have escaped me?"

"That is not my affair. This is my lawyer, Master Fink!"

I bowed to the lawyer, and said to Pretzel,

"You will renew the bond, will you not? You will let the money remain with me for another two years, at the same rate of interest?"

"What!" he cried; "are you mad, or do you think I am?"

"No," I said, in a rueful tone, "I am not mad, but you see the state I am in. Unfortunate--"

unfortunate that I am!"

"That is always the way," he said, appealing to his lawyer--" that is always the way." Then to me, "Is not my demand just?"

"Quite just; but you will continue to be my friend--you will not ruin me!"

He laughed in my face. "Master Fink," he said, "attend, to me. Years before I lent you this money you were in the habit of reviling me and speaking against me. You libelled and scandalized me; you held me up in the blackest light. You were never tired of calling me a villainous old usurer."

"It is true," I groaned, "but I have lived to see my error. You are upright, you are just, you are liberal."

"I lent you my money," he continued, "without interest, to prove to you and to everybody that when you spoke in that way against me you were speaking lies, and that really I am a benevolent man." There was something absolutely diabolical in his voice as he uttered these words. "And even then, when I gave you the money, to my own loss--for how much more profitably it could have been employed!--you threw into my teeth the taunt that the devil is never so black as he is painted." (I groaned again.) "If you have been improvident that is your affair. If you have squandered my money and lost it recklessly, you will be spoken of as a knave, and you will forfeit the honorable name you have been so proud of." (I gave two long distinct groans.) "I have come now for my money, and if you are not prepared to pay me three thousand honest florins, I will strip your house and your shop of every article they contain."

"No, no, Pretzel," I moaned, "you do not mean it!"

"I do mean it! You shall not have a bed to lie upon, nor a spoon to eat with. You will be a beggar, a rogue, a cheat! Ask this lawyer whether I am standing on my rights."

I looked at the lawyer.

"By the bond you have signed," he said, "which Pretzel holds in his hands, if you do not pay him three thousand florins he is entitled to carry away everything movable within these walls."

"And I will do it!" screamed Pretzel, working himself up into a state of frantic exultation; "I will do it! I can see that you have not got the money--that you are not prepared to pay it--that you have squandered it like a thief! You shall suffer for calling me a villainous old usurer; you shall suffer for saying that I am not so black as I am painted! Do you see those vans at the door? They are mine--they are mine--and I'll strip the place to the bare walls, you honest, honorable man!"

Sure enough, there at my door stood two large, strong vans, and I strove to squeeze out a few tears at my impending ruin as Pretzel pointed to them and flourished the bond in my face.

"Are you quite determined to show me no mercy?" I asked, with a succession of such heavy sighs that I thought to myself if I had not been a watch-maker I might have been a fine actor.

"Hear him!" he cried; "he implores mercy from a villainous old usurer! Why, he must be a fool as well as a rogue!"

"Well, then," I said, and I threw myself, quite heart-broken, into a chair, "come at twelve o'clock, when the money is due, and in the mean time I will see if I can get my friends to help me."

"It is twelve o'clock now," said Pretzel.

"Nay," I replied, looking round at my clocks, which were ticking merrily away, "it wants exactly two hours to noon. The correct time is five minutes to ten."

"By my watch," said Pretzel, pulling it out of his pocket, "it is exactly five minutes to twelve."

I looked at his watch; the hands pointed to five minutes to twelve; there was no disputing it.

"Your watch is wrong," I said; "it is two hours fast."

"I say nothing to that," said Pretzel, eagerly watching the second hands, "you yourself have regulated it for several months past."

"Twenty-two times I have regulated it," I said, "and yesterday it was in perfect order."

"One minute gone," said Pretzel; "four minutes to twelve. I demand my money, my three thousand florins!"

"Your watch is two hours fast; how it came so Heaven only knows. You cannot demand your money till twelve o'clock by the right time."

"You are wrong. The bond says twelve o'clock by my watch. It does not stipulate that my watch

shall keep right time. Read the words for yourself. You stand by the bond, you know, to the letter--the exact words you spoke to me. Another minute gone; three minutes to twelve. I demand my money, my three thousand florins!"

"But, Pretzel," I implored, "you cannot mean it. You will surely not cast me into the streets--you will not make a beggar of me!"

"Oh no," he cried, "I will not make a beggar of you--I will not cast you into the streets! I have so much reason to love you, have I not? As for your ruin, you have brought it on yourself. This is your signature, not mine. It is your honesty that is at stake, not mine. The villainous old usurer, the devil that is not so black as he is painted, wants only his rights--nothing more. Two minutes to twelve; another minute gone. I demand my money, my three thousand florins!"

"Bring me writing materials," I said to my friend, in a despairing tone, "and I will write Miser Pretzel an order on the bank for three thousand florins."

"I will accept no order on the bank," said, Pretzel, "for two reasons. One is, because I should find it was not worth the paper it was written on; and the other, because it is stated in the bond that the money is to be repaid to me in hard coin."

"You insist upon it, Pretzel?"

"Yes, I insist upon it. Another minute gone; one minute to twelve."

I tapped him gently on his breast, within which I verily believe beat the cunningest heart that mortal was ever cursed with; I made him a low bow I smiled benignly; and saying, "What must be, must be," I took from a drawer the bag with the three thousand florins in it, and put it into his hands.

"There is your money," I said, "the exact sum, in hard coin, which I drew from the State Bank yesterday. Give me my bond, that I may cancel it."

He turned white, then yellow, then green; he trembled with rage; he gasped for breath.

"You forced your money upon me," I said, "as you have forced it upon others. You would have ruined me, as you have ruined others. I have made you pay for it. Out of a spirit of revenge you laid a snare for me, and thought to entangle me in it; and now you find yourself caught in your own trap. Instead of biting, you are bit. I put your money into the State Bank, at fair interest; I knew it was quite safe there. I never touched it, never used a florin of it, and with the interest I received yesterday I bought this handsome chain and this handsome lever watch, which I shall wear as long as I live, to remind me always that honesty is the best policy. Never, never shall it be set two hours fast or two hours slow to entrap the innocent and unsuspecting. Count the money, Pretzel, count the money; you will find it right to a florin; and you can carry it away in those beautiful strong vans you have gone to the expense of hiring for my benefit."

Shaking as if he had an ague, Pretzel counted the money and flung the bond at my feet.

"You do not require me any longer," said the lawyer to him, with an ill-concealed smile. I saw that he enjoyed the joke, and that very soon the whole town would be laughing at the capital trick Master Fink had played upon Miser Pretzel.

"Wait a moment, please," I said to the lawyer; "it is not yet quite finished. In your presence I present Pretzel the money-lender with a small account he owes me, and I request immediate payment of the same.

"Account!" snarled Pretzel; "I owe you nothing."

"Pardon me. Here is the account, with the items fairly and properly set down. Twenty-two times have I regulated your watch for you, at your own request. Why you wanted it so often examined and set in order when nothing was the matter with it was your affair, not mine; I sit at my counter to attend to my customers. I charge you one florin a time--in all, twenty-two florins."

"You are an extortionist," he said; and if he could have scorched me to death with his evil eye it would have afforded him, I have no doubt, the greatest satisfaction; "I shall not pay you a florin of this false account."

"It is a faithful account," I said, "and if it is not paid before twelve o'clock to-morrow--by my watch, not yours--I shall have you summoned in the Public Court. You may take my word that I mean what I say. Good-morning."

"Master Fink," he said, with the look of a snake, "one day I may be even with you."

"Till then," I said, "farewell."

From that hour we had never exchanged a single word. He prospered, and was feared and hated, and well did I know that if the opportunity ever offered itself he would deal me a deadly blow.

And this was the man with whom Gideon Wolf was consorting. Nothing but evil could come of such a friendship. But it was of no use my interfering between those two rascals; I should have been laughed to scorn by the pair of them.

It was otherwise with Katrine Loebeg. I had been kind to her; when she was a little one I had walked in the fields with her, and we had been merry together. I could speak to her as a father would to his child; I could warn her; I could enlighten her as to Gideon Wolf's time character. Ah! I did not think of the glamour which love sheds over the eyes of the young--not only over the eyes, over the reason, over the judgment. Had I reflected a little, had I recalled the memory of the past, when I myself was in love, I might have taken a different view.

I met Katrine the very next evening in the public street. I spoke to her, cautiously and tenderly. She was a timid, confiding girl, with a gentle voice, but the moment I ventured to say one word against Gideon Wolf she turned upon me like a fury. I never supposed her capable of such spirit. It was the passion of a mother defending her young. Ah, woman, woman! So weak, so strong, so fierce, so tender! It puts me out of patience to think of it. A bundle of sticks, some inflexible as steel bars, some supple as blades of grass--that well represents the qualities of her nature. What can be said of a man who, with some knowledge of the world, deliberately uses these astonishing, these beautiful contrasts to his own base ends? I have my own opinion on such matters. Perhaps I am old-fashioned. If so, thank God for old fashions! May they never entirely die out!

"What do you mean," cried Katrine, "first Anna, then you, by coming to me, and speaking against Gideon?"

"Anna has spoken to you, then," I said.

"Yes, she has," said Katrine, "and said such things of Gideon as she ought to be ashamed of. She deserves to be punished for it, and so I told her. I am not good enough for him, not half good enough. Is he not already sufficiently persecuted, sufficiently unfortunate? But if all the world rose against him, I would stand by his side, if he would let me, and die for him! Yes, gladly would I die for him!"

Fool that I was! Not to know that if you want to increase a woman's love for a man, all you have to do is to speak to her against him! I soon discovered my error, and was compelled to confess to myself that I had done Gideon Wolf a good turn in his suit with Katrine Loebeg. So may a man himself, by an act which he has not well considered, frustrate his own good intentions.

What thrilled me through and through was to see Pretzel the Miser, who had been secretly watching us, go to Katrine when I left her, and walk side by side with her in confidential converse. There came to my mind the picture of Eve and the Serpent in the Garden of Eden.

Well, the best service we could now render to Katrine was to hold our peace. Heaven knows, things were bad enough; to have set the whole town talking would have made them worse.

CHAPTER VII.

GIDEON WOLF PROPOSES TO ADOPT MASTER FINK AS HIS FATHER.

On Saturdays, unless there were repairs to be executed which were urgently required to be done, there was no work in my shop after three o'clock. During the afternoon I generally made up my accounts and balanced my books for the week--a task which afforded me satisfaction, for it was seldom I did not find myself a trifle richer at the end of the week than I had been at the beginning. A business is a real pleasure to a man when that is the case.

Gideon Wolf, the moment the hour began to strike, would lay down his tools as though they were red-hot, jump from his seat, whisk off his apron, and be out of the shop before the clock had done striking. You can always tell a good and cheerful workman by the manner of his proceedings when the clock proclaims that his day's toil is at an end.

While I was at my accounts, Gideon would be enjoying himself somewhere after his own fashion, and I would see nothing more of him till supper-time. He was frequently late at his work in the morning, but he was the soul of punctuality at his meals. I will say that of him.

On the Saturday after I had spoken to Katrine with such ill effect, I was casting up my books as usual, and coming to Gideon Wolf's account found him indebted to me to the tune of one

hundred and eighty florins. "He will never pay me," I thought. "The debt is not even doubtful; it is bad. Well, it is a good thing I can afford to lose the money." Just at that moment Gideon himself entered and stood before me. "Something is in the wind," thought I. "If he comes to borrow more money he may save himself the trouble of asking. I do not give him another florin." And I went on with my adding-up.

"Master Fink," said Gideon, "I wish to speak to you."

"Yes, Gideon, yes," I said, drawing a double line with my ruler, a thick one and a thin one; I kept my books very neatly, and often turned over the leaves with pride. "What have you to say?"

"I am not getting along well, Master Fink."

"That is plain," I said, with my eyes on his account.

"I might go on like this for fifty years," he continued, "and I should be no better off then than I am now."

"It really appears so," I said; "and to be honest with you, Gideon, if all the people I had dealings with resembled you, I should myself be no better off."

I said this quite calmly and dispassionately. It is hurtful to a man to be forever angry about things he cannot alter for the better, be he on the right or the wrong side with respect to them.

"I have served you faithfully, Master Fink. As apprentice and workman I have worked for you for more than ten years."

"Yes," said I, "it is more than ten years since you first entered my shop." And there rose before me the vision of his mother, my old sweetheart, as she appeared to me ten years ago, to beg me to take her son as my apprentice and make an upright man of him. Conscientiously had I endeavored to do my duty by him, to guide him in the straight path, to make him truthful, industrious, honest, and brave. As well might I have striven to alter the nature of a fox, and to instil into the heart of that treacherous animal noble and faithful qualities. Sadly did I confess that his mother's cherished dreams of the future could never be realized, and that she would one day awake to the bitter reality.

"Master Fink," said Gideon, the years I have worked for you have been wasted. I stand here today without a florin, compelled to do without many things I desire to possess."

"It is a common calamity," I remarked "all men suffer from it."

"We are sent into the world," said Gideon, gloomily, "with a common right, the poor as well as the rich, to enjoy what there is in it."

"Ah, ah," thought I, "is this young man a member of one of those secret societies I have read of, whose aim it is to root up the very foundations of society?" And I said aloud, "Yes, to enjoy what belongs to us, what we have worked for and honestly earned. Proceed, and leave politics out of the question. You say that the ten years you have worked for me have been as good as wasted. Have you not learned a trade?"

"My pockets are empty," he retorted. "Suppose that I wished to settle in life--" He paused suddenly.

I took up his words according to my understanding of them. "All, then, is arranged between you and Katrine Loebeg."

"What do you know about her?" he cried, with a dark flush in his face. "Why do you mix up our names?"

The rascal! I could have knocked his head against the wall!

"Be careful, Gideon, be careful," I said, half warningly, half threateningly "more is known about you and Katrine Loebeg than you seem to be aware of. People are not blind."

He bit his lips. "What there is between Katrine and me is our business, and concerns no one but ourselves."

"You are in error. Katrine was born in this town, and she is an orphan. She is regarded with eyes of affection by many, and I could name worthy parents who would gladly receive her as a child of their own. See that you deal honestly by her. You did not finish what you were about to say. Suppose you wished to settle in life--"

"How should I be able to do so? If I set up for myself as a watch-maker in this place, either you or I would have to put up our shutters. There is not room enough for two."

"The world is wide, Gideon."

"But if I wish to stop here?"

"Stop here, in Heaven's name! Who prevents you?"

"I did not expect you would mock me, Master Fink," and from biting his lips he took to biting his nails. "I have a proposition to make to you. Having worked for you so long it is natural I should look for some advancement. I will work for you for two more years at the present rate, and at the expiration of that time you shall admit me as a partner in your business. You have no son to take care of you in your old age. I will be your son; I will take care of you. Then all will be well with us."

"The murder is out," I thought. "Now I will see how far he will go."

"In plain words, Gideon," I said, "you propose to adopt me as your father. How can I thank you for your generous proposal! Of course it would have to be a settled agreement between us."

"Of course," he said, eagerly.

I remained silent for a little while, with my head resting on my hand, and I saw, without looking up, that his eyes never left my face. "The villain!" I thought. "He thinks the hook is already in my gills. I will remain silent just long enough to make him believe he has me safe. A fine idea, truly, to take this envious, idle knave as my partner. In three years I should find myself penniless, without a roof to my head. If it were not for his mother, whom I once loved, I would bid him pack off without another word. I am to allow him to adopt me as his father, am I? I am to put myself into his charge, for all the world as though I needed a keeper! A lunatic, indeed, I should prove myself to be by so doing. He must think that mankind were made for him to prey upon. Do I not put up with his blunders and bad workmanship--ay, and with something worse which I have never given utterance to? Because I am silent on the matter, he does not suspect that I know him to be a thief, and that I could send him to prison for what he has done. But for his mother's sake I will spare him. I will not bring shame and disgrace upon the gray hairs of the woman who brought into my life its most beautiful dreams, and who made the mistake of choosing a vagabond instead of me. She has suffered enough, and my hand shall not be raised against her. Ah, you gambler and schemer, Gideon Wolf, I could find it in my heart to strike you where you stand!"

Thus I thought and mused, while Gideon stood before me, reckoning up the chickens I had hatched, and calculating how many gold-pieces they would sell for.

"Gideon Wolf," I said, in as gentle a tone as I could command, "your proposal springs from a heart beating with consideration for your old master. It displays your nature in a beautiful light. But have you fully considered the sacrifice you propose to make; have you debated the subject with yourself in a calm and serious spirit; are you quite prepared to waste two of your most valuable years in my service, before you can hope to reap the reward to which you believe yourself entitled?"

"I have fully considered," he said, with gracious arrogance; "I am quite prepared."

"There are so many things," I said, laughing inwardly, "that may have escaped one of less experience than yourself. In human life so many unforeseen circumstances occur! I am hale and hearty and strong; yet unexpectedly the angel of death may call me to my account."

He held his hand before his eyes, which were as dry as a stone.

"Do not speak of such a calamity," he said, in a broken voice; "it cuts me to the heart. But even then you could provide for me. You are alone in the world; you have no family to whom you would care to leave your possessions."

"And I might leave them to you!" I cried, in the tone of a man upon whom a blessed inspiration had fallen. "I might make a will, constituting you my heir! True, true that would be the best way--by far the best way."

His face glowed with exultation. "You are too good, my master," he said, drawing his breath quickly. "You think of everything. It would never have occurred to me."

"How could such a thing be possible?" I cried, in assumed indignation at the injustice he was doing himself. "You are the last person who would calculate upon gaining anything by my death. But still consider, Gideon, what you might be throwing away by tying yourself to me. You have seen but little of the world, and you do not know how many lonely rich men there are who would gladly throw themselves into your arms if you made them understand what you are ready to sacrifice for them."

Certainly this young man was fool as well as rogue, for he accepted every word I spoke as the utterance of sincerity.

"Why waste more time?" he asked, with a complacent glance at that portion of my stock which was displayed to attract customers--among which were six fine fat gold lever watches, eighteen-carat hunters; six others, open-faced; four lady's dainty toys, with enamelled cases, set with diamonds a couple of dozen silver watches, with perfect movements and one marvel of workmanship, which told not only the time but the day of the year, the name and date of the

month, and the changes of the moon. Then there was a fine collection of trinkets, chains, and rings, brooches, and the like, all paid for with the labor of my hands. And Gideon Wolf was standing beneath the fruitful vines, with his mouth wide open, waiting for the grapes to fall into it. But he was not the only fox in the world who met with disappointment. "Why waste more time?" he asked. "I am a man to be trusted, and what I mean I say. After all the years I have passed in your house, it would be black ingratitude in me to desert you in your old age."

"Am I so very old, Gideon?" I murmured.

"You are not young, Master Fink."

"But I feel sometimes as if I still had a little strength left in me; I do indeed, Gideon."

"The strongest are cut down when they least expect it," he said, showing me the whites of his eyes.

"There is Anna," I said; "she has been with me a long time, and her heart is full of kindness towards me. She would take care of me."

"Of what use are women?" exclaimed Gideon, scornfully. "They are mere playthings."

I sighed, "Alas, for poor Katrine!" and then said, "You have no cause of complaint against me, Gideon. You have been well and justly treated in my house. You acknowledge it?"

"Yes, Master Fink, I acknowledge it."

"You do not, I am sure, harbor any uncharitableness towards your old master."

"I should despise myself if I did."

"Fair wages all the time you were my apprentice, Gideon. This home is not to be despised. It is not a palace, it is true, but it is better than many palaces. The rain does not come through the roof and your bed--it is a comfortable bed, Gideon?"

"Yes, it is a comfortable bed."

"Then Anna is a good cook--one in a thousand. You have always had plenty to eat."

"I have nothing to complain of, Master Fink, nothing whatever. You have been a good and kind master, and I am going to show my gratitude. It is a bargain--you consent to my proposition. We commence from this day."

"Nay," I said, deeming it time to end the comedy; "it takes two to make a bargain;" and I rose and made him a low bow, just the kind of bow I made to Pretzel the Miser a good many years before, when he came into my shop, ready to strip me of every stick I possessed. "I will never consent to the sacrifice; it would be a reproach to me all my life. No, Gideon, I will not be adopted as your father; I will bear my burden alone. You shall grow rich in an easier way; you will find it, I make no doubt, for you are a sharp customer. Perhaps Miser Pretzel will make you his heir." Gideon's face, at the mention of Pretzel's name, was as white as milk, and I was confirmed in a suspicion which had crossed my mind, that Pretzel had a hand in counselling him to the end he wished to gain. "He is rolling in money--and so very, very generous! He once tried to do me a good turn. Or perhaps the invisible gentleman you play cards with in the middle of the night may, some time or other, lose a large sum of money to you, and bring it to you in a number of sacks. How wonderful that would be, would it not? So let what has been spoken between us be forgotten, as though it had never happened. And when you are rich," I said, closing the book in which his account was entered, and giving it a little tap, "and riding in your carriage, you shall pay me what you owe me, and get out of my debt. I hope you will give me your custom, as a slight return for the just treatment you have received in my house."

His face was dreadful to look at. Rage, terror, venom, in their most baleful aspects, were expressed in the play of his features. Had I been a weak old fellow I think he would not have restrained the impulse to put his fingers round my throat but he was aware of my strength, and we were both spared unpleasant consequences.

"So," he said, slowly, "you have been playing with me; you have been mocking me; you have been acting the part of spy and eavesdropper. You treat me as you would treat a dog that you can kick about at your pleasure. Because you are rich and I am poor, you think you have the right to crush me under your feet. Oh, if I had the power!--"

And he ground his teeth, and left me without another word.

It was a hard punishment I had dealt out to him, but he deserved it. He was a rascal from the hairs of his head to the soles of his feet.

CHAPTER VIII.

MASTER FINK RESOLVES TO UNDERTAKE A JOURNEY.

All that night Gideon Wolf occupied my mind. I thought of him and dreamed of him, and when I rose in the morning it seemed to me that I had a duty to perform which it would be a sin to neglect. Anna was very much astonished when I told her after breakfast, Gideon not being present, that I was going a journey on the following day, and should be absent for a week.

"How will you be able to live away from home?" she exclaimed. "You have never slept a night out of the house all the years I have been with you."

"A proof," said I, "that I deserve a holiday."

"Who will air your sheets for you? Who will cook your meals? You will come back as thin as the leg of a fly."

"I shall enjoy your cooking all the more when it is placed before me again. Do not fear, Anna--I shall be able to manage. It is not pleasure that calls me away; it is duty. I shall take only my knapsack with me, and I shall leave the place in your charge."

"It will be taken good care of," she said wiping her eyes; the foolish creature had been actually shedding tears at the thought of my leaving her for a short time; "only I will not have Gideon Wolf in the house while you are absent. I will not cook a meal for him--no, Master Fink, not for all the money you can offer me; and I will not sleep in the house alone with him."

"Then," I said, by no means displeased at the opportunity she offered me, "I shall tell Gideon that he must get lodgings elsewhere. It may be, Anna, that he will not remain with us much longer."

"I shall dance for joy," she said, nodding her head a great many times, "when he goes for good. It is not for good that he stays."

If Anna was surprised at my resolution, Gideon Wolf was filled with consternation upon my telling him that there would be no business done in the shop for a week.

"What is to become of me?" he cried.

"I really cannot tell you," I replied. "It must be quite plain to you that there is not much love lost between us. Our conversation yesterday was not the pleasantest in the world, and you left me in a very insolent manner. You said things which I shall not easily forget. You are a man, and you must shift for yourself in the best way you can. I do not presume to dictate to you, or to offer you advice."

"Master Fink," he said, cringing, "I am sorry for the words I spoke when I left you yesterday. I will beg your pardon if you wish me to."

"I do not wish it. You are humble now because you are frightened. It may be, Gideon, when I return from my journey, that I may still be disposed to act as your friend; I tell you honestly that it depends upon circumstances and what happens to me during the time I am away."

"Where are you going?" he asked, with a look of keen curiosity.

"I shall not tell you; I am my own master, and my movements are free. It remains for me to inform you that you cannot remain in this house during my absence."

"What! You turn me out-of-doors!"

"It can scarcely be regarded in that light," I said; "you will not be in want of a bed. Anna will be the master here, and she will not have you near her. You have managed to offend her in some way, and she declares she will not cook a meal for you for all the money I could offer her."

"She is a cat!" snarled Gideon.

"Well, at all events she has a set of long, sharp nails, and I should advise you to be civil to her. You remember what I told you yesterday about the invisible gentleman you play cards with in the middle of the night. Anna has got scent of it, and she vows she will not sleep in the house with you and that--that strange friend of yours, unless she has a man to protect her. You see, Gideon, there is no help for it."

"I have no money to pay for lodgings elsewhere," he said. "Are you going to leave me to

starve?"

"No; here are two watches to clean and regulate; let them be in first-rate going order at the end of the week, and I will pay you more than your food and lodging will cost you. As for starving at any time, are you not an able-bodied man, with a strong pair of hands, and a good trade at your fingers' ends? No man who is willing to work need starve in this town."

The watches I gave him to repair were of little value, and I could easily have replaced them in case they were not returned to me, so the next morning, which was Monday, I affixed to my shutters a notice that I was called away on important business, and should be absent for a week. Then I shook hands with my old Anna, who arranged my knapsack for me, and bade her good-bye. She was much affected. Had I been her husband or her son she could not have exhibited a deeper concern at my departure; her tenderness touched me to the heart. Something else worked also upon my feelings. There was an appetizing fragrance in my knapsack proceeding from some delicacy which Anna had cooked for me; I could not help smelling it, although my nose was in the middle of my face, and not at the back of my head.

CHAPTER IX.

RELATES WHAT KIND OF HARVEST MASTER FINK GATHERED IN THE COURSE OF HIS JOURNEY.

The duty I had set myself to perform was to speak to Gideon Wolf's mother concerning his doings. I would tell her, gently and kindly, that he needed counsel from some one to whom he would listen with respect. Who was better able to enforce this advice than the mother who had nursed him at her breast? She should learn all about Pretzel the Miser's character, and how that association with a wretch so vile could be productive of nothing but evil. I would speak to her also about Katrine Loebeg, and beg her to save that innocent young girl from shame. Moreover, I was prepared to advance her a small sum of money, with which her son could set up business in another town, at some distance from me, where there was no watch-maker, and where one could do a fair trade. I would lend the money to her, not to Gideon. If she repaid me, well if not, well. It would not ruin me. With industry, and with his mother living with him to attend to his wants and do the household work, he might in time get better thoughts in his head, and become a respectable member of society. This would I do for my old sweetheart's sake.

The direction, therefore, I took was towards the village in which I had passed my youthful days and dreamed my youthful dreams, the village of which Louisa was once the pride and the beauty, and in which she still lived, a broken-down woman, old before her time, on whom the years had pressed with a bitter hand. One friend and another came out of their shops and houses to shake hands with me and ask questions about my journey, for the knapsack on my shoulders excited their curiosity. They all had kind and neighborly words for me, and nodded and smiled when I told them I was going to take a holiday and do a little business at the same time. Never till that day did I know how much I was respected by my neighbors, and how sincere was the affection they entertained for me. These feelings were mutual. There are memorials which grow in silence and stillness, of the growth of which we are almost unconscious until some action of ours out of the ordinary groove brings them into view and then there is suddenly revealed to us a full-bearing tree of love or hate. One good woman insisted upon my stopping at her door. Running to the rear of her house and running quickly back again, she brought me a beautiful white rose, which she stuck in my coat.

"Going a-courting, I do believe," she said, with a merry smile.

"I am past that long ago," I replied.

"No, indeed," she said "if you cared to ask, you would not be single at the end of the year."

"Well, then," I said to her little girl, about six years old, who was clinging to her gown, "will you marry me, little maid?" The child hid her face in her mother's dress, and blushed as if she had been fifteen. "There now," I said, "what did I tell you?"

I stooped and kissed the little maid, and she gave me two kisses for my one.

"If that answer doesn't satisfy you," said the gay-hearted mother, "you are hard to please. Mind! I shall keep you to it!"

So we parted, blithely.

Pleasant bits these to meet with by the waysides. And the best of it is, even the humblest and

poorest may earn them if they are so minded.

The knapsack on my shoulders was the same which had accompanied me on my youthful travels, and though I had not worn it since that time, it felt like an old friend to me. I had determined to walk the best part of the way, out of a sentimental desire to renew acquaintance with scenes I had not set eyes on for five and twenty years. I knew that I should be overtaken on the road by carts and wagons on which I could get a lift when I was tired.

There are others besides myself who, in their middle or old age, have started upon such an excursion, and who have retraced, as it were, the roads of life with feelings of pensive sadness and wonder at the change that has come over them. I have read of countries in which people live at such a rapid rate that everything in them is constantly changing its condition; where in a year the roads are so altered that you cannot recognize them as the same over which you travelled but yesterday; where dwellings are being continually pulled down and built up again; where villages grow into towns, and towns into cities, with magical swiftness; where farm-houses disappear, to make room for mansions; and where the people, young and old, are afflicted with such a restlessness in the soles of their feet that they keep running from this spot to that, and from that to this, in their eager haste to acquire land and money and houses. It is not so with us, and despite the grand talk about the march of progress and the advance of civilization, I do not believe we are any the worse off for it. We move slowly along, and there are not many who desert their native place in their youth, and pass their manhood in a distant spot. True, I had done so, but there was a heart-reason for it. I have no doubt, if Louisa had chosen me for her mate, I should have been in the old village at this moment, surrounded by my children. In the countries of which I speak wanderers like myself are deprived of a sad and sweet pleasure, such as stole into my heart as I passed and recognized old familiar scenes made dear to me by the years which had passed since they and I last greeted each other. For, indeed, it was not only I who greeted them, it was they, also, that greeted me. The trees, the woods, the farm-houses, the vineyards, the wayside inns, the scores of familiar landmarks which met my eyes, all seemed to say, "Ah, old fellow, here you are once more. We have often wondered what had become of you. Where have you been hiding yourself all this long while? We are glad to see you alive and well. Welcome--welcome!" Yes, it is true, they all welcomed me, and were rejoiced to see me, and I waved my hands and smiled at them, in response to the spiritual greeting which brought gladness and sadness to my soul. A sweet spirit of repose pervaded my being, and even in my sadness there was no unhappiness. Here was an old windmill, within view of the moving sails of which I had rested five-and-twenty years ago, thinking of Louisa Wagner; here the great stone, embedded in the earth and covered with moss, upon which I sat. The sails were revolving now, and the sight brought back to me the very thoughts which agitated me then. Ah, how I suffered, how I suffered! "Take with you all my hopes," thus did I muse at that long distant time--"take with you all my hopes, and grind them into dust." And now, as I sat upon the ancient, moss-covered stone, the heart's storm was hushed, the tempest of the soul was stilled. I breathed a prayer, and was grateful. That is the most beautiful time of a man's life, when he feels at peace with himself and the world. So might an aged father, after a long and varied life, gaze upon his old wife and beautiful children, and say, "Thank God!" Everything I saw contributed to my enjoyment. The orchards in which the plums were ripening and the apples blushing like young maids, the fir-trees bending solemnly above me in the heights, the hedges, the hay-ricks, the cattle drinking in the lowlands, the ponds in which the ducks were swimming, the fowls scratching at the earth, the brooks, the streams, the pigeons flying to their steeped houses, the very children who looked at me as I passed--all were the same as I had seen in my younger days. They had not grown an hour older, not an hour. There came a troop of youngsters on their way home from school, caps and frocks and boots and books, all the same. They followed me, singing an evening song, and I rewarded them and made them happy. A cow stood with her head over a fence, and gazed at me with mild, serious eyes. Two young colts, running towards me with side-twistings of their bodies, suddenly stopped, transfixed. And there was the inn at which I had rested for the night, and the wife of the innkeeper, with a baby in her arms. All the same--all the same--young and sweet and beautiful as in the days gone by. Ah, what a pleasure to me was that journey, and what reflections passed through my mind as I thought of the more pregnant journey I had taken on the roads of life since I had torn myself from my native village! It is good occasionally to give one's self up to these thoughts. At such times the trouble and vexation of our days sink into insignificance, and are of less importance than the bird which flies in the air, than the leaf which flutters in the wind. At such times we learn the truest lessons.

It was soon over, that excursion of fifty miles, as all things are and shall be, for time is but a breath; and on the morning of the third day I entered the village in which I was born.

I made my way at once to the cottage in which Louisa had resided with her parents. It was inhabited by strangers. Upon inquiry I learned that she lived in a hut on the farther outskirts of the village. I recognized no one; no one recognized me. I went to my old cottage, the cottage in which my father and grandfather and great-grandfather had lived, and in which I had soled and heeled Louisa's boots. It was now a little shop in which sweetmeats and children's toys and cakes were sold. I asked the woman to allow me to go through the rooms, and told her I was born there.

"Then you must be Gustave Fink," she said.

"Yes," I answered, "I am Gustave Fink."

It was supposed, I discovered, that I had made a great fortune, and that I was rich enough to

buy up the entire village. This impression was confirmed by my purchasing, at a cost of less than half-a-florin, toys and cakes for all the children who were looking at the treasures in the window. But it seemed to me, after the first greeting, that the woman gazed on me with displeasure, as on a man who had committed some grievous wrong. I dismissed the fancy. What earthly grounds could there have been for such a feeling?

From my old house I went to the church, and lived over again the Sabbath morning walk I had taken with Louisa, in her new cotton dress and the bit of new ribbon at her throat. I read the inscriptions on the tombstones, and was strangely affected. Many whom I had known had passed away years ago. All these years at peace, with the grass and the wild-flowers growing over them, while all around the hearts of men and women were still throbbing with wild desires, with unsatisfied yearnings, with longings and temptations. Ah, what a lesson, what a lesson! Wait but till to-morrow, when death's icy hand shall stop the beating of the pulses, when the great king, Dust, shall claim them for his own! How blind, how blind! If men would but kneel and sincerely pray, and hold out the kindly hand to their fellows! If they would but learn the lesson aright!

The simplest flower teaches it. Behold me, radiant, blooming, bright-eyed, perfect in outward form and in every hidden vein. It is the summer, and warm breezes kiss me, and the life-giving sun shines upon me, and I live--I live--I live! It is the winter, and I am dead. Seek me in vain I am crumbling into dust.

But the seed remains.

So shall the seeds of good deeds remain, and blossom into flower.

The church door was open. I entered, and knelt and prayed.

CHAPTER X.

MASTER FINK HAS AN INTERVIEW WITH THE WOMAN HE LOVED.

An hour past noon I stood before Louisa Wolf's hovel. It was nothing more; it would have been mockery to call it a cottage.

I looked in at the window it was almost bare of furniture, and I recognized that whoever inhabited it must have a hard fight to keep body and soul together. And in the room was an old, old woman--none other than Louisa Wolf.

She was but forty-five, but she looked seventy when she opened the door to my knock.

She fell back when she saw me, as though she had received a mortal wound. I hurried forward to support her, but she thrust me fiercely off, and retreated a step or two. I entered without invitation, and surveyed with wonder and compassion the miserable apartment. When, after this melancholy survey, I looked at Louisa Wolf, I was astonished to observe that a dark frown had settled on her face, and that she was regarding me with aversion. I had not long to wait before I was enlightened as to the cause of this unwelcome and unexpected reception.

"What do you do here?" she muttered. "What do you do here?"

"I have made a long journey," I said, "especially to see you."

"How have I deserved so great an honor," she asked, her eyes flashing scorn at me, "from one so powerful and rich? You have something to say to me--of course you have, else why should you have troubled yourself to come to me? Is what you have to say about a man or a woman, Gustave Fink?"

"It is about your son Gideon," I replied.

"About my dear son Gideon," she cried "I guessed as much, I guessed as much! It is for evil you are here--you are capable of nothing else. Have you come to complain of my boy? Have you come to set a mother against her son? Well done, well done, Gustave Fink! Have you come to tell me that Gideon ought to work twenty hours a day for you instead of eighteen, and that he does not pay his debt to you quick enough to satisfy your grasping soul? How is it possible, when you starve him, when you cheat him, when you rob him of his rest? Is that the way to treat the man who has slaved for you, who has worked his fingers to the bone for you, who has made you rich, and who brings all the custom to your shop? You would have been in the gutter had it not been

for the exertions of my noble boy, who found out too late that he was bound to a monster without a heart. Did you think I was ignorant of your wicked doings? Evil actions such as yours cannot be forever hidden. Go, go, or I shall strike you!"

And indeed she raised her feeble hand to put her threat into execution.

I comprehended instantly the lying and backbiting that had been going on, and the kind of character that villain Gideon had been giving me all the time he had eaten my bread and been sheltered under my roof. This was the return he had made for my kindness and consideration. Where could that young man have got his secret and wicked mind from? Not from his mother, whose heart had been always open to tender impressions, and who, the moment she saw me, could not help speaking frankly. It was the father who had bestowed upon his son the curse of his venomous nature. Heavens! What some parents have to answer for! There must have been a time in the world when human creatures were suckled at the teats of treacherous animals.

How could I be angry with the unfortunate woman? I pitied her--from my heart I pitied her. What a fate was hers! First the father, then the son. She was born to be deceived. She put her trust in rocks that wounded her body and brought anguish to her soul. In what way was it all to end?

My mission was useless, I saw that clearly enough, and I was almost tempted to exclaim, "Never again will I attempt to do good to any living creature!" I had been animated by the best intentions, and they were turned as poisonous arrows against me. After what I had heard I was convinced that Louisa Wolf would put a wrong construction upon every word I uttered concerning her son. Her mother's love was too strong a shield for me to hope to produce any good effect upon it in my desire to assist her. Perhaps it was as well; it was labor saved. Her son's nature was too bad to be altered for the better; it was rotten to the core.

But I was desirous to ascertain the full extent of his misrepresentations.

"You know, then," I said, "how much your son is indebted to me."

My amazement was great when she mentioned a sum it would have taken him twenty years to repay.

"Oh, I know, I know!" she cried, in terrible agitation, invoking, by the movement of her hands, Heaven's imprecations on my head. "You have set it all down against him, every florin, and added devil's interest, so as to make him your slave for life. From the first week he became your apprentice you brought him in your debt, and you continued to do so day after day, week after week, till his time was out. He could not leave you as he wished to do, because you had in your false books page upon page of figures, which you told him he must clear off. You threatened him with prison if he left in your debt. You would like me to believe that it is not true--you would like me to believe that you are an honorable, good man, and that my son is a thief; but, Gustave Fink, you can no longer deceive me. There was a time--but it is past I have been warned against you. My son has told me--yes, he has told me in his letters that one day you would seek me out, and endeavor to make me believe that he is worse than you are yourself. You can save the lies; keep them to use on some other poor woman. Where is Heaven's justice that such men as you prosper, while honest, upright men are made to suffer? Gideon might dispute the debt--he might take you before the judges, and say, 'My master is a rogue his accounts are false; he makes me largely in debt to him because he does not wish me to leave his service.' Of what use would it be? A poor man against a rich man--we know what that comes to in law. And you have made people think you are so good. Kind Master Fink! Benevolent Master Fink! That is how they speak of you--those who are not acquainted with your real character. You would have had *me* believe it by sending me money from time to time, and putting down twice the sum in your books against Gideon. You have done yourself no good; every florin you have sent me I have sent back to my poor boy yes, every florin. I have wanted bread over and over again, but I have fasted for days rather than spend the smallest coin of your money upon myself. It was my son's money you were sending me, not your own. But your punishment is coming. Gideon is your slave; he will not be so much longer. He will be free soon, and then he will expose you, and will let me live with him. He will be rich one day, mark my words, and you will have to stand aside and bow to him. And I shall be with him--it will break your heart to see him and his loving mother together at last, you who have tried your hardest to keep us apart. Every year I have hoped to go to him, but you have compelled him to put me off. 'Not this year,' he has been obliged to write, 'not this year, but next. Master Fink will not hear of it yet awhile, and he has so got me in his power that I dare not offend him by asking you to come.' And then again, when another year went by, 'Master Fink swears he will discharge me if you come, and will imprison me for the money he says I owe him.' And again and again and again the same. What could my poor boy do when you had set your heart upon separating us? So it has gone on all these weary years, and I have never kissed my boy's bright face since the unhappy day he left me to become your apprentice. What wicked thing had I done in my life that I should be so bitterly punished? What evil fortune led me to your door to beg you to rob me of my son? Better that I had dropped down dead on the road, for then Gideon would have remained among friends." Tears streamed from her eyes; her face was convulsed with grief. "What pleasure," she continued, wringing her hands and swaying to and fro, "do you think I have in this world except him, my boy, my baby that I suckled at my breast? What do I care for in the world but him? Has my life been so full of joy that you should bring a deeper misery into it than any I have suffered? You are my son's enemy and mine--oh, I have known it

long! You were my enemy when I was a girl, and you used to speak against Steven because I chose him instead of you."

I had listened in profound sorrow and indignation to the outpourings of her grief, but for the life of me I could not remain silent at this accusation.

"Louisa Wolf," I said, "I never spoke against your husband. What I thought I thought, but I never openly uttered one word against Steven Wolf. You were free to choose, and you chose. With all my heart I wish that your choice had brought you greater happiness."

When I saw her eyes wandering mournfully round her cheerless apartment I was angry with myself for having spoken. It would have been more generous by far to have held my tongue.

"Ah," she said, shuddering, "this is part of your revenge--this is why you come here--to exult and rejoice over my misery! Years ago you resolved in your heart that you would one day be revenged upon me for refusing you and accepting another man. Well, you have your revenge! Look at my home--you see the whole of it. There is no other room. Here is my bed--a little straw on the bare boards. Here is the cupboard in which I keep my food when I have any. Take your fill, take your fill--you are well revenged. Look at my face--look at my hands--see what I have come to, and rejoice!" She struck her breast despairingly. Into my eyes the warm tears gushed, but she could not see them, for she was blinded by her own. "Gustave Fink, I once held you in my heart--I did, although I accepted Steven even then I held you in my heart. Not guiltily, no, not guiltily, but as a sister might a brother whom she could love and honor. I thought of you as a pure-minded, noble, generous man, and I looked up to you as the best I had ever known. Now, in my heart you have destroyed that image, and I regard you as a monster. Yes, you are there still, but as my enemy and my son's enemy. You have poisoned my life--your revenge has reached as far as that. From the day upon which conviction entered my mind that you were not worthy of my esteem, I had nothing but the memory of my son. to comfort me. You would rob me of him, but you shall not--you shall not, I say! God will prevent you, and will smite you with a terrible but just punishment for your cruelty to a poor and suffering woman!"

Of what use to attempt to undeceive her? It would have been but adding torture to torture. But was it not infamous that one's good intentions should have been frustrated, and one's kindness turned to gall, by the machinations of a knave? Still, I did say, out of simple justice to myself,

"Believe it or not, as you will, Louisa Wolf, my only motive in coming here was to endeavor to do you and your son a kindness."

"I do not believe it," said the poor creature, vehemently "your actions give your words the lie! Answer me this, if you can. Did you seek me out to tell me that Gideon had done his duty by you, that he was a faithful, willing, honest servant, and that you are satisfied with him, and grateful to him for the great services he has rendered you? Did you come here to give me pleasure or sorrow? You are silent--you dare not speak no, Gustave Fink, you dare not! God once smote a liar dead, and you fear he would smite you the same. Now, hear me. Before this year is out I will see my son, or die! Nothing shall prevent me nothing but death! If he cannot come to me I will go to him, and give him a mother's blessing--I will, as there is a Judge in heaven by whom you shall one day be condemned!"

Well, I left her; it was the best mercy I could show her.

As I turned my back upon the miserable hovel I was conscious that a spiritual sweetness had departed from my life, and that a human link of love was snapped which could never again be made whole. Now that I had lost the esteem of the woman whose laugh was the cheeriest, whose eyes the brightest, whose face the sunniest in my remembrance, I felt how precious it had been to me, and how, in its unrecognized influence, it had often helped to soften my judgment and my temper when things were not going exactly right with me.

Thus it happened that twice in my life had I received a terrible wound at the hands of a good and virtuous woman whom I had honorably loved.

It was fortunate that at least two or three days were to elapse between my interview with Louisa Wolf and my coming face to face again with her treacherous son. Had I seen him immediately after the interview I might have conducted myself in an unbecoming manner, and it would have been good neither for him nor me. I had time on my homeward journey to reason with myself. "Shall I make myself unhappy," I thought, "shall I fret myself to a shadow because I have been maligned? Shall I allow such a rascal as Gideon Wolf to entirely destroy my peace and repose? That would, indeed, be giving him an advantage over me. Let me rather bear this stroke with equanimity, and be thankful that there are still some honest men left in the world." But it was poor comfort, and it needed all my philosophy to calm the turbulence of my feelings. So startling were the revelations! To think that all the money I had sent to his mother during the last ten years, to soften her lot, should have found its way into Gideon Wolf's pocket! And for him never to have given me the slightest cause for suspicion that this cunning game was being systematically carried on! It was a bit of trickery worthy of his friend Pretzel. The pair of knaves! It was well for him--yes, it was well for him that I did not meet him when I left his mother's cottage. I should have been tempted to break every bone in his body.

The latter part of the journey was by no means so enjoyable as the first. The familiar scenes and signs which had afforded me so much pleasure on my outward journey presented themselves in quite a different aspect. They appeared to have grown suddenly much older, to have become faded. What had happened to them? Had they, also, met with a bitter disappointment that they should so swiftly have lost the greater part of their beauty? The innkeeper's wife was scolding her baby, who was crying and kicking like a little demon; the woman herself was very plain-looking, and there was a sour expression on her face; the orchards were dusty, the ducks seemed discontented, as though they had eaten something which disagreed with them, the brooks and streams were not so bright, the pigeons flew with heavy wings, the children were listless in their movements, the hedges had lost their fragrance, the fir-trees on the heights bent sadly towards me. Thus do we gain and convey impressions according to our moods. A joyous heart can see the sun behind the clouds, and there is gladness in the brightest day. Yes, yes--a cheerful and contented spirit is man's best possession.

CHAPTER XI.

RELATES HOW GIDEON WOLF LEFT MASTER FINK'S EMPLOYMENT.

I arrived home a little before noon on Saturday, and took down my shutters and examined my stock. Nothing was missing or disturbed; everything was as I had left it, except that some of the brooches and chains had been brightened. That was my old Anna's doings, though she said nothing about it till I asked her. The delight evinced by this faithful servant at my return moved me deeply. Her hands hovered about me with exceeding tenderness. She trotted up and down stairs briskly, really as if she were a young girl, and before I had been half an hour in the house she set before me a meal that did the heart good only to look at it. The bright knives and forks and spoons, the snowy table-cloth and napkins, the shining glasses, the sweetness and cleanliness all around--let me tell you that there lies in these things a medicine for the soul: it is not only the body that benefits by their influence. And when Anna removed the covers--ah, then! The delicious aroma floated into my inner being as it were, attacked by melancholy, vanquished it, and sent it to the rightabout. I was myself again. I rubbed my hands, and Anna rubbed hers. She was as pleased as I was.

Gideon Wolf came in before I had finished my meal. His nostrils twitched; he sniffed the fragrance.

"It smells good, Master Fink," he said.

"It eats better," I said.

I did not ask him to join me after what I had heard it was not possible for me to sit at the same table with him.

"Did you enjoy your holiday?" he asked.

I did not answer him I went on with my meal.

"But it was not a real holiday, was it?" he continued. "You went partly on business. Did you do a good stroke? You had fine weather. Which road did you take?"

"You want to know too much," I said, and I rose from the table and went into the shop. He followed me there.

I had made up my mind as to the course I should pursue towards him. I would get rid of him as quickly as possible. To have a treacherous creature continually in my sight would have made my life unbearable. He should go; he had done mischief enough I would have nothing more to do with him.

He felt the coldness of my reception; I wished him to feel it.

"You do not seem glad to see me," he said.

"There is no special reason for joy," I replied.

"I shall not trouble myself, however," he said. "Here are the watches you gave me to repair."

I laid them aside and paid him. He counted the money discontentedly.

"It will barely pay for my week's board and lodging," he said. I made no remark. Then he opened fire in real earnest. "You do not forget the conversation we had last Saturday, Master Fink?"

"Surely not," I replied; "it is fixed in my memory."

"Do you still refuse the offer I made you?"

"I still refuse it."

"Once is enough. I have nothing more to say on the subject. Perhaps it will be for my good that you do not take me into partnership."

"Perhaps it will."

My laconic answers angered him.

"I should be a fool to waste the best years of my life in a service so unprofitable."

"Very likely, very likely."

"You have lately frequently complained of my work."

"With good cause. In spite of all my endeavors to teach you, I never saw a watch-maker handle a watch more clumsily than you do."

"It proves that I was made for higher things."

"Or lower."

"At all events I am going to better myself."

"I am rejoiced to hear it. You give me notice to leave?"

"If it pleases you, Master Fink."

"It pleases me well. When is the affliction to fall upon me?"

"As soon as convenient. Next week, or earlier, if it is acceptable."

"It is quite acceptable. Go, Gideon, not next week, but this; not on Monday, but to-day--now, this very hour. I will not delay your prosperity by a single movement of a pendulum."

He was disturbed, not expecting so cheerful an acquiescence. Did the rascal think I should beg him to stay?

"When I pay for the food I have had this week," he whined, "I shall have nothing left."

"Do I owe you anything? I thought it was the other way--or have I been dreaming all these years?"

"You do not strictly owe me anything but you surely do not wish to thrust me on the world in a state of beggary!"

"It is not I who thrust you on the world it is your own deliberate act, my worthy Gideon, and your plans to better yourself are already laid. However, your appeal shall not be made in vain. I will deal, not justly, but generously, towards you." I opened my safe, and took therefrom a packet containing coins. "I am going to make you a present of twenty-eight florins." His eyes glistened, and he held out his eager hand. "All bad ones, Gideon, every one of them! But I am not responsible for that, it is your affair. Among them you will find, with a date scratched on them, two false florins you brought to me this day four weeks as having been paid to you by Strauss the butcher, for repairs done to his watch."

"He gave them to me!" cried Gideon, turning very white. His limbs trembled; he was in mortal fear, "With his own hands he gave them to me."

"And you gave them to me. Go to Strauss, and inform him that he deals in bad money, for you will find in this packet three other false florins which you brought to me from him four months ago--you will see the date on them--in payment for a pair of silver ear-rings he bought for his little daughter. Go to Strauss, Gideon, go to him. He was never known to rob even the rich, and if you succeed in convincing him that he gave you the five bad florins, he will give you five good ones in exchange for them. He will do it, Gideon, without a murmur, for naturally he will be desirous to keep such a transaction very quiet. There is also another bad coin you brought to me from Rosenblatt the clothes-mender. Perhaps he found it in an old coat he was patching. There are seven others in a batch--mere bits of lead, Gideon--which you brought to me from Philip Adler the rabbi, in payment of a long-standing account. Philip Adler is a charitable man, and much loved. Go to him, and acquaint him with this sad business; he will not see you wronged."

"It is a plot!" gasped Gideon. "You wish to ruin me; you wish to take away my character."

"Let us not speak of plots," I said, and here my voice grew stern. "Let us not speak of taking characters away. Every florin in this packet I received direct from your hands, and I have kept a faithful record of them. You will be glad to receive them back, for it is not a pleasant matter; it is, indeed, as you are well aware, a most dangerous matter. We live in evil times, Gideon, and one needs to be very, very careful in his dealings. Beware of rogues and backbiters; avoid bad company; speak always the truth; do not malign your benefactors; do not play cards with the devil; and do not betray the innocent. Fare you well, Gideon Wolf."

His tongue was afflicted with a kind of St. Vitus's dance as he endeavored to explain that he was innocent of this dangerous passing of bad money for good. I sat back in my chair, and did not assist him out of his tangle of words, I listened in silence, and when his tongue had run itself down, like an ill-regulated watch, I bade him farewell once more, and shut my door upon him.

It was a happy release. Old Anna was overjoyed.

"Now I can sleep in peace," she said.

CHAPTER XII.

MASTER FINK ENDEAVORS TO RESCUE KATRINE LOEBEG FROM THE EVIL INFLUENCE OF PRETZEL THE MISER.

I did not entirely lose sight of Gideon. It is not easy in a town like this for a man to hide himself and his doings from the knowledge of his neighbors, and it was very soon known to everybody that Gideon Wolf and I had parted company. The question now was what he would do, how he intended to live. I devoutly hoped that he would leave the town and seek his fortune elsewhere, but my hope was not fulfilled. Old Anna, womanlike, was more curious about him than I, and she made it her business to find out all she could concerning his movements. Thus for some time all the information I received with reference to him came through her. On one day it was,

"Gideon Wolf called this morning upon Peterson the tanner, to collect some money he owes Miser Pretzel."

On another day,

"They were walking together this afternoon, Pretzel and Gideon."

And at length,

"Gideon Wolf has gone to live in the Temple, in the garret of the house immediately opposite Miser Pretzel's."

There have been great changes in the town these last few years. The Temple has been pulled down to make room for the new railway-station which is to bring confusion into our quiet lives. That demon, Steam, will no longer permit us to live in peace and quietness. The young may rejoice in these changes; to the old they are an affliction.

It was certainly time the Temple was destroyed, for it was a disgrace. Long, long since, hundreds of years ago, it had been used as a refuge for monks and priests, and it was then that it got to be called the Temple. The houses, I have no doubt, were grand places in those days, but now they were so old and rickety that timid people had a fear of them. As for honest and virtuous folk, on no account would they reside there. It bore a dreadful reputation, and was given up entirely to vile and desperate characters, jailbirds, loose women, desperadoes, and adventurers. Nevertheless, there it was that Gideon Wolf took up his quarters, at the top of a house four stories high, the roof of which nearly touched the clouds. To save it from tumbling down, a heavy beam had been fixed high in the air, in between it and the rotten old house on the opposite side, in which Pretzel lived. These decrepit, worn-out tenements leaned towards each other from sheer weakness, and could not stand without support, like human beings who in their old age require a prop to save them from falling to the earth. The crossbeam between the two houses was fixed, on the left, just below the top window of Miser Pretzel's house, and, on the right, immediately below the window of the garret in which Gideon Wolf slept. The lower portion of this house was occupied by people of bad character, the second and third floors were empty, and only Gideon lived in the garret. In Miser Pretzel's house no one resided but himself; it was his own property, and he would not admit a tenant. Dwelling for years among lawless people, and keeping always, as was currently reported, a large sum of money in his rooms, it was wonderful that he was not robbed. But he seemed to be protected by a charm, for no ill befell him, and he was able to carry on his usurious practices without check or hindrance. It was understood that Pretzel had taken

Gideon into his employ, for the young man was now regularly engaged in collecting debts owing to the miser by poor people who had been drawn into his web.

But if appearances went for anything, Gideon Wolf did not thrive in his new vocation. Miser Pretzel, who loved his money with a closer love than men have for their children, was not likely to pay liberal wages to those who worked for him, and Gideon grew shabbier and poorer week by week. I had opportunities of observing this, for he sometimes passed my shop; but between us not a word was exchanged.

"Miser Pretzel will get Gideon well into his clutches," said Anna, "and then the devil will fly away with the pair of them."

The autumn waned, and winter came on. A bitter, cheerless winter, always remembered because of its heavy snowfalls, the like of which had never been seen in the town. In the first week of November Anna burst in upon me with the words,

"What do you think? Katrine Loebeg has left her situation, and has gone to attend upon Miser Pretzel."

"That is bad news indeed," I said.

"The child!" cried Anna, in deep distress. "The foolish, foolish child! She will come quickly now to shame and ruin! Will no one stretch out a helping hand to her--will no one save her?"

"How can it be done?" I asked. "Heaven knows I would sacrifice much to save the poor girl, but you remember how she received us when we spoke to her before. She is her own mistress, and can do as she pleases; no person has any legal authority over her. Were I her grandfather, or her uncle, or even a distant relative of her dead mother, I might have some right to interfere--although it would be useless, Anna, quite useless; of that I am certain. She does not see Gideon Wolf with our eyes, and it is he, no doubt, who has been instrumental in getting her into Miser Pretzel's house."

"Master Fink," said Anna, "you have a solemn duty before you, and you must not shrink from it. You must save that sweet child from life-long grief. It is in your power. All the town will bless you for the deed."

"I don't want all the town to bless me," I said, somewhat testily I must own. "I am content to do what is right for right's sake, and for the sake of my conscience. In Heaven's Dame enlighten me how it is in my power to save Katrine!"

Old Anna spoke now very earnestly. "There is no one in the world who is so thoroughly acquainted as yourself with the vile nature of that scorpion, Gideon Wolf. To stand tamely by, and allow him to drag the innocent soul of Katrine down to perdition would be a heavy sin. Oh, Master Fink, I think there is a way. You have no wife, you have no child--"

"Ah," I exclaimed, "I see! you wish me to adopt Katrine as my child. Thank you, Anna, thank you; you have a kind heart. It is a noble idea. I will do it--yes, Anna, I will do it, if Katrine will consent. I will be a father unto her, and as God is my judge I will deal tenderly and lovingly by her. It will be a beautiful thing to have a fresh young being like her in the house. And in course of time she shall forget that rascal, Gideon Wolf, and set her heart upon some fine honest young fellow who will make her happy." I glowed with pleasurable excitement; I could not keep my seat; I walked up and down the room, rubbing my hands.

"Master Fink," said Anna, wiping her tears away with the back of her hand, "I bless the day I first took service with you."

"Never mind that, never mind that," I cried; "it is a waste of time to talk of such things. We must see her at once--we must not lose a moment. She is in danger, in positive danger." And then, all in a moment, my spirits fell. "Are you sure, Anna, that she lives with Miser Pretzel?"

"Yes, there is no doubt of it, and we must go to his house, and speak to her there."

"Speak to her in Pretzel's house! Do you forget the enmity he bears to me? He will not admit us; he will laugh at us, and shut the door in our faces. He has been waiting for years to spite me; old as he is he would walk a hundred miles to do me an injury."

"We go to see Katrine, not to see him, Master Fink. There is nothing to be afraid of; he will not eat us, and if he won't admit us into the house we will call Katrine out, and speak to her in the streets. Because it is unpleasant to do, you must not shrink from it."

"I will not," I said, firmly. "Come, Anna, you shall accompany me. What is right to be done should be done without delay."

In less than three minutes I had locked up my shop, and Anna and I were on our way to the Temple and in due time we paused before the door of Pretzel's house.

It was years since I had visited the Temple, and I was struck by the ruined appearance of the habitations. Dirt and filth, rotting timbers, broken windows stuffed with rags to keep out wind

and rain, crumbling stones, and signs of dilapidation, met my eye whichever way I turned. One house had shrunk in the middle, just as if it had a pain in its stomach, and there was not a dwelling that did not bear some strange resemblance to a drunkard in the last days of his evil life. The signs of animation were quite as deplorable. The cats were skinny, vicious, fiery-eyed; fowls I should have fled from in horror had their emaciated bodies been placed on my table were pecking in the gutters; and a dog, a very skeleton of a dog, whose ribs were almost breaking through its skin, barked and snapped at my heels as I knocked at Miser Pretzel's door. Katrine herself opened it. She turned pale when she saw us, and made a motion as though she would shut the door in our faces; but I held it back, and said, in a gentle tone,

"Katrine, we have come in perfect friendship, Anna and I. We wish to speak to you in love and honest friendship--"

"Who is there--who is there?" cried Miser Pretzel, from the lower part of the house. "What is keeping you so long, Katrine?"

"It is Master Fink and Anna," replied Katrine.

He was up in an instant, and glided before Katrine and faced us.

"What an honor--what an honor!" he exclaimed, surveying us with his sly eyes. "Now, whoever would have thought that honest Master Fink, upright Master Fink, who wastes young men's lives, and ruins them, and treats them like dirt under his feet--whoever would have thought that *he* would make a friendly visit to poor old Pretzel! And handsome Anna, too, with her beautiful white teeth close shut over her malicious old tongue--she has come to see the poor old man! Katrine, my child," and Pretzel drew the girl, who was now looking at us in anger, close to him, "how shall we receive these worthy people who take away a young girl's character, and lay cunning plots to ensnare a faithful, generous-hearted, hard-working young man whom they have robbed of his rights? How shall we receive them, eh?" And he patted the young girl's hand, which he had placed on his arm, and smiled at us malevolently.

I sighed. The power the old villain exercised over the innocent girl was apparent; every word he spoke struck home, and increased the dislike with which she regarded us. I was afraid that the mischief had gone too far for me to repair it but I would not leave without making the attempt. I had some difficulty in preventing Anna from reviling Pretzel; she had not my prudence or self-control.

"I have not come to see you, Pretzel; my visit is to Katrine."

"Ah, ah," he rejoined, "you have not come to see me; but who is to believe a liar? I had a notion that you wished to borrow another three thousand florins of me for two years without interest. That is what I did for this old fellow once, Katrine--ask him to deny it. He cannot, you see. He was on the point of ruin, and because I did this good deed out of pure compassion, because I lent him three thousand florins without interest, and so saved him from beggary and the gutter, he has gone on ever since speaking ill of me, and maligning me behind my back, as he has maligned his confiding, unfortunate apprentice. It is how he serves everybody. First he pretends to be kind to them, and when he has got them in his power he bites them and blackens their reputations. He is a wolf in sheep's clothing. His appearance is quite benevolent, is it not, Katrine, my child? But never trust a man with such a face as that never, never, or you will rue the day. Now I would lay a wager that he has some evil intention in his mind as he stands there looking at you with pretended sadness. Ask him what it is he wants to say to you?"

"What do you want of me?" asked Katrine, in a tone of deep resentment.

By a great effort I controlled myself. "Katrine Loebeg," I said, "this is no place for you. None but bad people live in this neighborhood--"

Pretzel interrupted me. "What did I tell you, Katrine? And here stand I, Pretzel, Gideon Wolf's best friend, the friend who is going one day to make him rich and in the opposite house lives Gideon himself. Oh, what bad people live here--what bad, bad people!"

"I have come with a fatherly intention, Katrine," I said, "and old Anna is with me--old Anna, who loves you, and wishes you nothing but good."

"First a kiss, and then a scratch," sneered Pretzel. "Think of old Anna loving you so dearly--she who said to you what she did about Gideon, who would not sleep in the same house with him, and who would not cook a meal for him for all the money that could be offered her! Dear me, dear me--what a benevolent, kind-hearted, backbiting old woman!"

I continued I would not be driven from my purpose by his sneers.

"I ask you to come and live with me as my daughter, Katrine. I will protect you as a father; I will provide for you as a father. Inquire of any person in the town about my character--"

"Yes, yes," said Pretzel, "ask Gideon Wolf for Master Fink's character. Ask Gideon, ask Gideon."

--And you will learn that I have never wronged a human being--"

"Then Gideon Wolf is not human," said Pretzel, and I am an image of stone. You shall prove for yourself, Katrine, what kind of a man this is who stands before us. He shall himself show you his benevolent heart. Ask him but one question--whether, if you accept his offer, he will open his doors to Gideon Wolf, so that you may all live together in love and good-will?"

"Will you do this?" asked Katrine.

"No," I answered, "it is impossible."

"What do you say to that, Katrine?" cried Pretzel. "Does not that show you something of his real meaning? He has abominable ideas in his head about you. He wants you as his daughter--oh yes, as his daughter! That is his pretence. It is infamous, infamous! If Gideon were here he would throw this old sinner from my door-step into the road. Katrine my child, I think I hear a window slamming down-stairs. Run and shut it, and see that all the doors are secure. We must protect ourselves against this wrong-doer."

Katrine obeyed, and the moment she was out of sight Pretzel came close to me and Anna.

"How many years is it, Master Fink," he hissed, "since I told you I would be even with you? Pretzel never forgets--never forgets and never forgives--never forgives! You will find that I shall be more than even with you. I will strike you through this simple girl. I will ruin her, yes, I will blight her life, because I know it will cause you sorrow. That will be interest for the money you borrowed of me--good interest, good interest! I have Katrine and her lover in my power, and nothing that you can do shall save them. The deeper the misery into which she is plunged the deeper will be your suffering. I shall remember that, I shall remember that, and Gideon Wolf and I, between us, shall strike her with wretchedness. What do you say to that, you old hag?" And he poked his face, upon which there was really a diabolical expression, so close to Anna's that she jumped back, as if the evil one himself were attempting to seize her. Katrine now re-appeared, and Pretzel put his arm round her waist to protect her, and continued, "This scoundrel has been unbosoming himself to me while you were away, and has been gloating over his wicked intentions. You have heard his offer, and if you allow him to go on he will tell you, being the prince of liars, that if you do not accept it you will be ruined and brought to sorrow. He is not at all particular in what he says. Perhaps you wish to hear him."

"I do not," said the poor girl, firmly.

"Remember, then, how he has treated Gideon Wolf, and give him his answer, Katrine."

She looked me full in the face. "You are a slanderer," she said; "you have an abominable heart. You cheat your workmen; you set snares for the innocent; and you would separate me and Gideon, whom I love with all my soul. Go; I will have nothing to say to you."

"Heaven pity you!" I sighed; and Anna and I walked slowly away, and did not speak a single word till we reached home. Then Anna said,

"Do not take it too much to heart, Master Fink. You have done your duty."

But we were both very sad for many days.

CHAPTER XIII.

GIDEON WOLF AND HIS MOTHER BEGIN THE NEW YEAR TOGETHER.

Before we knew where we were, the last day of the old year was upon us. Time is a thief he is forever stealing upon us, and robbing us of sunny moments. He ripens to destroy. Joy vanishes, but sorrow remains. Never, never, though I live to a hundred, shall I forget that last clay of the old year.

For four days the snow had fallen without cessation--heavy, thick, blinding snow. There was no telling when it would leave off. The streets were a foot deep, and people coming in from the surrounding country related dismal stories of the state of the land. Depend upon it that those who had no occasion to leave their houses were glad enough to shut out the snow and the wind, and sit by their firesides, drinking hot spiced wine. It had been a custom with me at different times of the year, especially on New-year's night, for every person in my house to assemble a

little before midnight, for the purpose of drinking more than one steaming glass of wine of Anna's making. That was not the only good cheer in which we indulged and it happened sometimes that friends were with us to help us eat the splendid dishes which Anna cooked for us. This year Anna and I were alone. The day had not been particularly joyous, but although no guests sat at my table I did not allow the old year to go out unrecognized. Exactly as the clock struck eleven my faithful old house-keeper made her appearance, carrying a jug of hot wine, the fragrant steam of which was really delightful.

"I thought I would come a little earlier than usual," said Anna, "in case you might be lonely."

"You did right, Anna," I said.

I filled her glass and mine, and then we shook hands, and drank the toast, "May we all be alive at the birth of another year, in contentment and health!" Then Anna, upon my invitation, sat on the opposite side of the fire, and we disposed ourselves for a chat.

"This is the quietest New Year we have ever spent," I said. "Just before you came in, Anna, I was feeling very melancholy."

"It does no harm, a little melancholy," said Anna, "though this is a week in which happiness should reign. For my part, always at this time I keep thinking of the poor and pitying them, and wishing I could do a great deal for them."

It is only just to the memory of my old Anna to say that she was one of the kindest souls in existence. She was forever giving away--so much so that it was impossible for her to save money--and she never spoke of her charities. It was seldom that she could not see to the bottom of her purse.

We spoke of many things--of the storm raging without, of Katrine Loebeg, of Gideon Wolf, of Miser Pretzel--and wondered how they were spending the evening. Then Anna related to me a pitiful story of one New-year's night, long ago in the past, when she was a child living with her mother, who was very poor. How that they had no home, and were walking through the cold snow in grief and darkness, when they saw lights in the windows of a farm-house. How they crept to the windows, and how, although fierce dogs were chained up they did not even bark at Anna and her mother. How they peeped through the windows, and saw all the family so happy that Anna began to sob. How her sobs reached the ears of those within, and how the master came out, and after a few questions took them into his house, where they were fed and warmed and made happy. She had nearly come to the end of her story, which she related with wonderful animation, when I held up my hand.

"I thought I heard a sound at the street door," I said.

We listened in silence, but heard nothing, and I told Anna to proceed. Her story was just finished as I held up my hand again.

"I must be haunted," I said; "when I don't listen, I hear sounds like moans; when I listen, I hear nothing. I cannot rest till I satisfy myself."

I went to the street door and opened it, and the snow and the howling wind beat in upon me and almost blinded me. I called out loudly many times, and receiving no answer, nor seeing anything, was about to close the door, when Anna, who had followed me, gave a great scream, and darting past me fell upon her knees. I looked down, and beheld her busy about the form of a woman lying in the snow. I stooped to assist her; and we carried the insensible woman into my room, and laid her before the fire.

"Poor thing, poor thing!" said Anna, rubbing the woman's hands and limbs. "Ah, what a state she is in! God help us, I fear she is frozen to death."

As she spoke these words I recognized the woman.

"It is Louisa Wolf," I said, pityingly, "Gideon Wolf's mother, for whom you made some soup on the day she came to ask me to take her son as my apprentice. No wonder that you do not recognize her; she is sadly, sadly altered. She has come--I divine it to spend the New Year with her son, whom she has not seen since he was a lad. For Heaven's sake, let us do all we can to revive her!"

Anna hurried away to light the fire and get the bed ready in the room Gideon used to occupy. Before she returned, the warmth and the hot wine I succeeded in making the poor creature drink--and I have no doubt the mother's love which had sustained her in her weary journey--restored Louisa Wolf to consciousness. She opened her eyes and they fell upon me. Ah, what a state of poverty she was in! Her clothes were in rags, her boots were worn off her feet, her face was pinched with cold and hunger and suffering. My heart bled for her. Recognizing me, she pushed me feebly from her with exclamations of horror, and struggled to her feet.

"My son!" she cried, in a terrible voice; so hoarse was it, so charged with overwrought agony, that it was scarcely human. "My son!"

"Rest yourself first," I said, compassionately; it was evident she did not know that Gideon had left my employment; "rest yourself, and take some food. Then we will talk."

"I want no rest," she cried, "nor will I eat in your house! It would choke me. Give me back my son you shall no longer keep him from me! I have walked fifty miles through the snow to see him, hoping to be here two days ago; but the cruel snow kept me back. Oh, my God, what I have suffered! My son--my son--give me my son! Do you hear me? Give me my son! Gideon, Gideon!" she screamed. "Your old mother is here! Come to me, for God's sake come to me!" Her screams brought Anna into the room. "Ah," cried Louisa Wolf, running to Anna, and putting her hands convulsively upon her; "you are a woman; you have a human heart beating in your breast--not like that monster there--"

"Stop!" exclaimed Anna; "you are crazy--you don't know what you are saying. Master Fink is a good and just man, and any one who says otherwise cannot be in her right senses."

"Anna," I said, sadly, "do not waste time in defending me. We stand in the presence of a sorrow so overwhelming that all other considerations are as nought in my eyes. I forgive Louisa Wolf for any words she may speak against me. The great Lord of all, who rules the storm and the tempest without--not fiercer is it, Anna, than the storm which racks and tears this poor woman's soul--has seen my actions, and will judge me." Anna came to my side and kissed my hand; it was a simple action, but it comforted me. "Louisa Wolf," I said, "your son is not here."

"Where, then, can he be?" she moaned, and she looked about the room really as though she were bereft of reason. "Merciful God! Do not tell me he is dead!"

"He lives," I said, "but I know nothing more of him than that. He left my house four months ago, and from that day we have spoken no word to each other."

"Four months ago!" she muttered. "That must be about the time you came to our old village. Why did he not tell me--why did not you? You are speaking the truth, Gustave Fink? Swear it, by your mother's spirit!"

"I am speaking the truth, Louisa Wolf," I said; "I swear to it by the memory of my mother!"

"Then I have no business here," she said, bewildered and dazed. "I came to this house to find him to press him in my arms--to embrace him, and receive his kisses! Oh, my dear one, my baby boy, where art thou? Tell me, you two--my enemies--tell me where I shall find my son."

"He lives in the Temple," I said, "a mile from this spot. That is all I know, and all I can tell you."

"In the Temple," she murmured, "a mile from this spot. God give me strength to get there! The Temple! A sacred place. I hear the holy music! My dear one, my dear one!" She raised her hands, mid there was a look of ecstasy on her face. Suddenly she recovered herself, and shuddering at the sight of me, said, "May I never again be afflicted with the sight of your face, Gustave Fink! The Temple--the Temple!" And she staggered to the door.

"You will never dream of going there to-night!" I cried; and Anna stood in her way.

"No," she said, "I will not dream of going--I will go. No mortal power shall stop me. The Temple! Do you not hear the music? Ah, how sweet--how sweet!"

"Think a moment," I said, hurriedly; "listen to the storm. It increases in fierceness. There is not a soul in the streets."

"God is there," she answered, "and all his holy angels. You cannot prevent me from going--they will not permit you. I am coming, Gideon, I am coming, my dear one! Thou and I will spend the New Year together. The storm is singing, to guide me to thee!"

"Give me my cloak, Anna," I said; "I will go with Louisa Wolf; otherwise she will perish in the snow."

"I will accompany you, Master Fink," said Anna; "I will not leave you to-night."

In a moment my cloak was on my shoulders, and my fur cap on my head. Anna, also, was as quickly equipped. She would have wrapped a thick shawl round Louisa Wolf, but the kindly service was rejected, and the shawl fell to the ground. I picked it up and carried it on my arm.

We went out into the storm. So thick was the falling snow that I could scarcely see a yard before me. It swirled into our faces, and the sharp wind cut us bitterly. But Louisa Wolf did not feel it. A look of rapture was in her eyes, and on her lips an ecstatic smile.

"Dear angels, lead me!" she whispered, as she stepped from my house.

Not a light was to be seen, not a human being but ourselves was abroad; our feet sank into the snow more than ankle deep, and we heard no sound but the raging wind. Moving as we did, noiselessly along, the moaning and the sobbing of the storm seemed, as it were, to be dissociated from us, and even amid these tempestuous evidences we were engulfed in an awful white silence.

We were like three spirits moving through dead streets.

The difficulties in our way were so great that we made but slow progress. Louisa Wolf refused all offers of assistance; she would not touch our hands. Surely some superhuman power must have sustained her through the terrible fatigue she had endured. We were more than an hour reaching the Temple, and if Anna spoke to me, or I to her, it was in a whisper. Only once did we stop--when the distant church bells proclaimed the birth of a New Year.

Sweet and solemn they pealed upon the air, conveying their pregnant message which all do not take to heart--the message of the cradle and the grave.

"A Happy New Year to you, master," said Anna.

"And to you, Anna," I replied.

"The bells of the New Year!" murmured Louisa, Wolf. "God bless my beloved son, and make his life honored and happy!"

At length we were within a hundred yards of Miser Pretzel's residence, and then a singular impression stole upon me. There appeared to be an unusual movement in the air, a tremulous pulsing, as it were. I cannot more clearly define it; the impression was more spiritual than real. But it was prophetic of what followed.

We entered the narrow streets of the Temple; we traversed the tortuous thoroughfare in which Gideon Wolf resided; we stopped before the house, immediately opposite the house of Miser Pretzel.

High up in the air, the beam which kept these houses from falling upon each other in deadly embrace was indicated by a thick band of snow, stretching from garret window to garret window.

"Your son lives here," I said to Louisa Wolf.

"Here!" she sighed. "Yes, yes, I see the lights, I hear the angels' music. Hush! my dear one's voice is among them. Gideon, Gideon my darling, I am waiting for thee!"

She slid from my supporting arms, which she had not now the power to thrust from her--indeed she was not conscious that they were around her--and sank upon the white steps of the door which, open, would have led her to her son's chamber. Her back was towards this door, her face towards the house occupied by Pretzel.

"Her strength is spent," I said to Anna.

As I uttered these words the upper window of Pretzel's house, immediately above the snow-clad beam, was thrust violently open, and a man issued therefrom, and sliding cautiously upon the wooden support, embraced it with his arms and legs. At the same moment a glare of light made itself visible in the room from which he emerged. I grasped Anna's arm, and her eyes followed the direction of mine. Entranced, we watched the man winding his way, inch by inch, along the beam, to the opposite window, which gave light to the room in which Gideon Wolf slept. So perilous was this enterprise that we held our breaths in very fear; we stood like stone, transfixed.

The glare in the room the man had left grew stronger and stronger, and like a great dark snake the man, whose body was stretched lengthways upon the beam, slid slowly onward till he reached Gideon Wolf's window. Then, with one hand cautiously raised, he strove to open this window; but he strove in vain. The window was fast, and no effort of his could move it. He could use but one hand; the beam was slippery with snow and ice-flakes, bits of which, dislodged by his movements, fell at our feet. His other arm and hand embraced the beam, to save himself from falling to certain death. One glance did I give at Louisa Wolf. A transport of rapture was on her face; she made a movement as though she were pressing a baby to her breast.

"See," whispered Anna, pointing upward, and she clung to me, trembling in every limb, "he is turning back."

Yes, foiled in his endeavors to open the window, the man, by a wonderful exercise of strength, twisted himself round, and was now sliding towards the room he had left. His progress was slower and more laborious; his exertions had well-nigh exhausted him.

"He will be killed--he will be killed!" gasped Anna. "He will fall, and die here at our feet! Help--help!"

"Do not cry out," I said, and with my hand on her mouth I prevented her screams from being heard.

"We cannot help him before he reaches Pretzel's window. If you rouse Louisa Wolf to consciousness she will go mad. Do you not see who it is up there?"

"No," she replied, "my eyes are too weak."

"Anna, it is Gideon Wolf himself."

Yes, it was he and no other, and as I gazed at his snake-like figure I marvelled to myself what kind of devil's work he had been engaged in. It was something villainous and unholy of that I was inwardly convinced.

By this time he had reached the open window of Miser Pretzel's house; but as he placed his hand upon the sill, and raised his head almost to the level of his hand, a tremendous volume of flame burst upon him and compelled him to shrink swiftly down upon the snow-clad beam.

"My God!" I cried, "the man is lost! The house is on fire! Anna, look after Louisa Wolf. Katrine Katrine! Pretzel--Pretzel! Come quickly, or you will be burned to death!"

And I beat with my fists upon Pretzel's door, and kicked at the panels with all my strength.

In less time than I take to tell it, the entire upper portion of Miser Pretzel's house was one mass of flame; cries and shouts rent the air; doors were flung open; half-naked people rushed out of their houses screaming women and children ran this way and that. But Miser Pretzel's house remained fast closed, and Louisa Wolf lay motionless in the snow, with her head in old Anna's lap. Strong men hacked at Pretzel's door with knives and axes, while Gideon Wolf, clinging to the snow-clad beam, cast frantic glances around--above, below, on every side--and screamed to us to save him. We could not hear his words, the uproar was so great, but we saw by his gestures that he was making agonized appeals to us. Ah, ah! They had broken in Pretzel's door, and reckless men rushed into the house to save the miser and Katrine Loebeg.

"Keep back, Master Fink," they cried, " we can do the work better than you." It was easy for me to obey them, for I was fascinated by Gideon Wolf's deadly peril. His struggles to retain his hold grew fainter and fainter. In his agony and terror and weakness his body slipped from the beam, and he hung in mid-air, sixty feet above us, supported only by one arm. In this violent movement his clothes became disarranged, and from his loosened pockets fell a great number of gold pieces. Yes, into the snow, like dead birds overweighted by sin, descended the bright golden shower, and the people threw themselves upon the ground, and tore frantically into the thick white carpet to gather it. Simultaneously with this new feature of the awful scene, men issued from Pretzel's house, bearing two bodies, the miser's and Katrine's. They brought them close to me, exclaiming,

"There has been murder done!"

They pointed to wounds in the breast of Miser Pretzel, from which the blood was still flowing, proving that the dark deed had been but recently committed. But Katrine was safe in my arms--I felt her warm breath upon my face--her bosom heaved--her eyes opened. She gave one upward glance, and beheld the suspended form of Gideon Wolf gradually but surely slipping from life to death.

"Murderer!" she screamed.

Ah, my God! Never shall I forget that scream. It was the knell of love and hope and faith and happiness. It rings in my ears now. It reached Gideon Wolf's in the last moments of his life, and he knew that his crime was discovered. With a wild shriek his arm slid from the beam, and he fell through the air upon the stones, forcing a shower of bloodstained snow into the faces of those who stood near his crushed and mangled form.

"Look, Master Fink, look!" said Anna, pulling at my cloak.

I knelt by the side of my old sweetheart, Louisa Wagner. I pillowed her head upon my breast.

"Listen," she murmured, "the angels are still singing. How sweet--how beautiful! The door of the Temple is open. The lights are there, and I see my boy--my angel baby-boy. Gideon, my dear one, I have come to spend the New Year with thee! Ah, he is in my arms I am happy, I am happy! All my pain has gone. How dim the lights are growing in the Temple! That is because you are not there, my dear one. We will never part again, darling! Closer--closer--closer!"

And with her lips upon my lips she died.

* * * * *

You guess, do you not, that Katrine Loebeg, the young woman with the silver hair, is my house-keeper now?

THE END.

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK SELF-DOOMED: A NOVEL ***

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