Jezebel

By

Wilkie Collins

www.freeclassicebooks.com

Contents

TO ALBERTO CACCIA

Let me begin by informing you, that this new novel does not present the proposed sequel to my last work of fiction--"The Fallen Leaves."

The first part of that story has, through circumstances connected with the various forms of publications adopted thus far, addressed itself to a comparatively limited class of readers in England. When the book is finally reprinted in its cheapest form--then, and then only, it will appeal to the great audience of the English people. I am waiting for that time, to complete my design by writing the second part of "The Fallen Leaves."

Why?

Your knowledge of English Literature--to which I am indebted for the first faithful and intelligent translation of my novels into the Italian language--has long since informed you, that there are certain important social topics which are held to be forbidden to the English novelist (no matter how seriously and how delicately he may treat them), by a narrow-minded minority of readers, and by the critics who flatter their prejudices. You also know, having done me the honor to read my books, that I respect my art far too sincerely to permit limits to be wantonly assigned to it, which are imposed in no other civilized country on the face of the earth. When my work is undertaken with a pure purpose, I claim the same liberty which is accorded to a writer in a newspaper, or to a clergyman in a pulpit; knowing, by previous experience, that the increase of readers and the lapse of time will assuredly do me justice, if I have only written well enough to deserve it.

In the prejudiced quarters to which I have alluded, one of the characters in "The Fallen Leaves" offended susceptibilities of the sort felt by Tartuffe, when he took out his handkerchief, and requested Dorine to cover her bosom. I not only decline to defend myself, under such circumstances as these--I say plainly, that I have never asserted a truer claim to the best and noblest sympathies of Christian readers than in presenting to them, in my last novel, the character of the innocent victim of infamy, rescued and purified from the contamination of the streets. I remember what the nasty posterity of Tartuffe, in this country, said of "Basil," of "Armadale," of "The New Magdalen," and I know that the wholesome audience of the nation at large has done liberal justice to those books. For this reason, I wait to write the second part of "The Fallen Leaves," until the first part of the story has found its way to the people.

Turning for a moment to the present novel, you will (I hope) find two interesting studies of humanity in these pages.

In the character called "Jack Straw," you have the exhibition of an enfeebled intellect, tenderly shown under its lightest and happiest aspect, and used as a means of relief in some of the darkest scenes of terror and suspense occurring in this story. Again, in "Madame Fontaine," I have endeavored to work out the interesting moral problem, which takes for its groundwork the strongest of all instincts in a woman, the instinct of maternal love, and traces to its solution the restraining and purifying influence of this one virtue over an otherwise cruel, false, and degraded nature.

The events in which these two chief personages play their parts have been combined with all possible care, and have been derived, to the best of my ability, from natural and simple causes. In view of the distrust which certain readers feel, when a novelist builds his fiction on a foundation of fact, it may not be amiss to mention (before I close these lines), that the accessories of the scenes in the Deadhouse of Frankfort have been studied on the spot. The published rules and ground-plans of that curious mortuary establishment have also been laid on my desk, as aids to memory while I was writing the closing passages of the story.

With this, I commend "Jezebel's Daughter" to my good friend and brother in the art--who will present this last work also to the notice of Italian readers.

W. C. Gloucester Place, London:

February 9, 1880.

PART I

MR. DAVID GLENNEY CONSULTS HIS MEMORY AND OPENS THE STORY

CHAPTER I

In the matter of Jezebel's Daughter, my recollections begin with the deaths of two foreign gentlemen, in two different countries, on the same day of the same year.

They were both men of some importance in their way, and both strangers to each other.

Mr. Ephraim Wagner, merchant (formerly of Frankfort-on-the-Main), died in London on the third day of September, 1828.

Doctor Fontaine--famous in his time for discoveries in experimental chemistry--died at Wurzburg on the third day of September, 1828.

Both the merchant and the doctor left widows. The merchant's widow (an Englishwoman) was childless. The doctor's widow (of a South German family) had a daughter to console her.

At that distant time--I am writing these lines in the year 1878, and looking back through half a century--I was a lad employed in Mr. Wagner's office. Being his wife's nephew, he most kindly received me as a member of his household. What I am now about to relate I saw with my own eyes and heard with my own ears. My memory is to be depended on. Like other old men, I recollect events which happened at the beginning of my career far more clearly than events which happened only two or three years since.

Good Mr. Wagner had been ailing for many months; but the doctors had no immediate fear of his death. He proved the doctors to be mistaken; and took the liberty of dying at a time when they all declared that there was every reasonable hope of his recovery. When this affliction fell upon his wife, I was absent from the office in London on a business errand to our branch-establishment at Frankfort-on-the-Main, directed by Mr. Wagner's partners.

The day of my return happened to be the day after the funeral. It was also the occasion chosen for the reading of the will. Mr. Wagner, I should add, had been a naturalized British citizen, and his will was drawn by an English lawyer.

The fourth, fifth, and sixth clauses of the will are the only portions of the document which it is necessary to mention in this place.

The fourth clause left the whole of the testator's property, in lands and in money, absolutely to his widow. In the fifth clause he added a new proof of his implicit confidence in her--he appointed her sole executrix of his will.

The sixth and last clause began in these words:--

"During my long illness, my dear wife has acted as my secretary and representative. She has made herself so thoroughly well acquainted with the system on which I have conducted my business, that she is the fittest person to succeed me. I not only prove the fullness of my trust in her and the sincerity of my gratitude towards her, but I really act in the best interests of the firm of which I am the head, when I hereby appoint my widow as my sole successor in the business, with all the powers and privileges appertaining thereto."

The lawyer and I both looked at my aunt. She had sunk back in her chair; her face was hidden in her handkerchief. We waited respectfully until she might be sufficiently recovered to communicate her wishes to us. The expression of her husband's love and respect, contained in the last words of the will, had completely overwhelmed her. It was only after she had been relieved by a burst of tears that she was conscious of our presence, and was composed enough to speak to us.

"I shall be calmer in a few days' time," she said. "Come to me at the end of the week. I have something important to say to both of you."

The lawyer ventured on putting a question. "Does it relate in any way to the will?" he inquired.

She shook her head. "It relates," she answered, "to my husband's last wishes."

She bowed to us, and went away to her own room.

The lawyer looked after her gravely and doubtfully as she disappeared. "My

long experience in my profession," he said, turning to me, "has taught me many useful lessons. Your aunt has just called one of those lessons to my mind.

"May I ask what it is, sir?"

"Certainly." He took my arm and waited to repeat the lesson until we had left the house; "Always distrust a man's last wishes on his death-bed--unless they are communicated to his lawyer, and expressed in his will."

At the time, I thought this rather a narrow view to take. How could I foresee that coming events in the future life of my aunt would prove the lawyer to be right? If she had only been content to leave her husband's plans and projects where he had left them at his death, and if she had never taken that rash journey to our branch office at Frankfort--but what is the use of speculating on what might or might not have happened? My business in these pages is to describe what did happen. Let me return to my business.

CHAPTER II

At the end of the week we found the widow waiting to receive us.

To describe her personally, she was a little lady, with a remarkably pretty figure, a clear pale complexion, a broad low forehead, and large, steady, brightly-intelligent gray eyes. Having married a man very much older than herself, she was still (after many years of wedded life) a notably attractive woman. But she never seemed to be conscious of her personal advantages, or vain of the very remarkable abilities which she did unquestionably possess. Under ordinary circumstances, she was a singularly gentle, unobtrusive creature. But let the occasion call for it, and the reserves of resolution in her showed themselves instantly. In all my experience I have never met with such a firm woman, when she was once roused.

She entered on her business with us, wasting no time in preliminary words. Her face showed plain signs, poor soul, of a wakeful and tearful night. But she claimed no indulgence on that account. When she spoke of her dead husband--excepting a slight unsteadiness in her voice--she controlled herself with a courage which was at once pitiable and admirable to see.

"You both know," she began, "that Mr. Wagner was a man who thought for himself. He had ideas of his duty to his poor and afflicted fellow-creatures which are in advance of received opinions in the world about us. I love and revere his memory--and (please God) I mean to carry out his ideas."

The lawyer began to look uneasy. "Do you refer, madam, to Mr. Wagner's political opinions?" he inquired.

Fifty years ago, my old master's political opinions were considered to be nothing less than revolutionary. In these days--when his Opinions have been sanctioned by Acts of Parliament, with the general approval of the nation--people would have called him a "Moderate Liberal," and would have set him down as a discreetly deliberate man in the march of modern progress.

"I have nothing to say about politics," my aunt answered. "I wish to speak to you, in the first place, of my husband's opinions on the employment of women."

Here, again, after a lapse of half a century, my master's heresies of the year

1828 have become the orthodox principles of the year 1878. Thinking the subject over in his own independent way, he had arrived at the conclusion that there were many employments reserved exclusively for men, which might with perfect propriety be also thrown open to capable and deserving women. To recognize the claims of justice was, with a man of Mr. Wagner's character, to act on his convictions without a moment's needless delay. Enlarging his London business at the time, he divided the new employments at his disposal impartially between men and women alike. The scandal produced in the city by this daring innovation is remembered to the present day by old men like me. My master's audacious experiment prospered nevertheless, in spite of scandal.

"If my husband had lived," my aunt continued, "it was his intention to follow the example, which he has already set in London, in our house at Frankfort. There also our business is increasing, and we mean to add to the number of our clerks. As soon as I am able to exert myself, I shall go to Frankfort, and give German women the same opportunities which my husband has already given to English women in London. I have his notes on the best manner of carrying out this reform to guide me. And I think of sending you, David," she added, turning to me, "to our partners in Frankfort, Mr. Keller and Mr. Engelman, with instructions which will keep some of the vacant situations in the office open, until I can follow you." She paused, and looked at the lawyer. "Do you see any objection to what I propose?" she said.

"I see some risks," he answered, cautiously.

"What risks?"

"In London, madam, the late Mr. Wagner had special means of investigating the characters of the women whom he took into his office. It may not be so easy for you, in a strange place like Frankfort, to guard against the danger----" He hesitated, at a loss for the moment to express himself with sufficient plainness and sufficient delicacy.

My aunt made no allowances for his embarrassment.

"Don't be afraid to speak out, sir," she said, a little coldly. "What danger are you afraid of?"

"Yours is a generous nature, madam: and generous natures are easily imposed upon. I am afraid of women with bad characters, or, worse still, of other women----"

He stopped again. This time there was a positive interruption. We heard a knock at the door.

Our head-clerk was the person who presented himself at the summons to come in. My aunt held up her hand. "Excuse me, Mr. Hartrey--I will attend to you in one moment." She turned to the lawyer. "What other women are likely to impose on me?" she asked.

"Women, otherwise worthy of your kindness, who may be associated with disreputable connections," the lawyer replied. "The very women, if I know anything of your quick sympathies, whom you would be most anxious to help, and who might nevertheless be a source of constant trouble and anxiety, under pernicious influences at home."

My aunt made no answer. For the moment, the lawyer's objections seemed to annoy her. She addressed herself to Mr. Hartrey; asking rather abruptly what he had to say to her.

Our head-clerk was a methodical gentleman of the old school. He began by confusedly apologizing for his intrusion; and ended by producing a letter.

"When you are able to attend to business, madam, honor me by reading this letter. And, in the meantime, will you forgive me for taking a liberty in the office, rather than intrude on your grief so soon after the death of my dear and honored master?" The phrases were formal enough; but there was true feeling in the man's voice as he spoke. My aunt gave him her hand. He kissed it, with the tears in his eyes.

"Whatever you have done has been well done, I am sure," she said kindly. "Who is the letter from?"

"From Mr. Keller, of Frankfort, madam."

My aunt instantly took the letter from him, and read it attentively. It has a very serious bearing on passages in the present narrative which are yet to come. I accordingly present a copy of it in this place:

"Private and confidential.

"Dear Mr. Hartrey,--It is impossible for me to address myself to Mrs. Wagner, in the first days of the affliction that has fallen on her. I am troubled by a pressing anxiety; and I venture to write to you, as the person now in charge at our London office.

"My only son Fritz is finishing his education at the university of Wurzburg. He has, I regret to say, formed an attachment to a young woman, the daughter of a doctor at Wurzburg, who has recently died. I believe the girl to be a perfectly reputable and virtuous young person. But her father has not only left her in poverty, he has done worse--he has died in debt. Besides this, her mother's character does not stand high in the town. It is said, among other things, that her extravagance is mainly answerable for her late husband's debts. Under these circumstances, I wish to break off the connection while the two young people are separated for the time by the event of the doctor's recent death. Fritz has given up the idea of entering the medical profession, and has accepted my proposal that he shall succeed me in our business. I have decided on sending him to London, to learn something of commercial affairs, at headquarters, in your office.

"My son obeys me reluctantly; but he is a good and dutiful lad--and he yields to his father's wishes. You may expect him in a day or two after receipt of these lines. Oblige me by making a little opening for him in one of your official departments, and by keeping him as much as possible under your own eye, until I can venture on communicating directly with Mrs. Wagner--to whom pray convey the expression of my most sincere and respectful sympathy."

My aunt handed back the letter. "Has the young man arrived yet?" she asked.

"He arrived yesterday, madam."

"And have you found some employment for him?"

"I have ventured to place him in our corresponding department," the head-clerk answered. "For the present he will assist in copying letters; and, after business-hours, he will have a room (until further orders) in my house. I hope you think I have done right, madam?"

"You have done admirably, Mr. Hartrey. At the same time, I will relieve you of some of the responsibility. No grief of mine shall interfere with my duty to my husband's partner. I will speak to the young man myself. Bring him here this evening, after business-hours. And don't leave us just yet; I want to put a question to you relating to my husband's affairs, in which I am deeply interested." Mr. Hartrey returned to his chair. After a momentary hesitation, my aunt put her question in terms which took us all three by surprise.

CHAPTER III

"My husband was connected with many charitable institutions," the widow began. "Am I right in believing that he was one of the governors of Bethlehem Hospital?"

At this reference to the famous asylum for insane persons, popularly known among the inhabitants of London as "Bedlam," I saw the lawyer start, and exchange a look with the head-clerk. Mr. Hartrey answered with evident reluctance; he said, "Quite right, madam"--and said no more. The lawyer, being the bolder man of the two, added a word of warning, addressed directly to my aunt.

"I venture to suggest," he said, "that there are circumstances connected with the late Mr. Wagner's position at the Hospital, which make it desirable not to pursue the subject any farther. Mr. Hartrey will confirm what I say, when I tell you that Mr. Wagner's proposals for a reformation in the treatment of the patients----"

"Were the proposals of a merciful man," my aunt interposed "who abhorred cruelty in all its forms, and who held the torturing of the poor mad patients by whips and chains to be an outrage on humanity. I entirely agree with him. Though I am only a woman, I will not let the matter drop. I shall go to the Hospital on Monday morning next--and my business with you to-day is to request that you will accompany me."

"In what capacity am I to have the honor of accompanying you?" the lawyer asked, in his coldest manner.

"In your professional capacity," my aunt replied. "I may have a proposal to address to the governors; and I shall look to your experience to express it in the proper form."

The lawyer was not satisfied yet. "Excuse me if I venture on making another inquiry," he persisted. "Do you propose to visit the madhouse in consequence of any wish expressed by the late Mr. Wagner?"

"Certainly not! My husband always avoided speaking to me on that melancholy subject. As you have heard, he even left me in doubt whether he was one of the governing body at the asylum. No reference to any circumstance in his life which might alarm or distress me ever passed his

lips." Her voice failed her as she paid that tribute to her husband's memory. She waited to recover herself. "But, on the night before his death," she resumed, "when he was half waking, half dreaming, I heard him talking to himself of something that he was anxious to do, if the chance of recovery had been still left to him. Since that time I have looked at his private diary; and I have found entries in it which explain to me what I failed to understand clearly at his bedside. I know for certain that the obstinate hostility of his colleagues had determined him on trying the effect of patience and kindness in the treatment of mad people, at his sole risk and expense. There is now in Bethlehem Hospital a wretched man--a friendless outcast, found in the streets--whom my noble husband had chosen as the first subject of his humane experiment, and whose release from a life of torment he had the hope of effecting through the influence of a person in authority in the Royal Household. You know already that the memory of my husband's plans and wishes is a sacred memory to me. I am resolved to see that poor chained creature whom he would have rescued if he had lived; and I will certainly complete his work of mercy, if my conscience tells me that a woman should do it."

Hearing this bold announcement--I am almost ashamed to confess it, in these enlightened days--we all three protested. Modest Mr. Hartrey was almost as loud and as eloquent as the lawyer, and I was not far behind Mr. Hartrey. It is perhaps to be pleaded as an excuse for us that some of the highest authorities, in the early part of the present century, would have been just as prejudiced and just as ignorant as we were. Say what we might, however, our remonstrances produced no effect on my aunt. We merely roused the resolute side of her character to assert itself.

"I won't detain you any longer," she said to the lawyer. "Take the rest of the day to decide what you will do. If you decline to accompany me, I shall go by myself. If you accept my proposal, send me a line this evening to say so."

In that way the conference came to an end.

Early in the evening young Mr. Keller made his appearance, and was introduced to my aunt and to me. We both took a liking to him from the first. He was a handsome young man, with light hair and florid complexion, and with a frank ingratiating manner--a little sad and subdued, in consequence, no doubt, of his enforced separation from his beloved young lady at Wurzburg. My aunt, with her customary kindness and consideration, offered him a room next to mine, in place of his room in Mr. Hartrey's house. "My nephew David speaks German; and he will help to make your life among us pleasant to you." With those words our good mistress left us together.

Fritz opened the conversation with the easy self-confidence of a German student.

"It is one bond of union between us that you speak my language," he began. "I am good at reading and writing English, but I speak badly. Have we any other sympathies in common? Is it possible that you smoke?"

Poor Mr. Wagner had taught me to smoke. I answered by offering my new acquaintance a cigar.

"Another bond between us," cried Fritz. "We must be friends from this moment. Give me your hand." We shook hands. He lit his cigar, looked at me very attentively, looked away again, and puffed out his first mouthful of smoke with a heavy sigh.

"I wonder whether we are united by a third bond?" he said thoughtfully. "Are you a stiff Englishman? Tell me, friend David, may I speak to you with the freedom of a supremely wretched man?"

"As freely as you like," I answered. He still hesitated.

"I want to be encouraged," he said. "Be familiar with me. Call me Fritz."

I called him "Fritz." He drew his chair close to mine, and laid his hand affectionately on my shoulder. I began to think I had perhaps encouraged him a little too readily.

"Are you in love, David?" He put the question just as coolly as if he had asked me what o'clock it was.

I was young enough to blush. Fritz accepted the blush as a sufficient answer. "Every moment I pass in your society," he cried with enthusiasm, "I like you better--find you more eminently sympathetic. You are in love. One word more--are there any obstacles in your way?"

There were obstacles in my way. She was too old for me, and too poor for me--and it all came to nothing in due course of time. I admitted the obstacles; abstaining, with an Englishman's shyness, from entering into details. My reply was enough, and more than enough, for Fritz. "Good Heavens!" he exclaimed; "our destinies exactly resemble each other! We are both supremely wretched men. David, I can restrain myself no longer; I must positively embrace you!"

I resisted to the best of my ability--but he was the stronger man of the two. His long arms almost strangled me; his bristly mustache scratched my cheek. In my first involuntary impulse of disgust, I clenched my fist. Young Mr. Keller never suspected (my English brethren alone will understand) how very near my fist and his head were to becoming personally and violently acquainted. Different nations--different customs. I can smile as I write about it now.

Fritz took his seat again. "My heart is at ease; I can pour myself out freely," he said. "Never, my friend, was there such an interesting love-story as mine. She is the sweetest girl living. Dark, slim, gracious, delightful, desirable, just eighteen. The image, I should suppose, of what her widowed mother was at her age. Her name is Minna. Daughter and only child of Madame Fontaine. Madame Fontaine is a truly grand creature, a Roman matron. She is the victim of envy and scandal. Would you believe it? There are wretches in Wurzburg (her husband the doctor was professor of chemistry at the University)--there are wretches, I say, who call my Minna's mother 'Jezebel,' and my Minna herself 'Jezebel's Daughter!' I have fought three duels with my fellow-students to avenge that one insult. Alas, David, there is another person who is influenced by those odious calumnies!--a person sacred to me--the honored author of my being. Is it not dreadful? My good father turns tyrant in this one thing; declares I shall never marry 'Jezebel's Daughter;' exiles me, by his paternal commands, to this foreign country; and perches me on a high stool to copy letters. Ha! he little knows my heart. I am my Minna's and my Minna is mine. In body and soul, in time and in eternity, we are one. Do you see my tears? Do my tears speak for me? The heart's relief is in crying freely. There is a German song to that effect. When I recover myself, I will sing it to you. Music is a great comforter; music is the friend of love. There is another German song to that effect." He suddenly dried his eyes, and got on his feet; some new idea had apparently occurred to him. "It is dreadfully dull here," he said; "I am not used to evenings at home. Have you any music in London? Help me to forget Minna for an hour or two. Take me to the music."

Having, by this time, heard quite enough of his raptures, I was eager on my side for a change of any kind. I helped him to forget Minna at a Vauxhall Concert. He thought our English orchestra wanting in subtlety and spirit. On the other hand, he did full justice, afterwards, to our English bottled beer. When we left the Gardens he sang me that German song, 'My heart's relief is crying freely,' with a fervor of sentiment which must have awakened every light sleeper in the neighborhood.

Retiring to my bedchamber, I found an open letter on my toilet-table. It was addressed to my aunt by the lawyer; and it announced that he had decided on accompanying her to the madhouse--without pledging himself to any further concession. In leaving the letter for me to read, my aunt had written across it a line in pencil: "You can go with us, David, if you like."

My curiosity was strongly aroused. It is needless to say I decided on being present at the visit to Bedlam.

CHAPTER IV

On the appointed Monday we were ready to accompany my aunt to the madhouse.

Whether she distrusted her own unaided judgment, or whether she wished to have as many witnesses as possible to the rash action in which she was about to engage, I cannot say. In either case, her first proceeding was to include Mr. Hartrey and Fritz Keller in the invitation already extended to the lawyer and myself.

They both declined to accompany us. The head-clerk made the affairs of the office serve for his apology, it was foreign post day, and he could not possibly be absent from his desk. Fritz invented no excuses; he confessed the truth, in his own outspoken manner. "I have a horror of mad people," he said, "they so frighten and distress me, that they make me feel half mad myself. Don't ask me to go with you--and oh, dear lady, don't go yourself."

My aunt smiled sadly--and led the way out.

We had a special order of admission to the Hospital which placed the resident superintendent himself at our disposal. He received my aunt with the utmost politeness, and proposed a scheme of his own for conducting us over the whole building; with an invitation to take luncheon with him afterwards at his private residence.

"At another time, sir, I shall be happy to avail myself of your kindness," my aunt said, when he had done. "For the present, my object is to see one person only among the unfortunate creatures in this asylum."

"One person only?" repeated the superintendent. "One of our patients of the higher rank, I suppose?"

"On the contrary," my aunt replied, "I wish to see a poor friendless creature, found in the streets; known here, as I am informed, by no better name than Jack Straw."

The superintendent looked at her in blank amazement.

"Good Heavens, madam!" he exclaimed; "are you aware that Jack Straw is one of the most dangerous lunatics we have in the house?"

"I have heard that he bears the character you describe," my aunt quietly admitted.

"And yet you wish to see him?"

"I am here for that purpose--and no other."

The superintendent looked round at the lawyer and at me, appealing to us silently to explain, if we could, this incomprehensible desire to see Jack Straw. The lawyer spoke for both of us. He reminded the superintendent of the late Mr. Wagner's peculiar opinions on the treatment of the insane, and of the interest which he had taken in this particular case. To which my aunt added: "And Mr. Wagner's widow feels the same interest, and inherits her late husband's opinions." Hearing this, the superintendent bowed with his best grace, and resigned himself to circumstances. "Pardon me if I keep you waiting for a minute or two," he said, and rang a bell.

A man-servant appeared at the door.

"Are Yarcombe and Foss on duty on the south side?" the superintendent asked.

"Yes, sir."

"Send one of them here directly."

We waited a few minutes--and then a gruff voice became audible on the outer side of the door. "Present, sir," growled the gruff voice.

The superintendent courteously offered his arm to my aunt. "Permit me to escort you to Jack Straw," he said, with a touch of playful irony in his tone.

We left the room. The lawyer and I followed my aunt and her escort. A man, whom we found posted on the door-mat, brought up the rear. Whether he was Yarcombe or whether he was Foss, mattered but little. In either case he was a hulking, scowling, hideously ill-looking brute. "One of our assistants," we heard the superintendent explain. "It is possible, madam, that we may want two of them, if we are to make things pleasant at your introduction to Jack Straw."

We ascended some stairs, shut off from the lower floor by a massive locked door, and passed along some dreary stone passages, protected by more

doors. Cries of rage and pain, at one time distant and at another close by, varied by yelling laughter, more terrible even than the cries, sounded on either side of us. We passed through a last door, the most solid of all, which shut out these dreadful noises, and found ourselves in a little circular hall. Here the superintendent stopped, and listened for a moment. There was dead silence. He beckoned to the attendant, and pointed to a heavily nailed oaken door.

"Look in," he said.

The man drew aside a little shutter in the door, and looked through the bars which guarded the opening.

"Is he waking or sleeping?" the superintendent asked.

"Waking, sir."

"Is he at work?"

"Yes, sir."

The superintendent turned to my aunt.

"You are fortunate, madam--you will see him in his quiet moments. He amuses himself by making hats, baskets, and table-mats, out of his straw. Very neatly put together, I assure you. One of our visiting physicians, a man with a most remarkable sense of humor, gave him his nickname from his work. Shall we open the door?"

My aunt had turned very pale; I could see that she was struggling with violent agitation. "Give me a minute or two first," she said; "I want to compose myself before I see him."

She sat down on a stone bench outside the door. "Tell me what you know about this poor man?" she said. "I don't ask out of idle curiosity--I have a better motive than that. Is he young or old?"

"Judging by his teeth," the superintendent answered, as if he had been speaking of a horse, "he is certainly young. But his complexion is completely gone, and his hair has turned gray. So far as we have been able to make out (when he is willing to speak of himself), these peculiarities in his personal appearance are due to a narrow escape from poisoning by accident. But how the accident occurred, and where it occurred, he either cannot or will not

tell us. We know nothing about him, except that he is absolutely friendless. He speaks English--but it is with an odd kind of accent--and we don't know whether he is a foreigner or not. You are to understand, madam, that he is here on sufferance. This is a royal institution, and, as a rule, we only receive lunatics of the educated class. But Jack Straw has had wonderful luck. Being too mad, I suppose, to take care of himself, he was run over in one of the streets in our neighborhood by the carriage of an exalted personage, whom it would be an indiscretion on my part even to name. The personage (an illustrious lady, I may inform you) was so distressed by the accident--without the slightest need, for the man was not seriously hurt--that she actually had him brought here in her carriage, and laid her commands on us to receive him. Ah, Mrs. Wagner, her highness's heart is worthy of her highness's rank. She occasionally sends to inquire after the lucky lunatic who rolled under her horse's feet. We don't tell her what a trouble and expense he is to us. We have had irons specially invented to control him; and, if I am not mistaken," said the superintendent, turning to the assistant, "a new whip was required only last week."

The man put his hand into the big pocket of his coat, and produced a horrible whip, of many lashes. He exhibited this instrument of torture with every appearance of pride and pleasure. "This is what keeps him in order, my lady," said the brute, cheerfully. "Just take it in your hand."

My aunt sprang to her feet. She was so indignant that I believe she would have laid the whip across the man's shoulders, if his master had not pushed him back without ceremony. "A zealous servant," said the superintendent, smiling pleasantly. "Please excuse him."

My aunt pointed to the cell door.

"Open it," she said, "Let me see anything, rather than set eyes on that monster again!"

The firmness of her tone evidently surprised the superintendent. He knew nothing of the reserves of resolution in her, which the mere sight of the whip had called forth. The pallor had left her face; she trembled no longer; her fine gray eyes were bright and steady. "That brute has roused her," said the lawyer, looking back at the assistant, and whispering to me; "nothing will restrain her, David--she will have her way now."

CHAPTER V

The superintendent opened the cell door with his own hand.

We found ourselves in a narrow, lofty prison, like an apartment in a tower. High up, in one corner, the grim stone walls were pierced by a grated opening, which let in air and light. Seated on the floor, in the angle formed by the junction of two walls, we saw the superintendent's "lucky lunatic" at work, with a truss of loose straw on either side of him. The slanting rays of light from the high window streamed down on his prematurely gray hair, and showed us the strange yellow pallor of his complexion, and the youthful symmetry of his hands, nimbly occupied with their work. A heavy chain held him to the wall. It was not only fastened round his waist, it also fettered his legs between the knee and the ankle. At the same time, it was long enough to allow him a range of crippled movement, within a circle of five or six feet, as well as I could calculate at the time. Above his head, ready for use if required, hung a small chain evidently intended to confine his hands at the wrists. Unless I was deceived by his crouching attitude, he was small in stature. His ragged dress barely covered his emaciated form. In other and happier days, he must have been a well-made little man; his feet and ankles, like his hands, were finely and delicately formed. He was so absorbed in his employment that he had evidently not heard the talking outside his cell. It was only when the door was banged to by the assistant (who kept behind us, at a sign from the superintendent) that he looked up. We now saw his large vacantly-patient brown eyes, the haggard outline of his face, and his nervously sensitive lips. For a moment, he looked from one to the other of the visitors with a quiet childish curiosity. Then his wandering glances detected the assistant, waiting behind us with the whip still in his hand.

In an instant the whole expression of the madman's face changed. Ferocious hatred glittered in his eyes; his lips, suddenly retracted, showed his teeth like the teeth of a wild beast. My aunt perceived the direction in which he was looking, and altered her position so as to conceal from him the hateful figure with the whip, and to concentrate his attention on herself. With startling abruptness, the poor creature's expression changed once more. His eyes softened, a faint sad smile trembled on his lips. He dropped the straw which he had been plaiting, and lifted his hands with a gesture of admiration. "The pretty lady!" he whispered to himself. "Oh, the pretty lady!"

He attempted to crawl out from the wall, as far as his chain would let him. At a sign from the superintendent he stopped, and sighed bitterly. "I

wouldn't hurt the lady for the world," he said; "I beg your pardon, Mistress, if I have frightened you."

His voice was wonderfully gentle. But there was something strange in his accent--and there was perhaps a foreign formality in his addressing my aunt as "Mistress." Englishmen in general would have called her "ma'am."

We men kept our places at a safe distance from his chain. My aunt, with a woman's impulsive contempt of danger when her compassion is strongly moved, stepped forward to him. The superintendent caught her by the arm and checked her. "Take care," he said. "You don't know him as well as we do."

Jack's eyes turned on the superintendent, dilating slowly. His lips began to part again--I feared to see the ferocious expression in his face once more. I was wrong. In the very moment of another outbreak of rage, the unhappy man showed that he was still capable, under strong internal influence, of restraining himself. He seized the chain that held him to the wall in both hands, and wrung it with such convulsive energy that I almost expected to see the bones of his fingers start through the skin. His head dropped on his breast, his wasted figure quivered. It was only for an instant. When he looked up again, his poor vacant brown eyes turned on my aunt, dim with tears. She instantly shook off the superintendent's hold on her arm. Before it was possible to interfere, she was bending over Jack Straw, with one of her pretty white hands laid gently on his head.

"How your head burns, poor Jack!" she said simply. "Does my hand cool it?"

Still holding desperately by the chain, he answered like a timid child. "Yes, Mistress; your hand cools it. Thank you."

She took up a little straw hat on which he had been working when his door was opened. "This is very nicely done, Jack," she went on. "Tell me how you first came to make these pretty things with your straw."

He looked up at her with a sudden accession of confidence; her interest in the hat had flattered him.

"Once," he said, "there was a time when my hands were the maddest things about me. They used to turn against me and tear my hair and my flesh. An angel in a dream told me how to keep them quiet. An angel said, "Let them work at your straw." All day long I plaited my straw. I would have gone on all night too, if they would only have given me a light. My nights are bad, my

nights are dreadful. The raw air eats into me, the black darkness frightens me. Shall I tell you what is the greatest blessing in the world? Daylight! Daylight!! Daylight!!!"

At each repetition of the word his voice rose. He was on the point of breaking into a scream, when he took a tighter turn of his chain and instantly silenced himself. "I am quiet, sir," he said, before the superintendent could reprove him.

My aunt added a word in his favor. "Jack has promised not to frighten me; and I am sure he will keep his word. Have you never had parents or friends to be kind to you, my poor fellow?" she asked, turning to him again.

He looked up at her. "Never," he said, "till you came here to see me." As he spoke, there was a flash of intelligence in the bright gratitude of his eyes. "Ask me something else," he pleaded; "and see how quietly I can answer you."

"Is it true, Jack, that you were once poisoned by accident, and nearly killed by it?"

"Yes!"

"Where was it?"

"Far away in another country. In the doctor's big room. In the time when I was the doctor's man."

"Who was the doctor?"

He put his hand to his head, "Give me more time," he said. "It hurts me when I try to remember too much. Let me finish my hat first. I want to give you my hat when it's done. You don't know how clever I am with my fingers and thumbs. Just look and see!"

He set to work on the hat; perfectly happy while my aunt was looking at him. The lawyer was the unlucky person who produced a change for the worse. Having hitherto remained passive, this worthy gentleman seemed to think it was due to his own importance to take a prominent part in the proceedings. "My professional experience will come in well here," he said; "I mean to treat him as an unwilling witness; you will see we shall get something out of him in that way. Jack!"

The unwilling witness went on impenetrably with his work. The lawyer (keeping well out of reach of the range of the chain) raised his voice. "Hullo, there!" he cried, "you're not deaf, are you?"

Jack looked up, with an impish expression of mischief in his eyes. A man with a modest opinion of himself would have taken warning, and would have said no more. The lawyer persisted.

"Now, my man! let us have a little talk. 'Jack Straw' can't be your proper name. What is your name?"

"Anything you like," said Jack. "What's yours?"

"Oh, come! that won't do. You must have had a father and mother."

"Not that I know of."

"Where were you born?"

"In the gutter."

"How were you brought up?"

"Sometimes with a cuff on the head."

"And at other times?"

"At other times with a kick. Do be quiet, and let me finish my hat."

The discomfited lawyer tried a bribe as a last resource. He held up a shilling. "Do you see this?"

"No, I don't. I see nothing but my hat."

This reply brought the examination to an end. The lawyer looked at the superintendent, and said, "A hopeless case, sir." The superintendent looked at the lawyer, and answered, "Perfectly hopeless."

Jack finished his hat, and gave it to my aunt. "Do you like it, now it's done?" he asked.

"I like it very much," she answered: "and one of these days I shall trim it with ribbons, and wear it for your sake."

She appealed to the superintendent, holding out the hat to him.

"Look," she said. "There is not a false turn anywhere in all this intricate plaiting. Poor Jack is sane enough to fix his attention to this subtle work. Do you give him up as incurable, when he can do that?"

The superintendent waved away the question with his hand. "Purely mechanical," he replied. "It means nothing."

Jack touched my aunt. "I want to whisper," he said. She bent down to him, and listened.

I saw her smile, and asked, after we had left the asylum, what he had said. Jack had stated his opinion of the principal officer of Bethlehem Hospital in these words: "Don't you listen to him, Mistress; he's a poor half-witted creature. And short, too--not above six inches taller than I am!"

But my aunt had not done with Jack's enemy yet.

"I am sorry to trouble you, sir," she resumed--"I have something more to say before I go, and I wish to say it privately. Can you spare me a few minutes?"

The amiable superintendent declared that he was entirely at her service. She turned to Jack to say good-bye. The sudden discovery that she was about to leave him was more than he could sustain; he lost his self-control.

"Stay with me!" cried the poor wretch, seizing her by both hands. "Oh, be merciful, and stay with me!"

She preserved her presence of mind--she would permit no interference to protect her. Without starting back, without even attempting to release herself, she spoke to him quietly.

"Let us shake hands for to-day," she said; "you have kept your promise, Jack--you have been quiet and good. I must leave you for a while. Let me go."

He obstinately shook his head, and still held her.

"Look at me," she persisted, without showing any fear of him. "I want to tell you something. You are no longer a friendless creature, Jack. You have a friend in me. Look up."

Her clear firm tones had their effect on him; he looked up. Their eyes met.

"Now, let me go, as I told you."

He dropped her hand, and threw himself back in his corner and burst out crying.

"I shall never see her again," he moaned to himself. "Never, never, never again!"

"You shall see me to-morrow," she said.

He looked at her through his tears, and looked away again with an abrupt change to distrust. "She doesn't mean it," he muttered, still speaking to himself; "she only says it to pacify me."

"You shall see me to-morrow," my aunt reiterated; "I promise it."

He was cowed, but not convinced; he crawled to the full length of his chain, and lay down at her feet like a dog. She considered for a moment--and found her way to his confidence at last.

"Shall I leave you something to keep for me until I see you again?"

The idea struck him like a revelation: he lifted his head, and eyed her with breathless interest. She gave him a little ornamental handbag, in which she was accustomed to carry her handkerchief, and purse, and smelling-bottle.

"I trust it entirely to you, Jack: you shall give it back to me when we meet to-morrow."

Those simple words more than reconciled him to her departure--they subtly flattered his self-esteem.

"You will find your bag torn to pieces, to-morrow," the superintendent whispered, as the door was opened for us to go out.

"Pardon me, sir," my aunt replied; "I believe I shall find it quite safe."

The last we saw of poor Jack, before the door closed on him, he was hugging the bag in both arms, and kissing it.

CHAPTER VI

On our return to home, I found Fritz Keller smoking his pipe in the walled garden at the back of the house.

In those days, it may not be amiss to remark that merchants of the old-fashioned sort still lived over their counting-houses in the city. The late Mr. Wagner's place of business included two spacious houses standing together, with internal means of communication. One of these buildings was devoted to the offices and warehouses. The other (having the garden at the back) was the private residence.

Fritz advanced to meet me, and stopped, with a sudden change in his manner. "Something has happened," he said--"I see it in your face! Has the madman anything to do with it?"

"Yes. Shall I tell you what has happened, Fritz?"

"Not for the world. My ears are closed to all dreadful and distressing narratives. I will imagine the madman--let us talk of something else."

"You will probably see him, Fritz, in a few weeks' time."

"You don't mean to tell me he is coming into this house?"

"I am afraid it's likely, to say the least of it."

Fritz looked at me like a man thunderstruck. "There are some disclosures," he said, in his quaint way, "which are too overwhelming to be received on one's legs. Let us sit down."

He led the way to a summer-house at the end of the garden. On the wooden table, I observed a bottle of the English beer which my friend prized so highly, with glasses on either side of it.

"I had a presentiment that we should want a consoling something of this sort," said Fritz. "Fill your glass, David, and let out the worst of it at once, before we get to the end of the bottle."

I let out the best of it first--that is to say, I told him what I have related in the preceding pages. Fritz was deeply interested: full of compassion for Jack

Straw, but not in the least converted to my aunt's confidence in him.

"Jack is supremely pitiable," he remarked; "but Jack is also a smoldering volcano--and smoldering volcanos burst into eruption when the laws of nature compel them. My only hope is in Mr. Superintendent. Surely he will not let this madman loose on us, with nobody but your aunt to hold the chain? What did she really say, when you left Jack, and had your private talk in the reception-room? One minute, my friend, before you begin," said Fritz, groping under the bench upon which we were seated. "I had a second presentiment that we might want a second bottle--and here it is! Fill your glass; and let us establish ourselves in our respective positions--you to administer, and I to sustain, a severe shock to the moral sense. I think, David, this second bottle is even more deliciously brisk than the first. Well, and what did your aunt say?"

My aunt had said much more than I could possibly tell him.

In substance it had come to this:--After seeing the whip, and seeing the chains, and seeing the man--she had actually determined to commit herself to the perilous experiment which her husband would have tried, if he had lived! As to the means of procuring Jack Straw's liberation from the Hospital, the powerful influence which had insisted on his being received by the Institution, in defiance of rules, could also insist on his release, and could be approached by the intercession of the same official person, whose interest in the matter had been aroused by Mr. Wagner in the last days of his life. Having set forth her plans for the future in these terms, my aunt appealed to the lawyer to state the expression of her wishes and intentions, in formal writing, as a preliminary act of submission towards the governors of the asylum.

"And what did the lawyer say to it?" Fritz inquired, after I had reported my aunt's proceedings thus far.

"The lawyer declined, Fritz, to comply with her request. He said, 'It would be inexcusable, even in a man, to run such a risk--I don't believe there is another woman in England who would think of such a thing.' Those were his words."

"Did they have any effect on her?"

"Not the least in the world. She apologized for having wasted his valuable time, and wished him good morning. 'If nobody will help me,' she said, quietly, 'I must help myself.' Then she turned to me. 'You have seen how

carefully and delicately poor Jack can work,' she said; 'you have seen him tempted to break out, and yet capable of restraining himself in my presence. And, more than that, on the one occasion when he did lose his self-control, you saw how he recovered himself when he was calmly and kindly reasoned with. Are you content, David, to leave such a man for the rest of his life to the chains and the whip?' What could I say? She was too considerate to press me; she only asked me to think of it. I have been trying to think of it ever since--and the more I try, the more I dread the consequences if that madman is brought into the house."

Fritz shuddered at the prospect.

"On the day when Jack comes into the house, I shall go out of it," he said. The social consequences of my aunt's contemplated experiment suddenly struck him while he spoke. "What will Mrs. Wagner's friends think?" he asked piteously. "They will refuse to visit her--they will say she's mad herself."

"Don't let that distress you, gentlemen--I shan't mind what my friends say of me."

We both started in confusion to our feet. My aunt herself was standing at the open door of the summer-house with a letter in her hand.

"News from Germany, just come for you, Fritz."

With those words, she handed him the letter, and left us.

We looked at each other thoroughly ashamed of ourselves, if the truth must be told. Fritz cast an uneasy glance at the letter, and recognized the handwriting on the address. "From my father!" he said. As he opened the envelope a second letter enclosed fell out on the floor. He changed color as he picked it up, and looked at it. The seal was unbroken--the postmark was Wurzburg.

CHAPTER VII

Fritz kept the letter from Wurzburg unopened in his hand.

"It's not from Minna," he said; "the handwriting is strange to me. Perhaps my father knows something about it." He turned to his father's letter; read it; and handed it to me without a word of remark.

Mr. Keller wrote briefly as follows:--

"The enclosed letter has reached me by post, as you perceive, with written instructions to forward it to my son. The laws of honor guide me just as absolutely in my relations with my son as in my relations with any other gentleman. I forward the letter to you exactly as I have received it. But I cannot avoid noticing the postmark of the city in which the Widow Fontaine and her daughter are still living. If either Minna or her mother be the person who writes to you, I must say plainly that I forbid your entering into any correspondence with them. The two families shall never be connected by marriage while I live. Understand, my dear son, that this is said in your own best interests, and said, therefore, from the heart of your father who loves you."

While I was reading these lines Fritz had opened the letter from Wurzburg. "It's long enough, at any rate," he said, turning over the closely-written pages to find the signature at the end.

"Well?" I asked.

"Well," Fritz repeated, "it's an anonymous letter. The signature is 'Your Unknown Friend.'"

"Perhaps it relates to Miss Minna, or to her mother," I suggested. Fritz turned back to the first page and looked up at me, red with anger. "More abominable slanders! More lies about Minna's mother!" he burst out. "Come here, David. Look at it with me. What do you say? Is it the writing of a woman or a man?"

The writing was so carefully disguised that it was impossible to answer his question. The letter (like the rest of the correspondence connected with this narrative) has been copied in duplicate and placed at my disposal. I reproduce it here for reasons which will presently explain themselves--

altering nothing, not even the vulgar familiarity of the address.

"My good fellow, you once did me a kindness a long time since. Never mind what it was or who I am. I mean to do you a kindness in return. Let that be enough.

"You are in love with 'Jezebel's Daughter.' Now, don't be angry! I know you believe Jezebel to be a deeply-injured woman; I know you have been foolish enough to fight duels at Wurzburg in defense of her character.

"It is enough for you that she is a fond mother, and that her innocent daughter loves her dearly. I don't deny that she is a fond mother; but is the maternal instinct enough of itself to answer for a woman? Why, Fritz, a cat is a fond mother; but a cat scratches and swears for all that! And poor simple little Minna, who can see no harm in anybody, who can't discover wickedness when it stares her in the face--is she a trustworthy witness to the widow's character? Bah!

"Don't tear up my letter in a rage; I am not going to argue the question with you any further. Certain criminal circumstances have come to my knowledge, which point straight to this woman. I shall plainly relate those circumstances, out of my true regard for you, in the fervent hope that I may open your eyes to the truth.

"Let us go back to the death of Doctor-Professor Fontaine, at his apartments in the University of Wurzburg, on the 3rd of September, in the present year 1828.

"The poor man died of typhoid fever, as you know--and died in debt, through no extravagance on his own part, as you also know. He had outlived all his own relatives, and had no pecuniary hopes or expectations from anyone. Under these circumstances, he could only leave the written expression of his last wishes, in place of a will.

"This document committed his widow and child to the care of his widow's relations, in terms of respectful entreaty. Speaking next of himself, he directed that he should be buried with the strictest economy, so that he might cost the University as little as possible. Thirdly, and lastly, he appointed one of his brother professors to act as his sole executor, in disposing of those contents of his laboratory which were his own property at the time of his death.

"The written instructions to his executor are of such serious importance that

I feel it my duty to copy them for you, word for word.

"Thus they begin:--

"'I hereby appoint my dear old friend and colleague, Professor Stein--now absent for a while at Munich, on University business--to act as my sole representative in the disposal of the contents of my laboratory, after my death. The various objects used in my chemical investigations, which are my own private property, will be all found arranged on the long deal table that stands between the two windows. They are to be offered for sale to my successor, in the first instance. If he declines to purchase them, they can then be sent to Munich, to be sold separately by the manufacturer, as occasion may offer. The furniture of the laboratory, both movable and stationary, belongs entirely to the University, excepting the contents of an iron safe built into the south wall of the room. As to these, which are my own sole property, I seriously enjoin my executor and representative to follow my instructions to the letter:--

"'(1) Professor Stein will take care to be accompanied by a competent witness, when he opens the safe in the wall.

"'(2) The witness will take down in writing, from the dictation of Professor Stein, an exact list of the contents of the safe. These are:--Bottles containing drugs, tin cases containing powders, and a small medicine-chest, having six compartments, each occupied by a labeled bottle, holding a liquid preparation.

"'(3) The written list being complete, I desire Professor Stein to empty every one of the bottles and cases, including the bottles in the medicine-chest, into the laboratory sink, with his own hands. He is also to be especially careful to destroy the labels on the bottles in the medicine-chest. These things done, he will sign the list, stating that the work of destruction is accomplished; and the witness present will add his signature. The document, thus attested, is to be placed in the care of the Secretary to the University.

"'My object in leaving these instructions is simply to prevent the dangerous results which might follow any meddling with my chemical preparations, after my death.

"'In almost every instance, these preparations are of a poisonous nature. Having made this statement, let me add, in justice to myself, that the sole motive for my investigations has been the good of my fellow-creatures.

"'I have been anxious, in the first place, to enlarge the list of curative medicines having poison for one of their ingredients. I have attempted, in the second place, to discover antidotes to the deadly action of those poisons, which (in cases of crime or accident) might be the means of saving life.

"'If I had been spared for a few years longer, I should so far have completed my labors as to have ventured on leaving them to be introduced to the medical profession by my successor. As it is--excepting one instance, in which I ran the risk, and was happily enabled to preserve the life of a poisoned man--I have not had time so completely to verify my theories, by practical experiment, as to justify me in revealing my discoveries to the scientific world for the benefit of mankind.

"'Under these circumstances, I am resigned to the sacrifice of my ambition--I only desire to do no harm. If any of my preparations, and more particularly those in the medicine-chest, fell into ignorant or wicked hands, I tremble when I think of the consequences which might follow. My one regret is, that I have not strength enough to rise from my bed, and do the good work of destruction myself. My friend and executor will take my place.

"'The key of the laboratory door, and the key of the safe, will be secured this day in the presence of my medical attendant, in a small wooden box. The box will be sealed (before the same witness) with my own seal. I shall keep it under my pillow, to give it myself to Professor Stein, if I live until he returns from Munich.

"'If I die while my executor is still absent, my beloved wife is the one person in the world whom I can implicitly trust to take charge of the sealed box. She will give it to Professor Stein, immediately on his return to Wurzburg; together with these instructions, which will be placed in the box along with the keys.'"

"There are the instructions, friend Fritz! They are no secret now. The Professor has felt it his duty to make them public in a court of law, in consequence of the events which followed Doctor Fontaine's death. You are interested in those events, and you shall be made acquainted with them before I close my letter.

"Professor Stein returned from Munich too late to receive the box from the hands of his friend and colleague. It was presented to him by the Widow Fontaine, in accordance with her late husband's wishes.

"The Professor broke the seal. Having read his Instructions, he followed them to the letter, the same day.

"Accompanied by the Secretary to the University, as a witness, he opened the laboratory door. Leaving the sale of the objects on the table to be provided for at a later date, he proceeded at once to take the list of the bottles and cases, whose contents he was bound to destroy. On opening the safe, these objects were found as the Instructions led him to anticipate: the dust lying thick on them vouched for their having been left undisturbed. The list being completed, the contents of the bottles and cases were thereupon thrown away by the Professor's own hand.

"On looking next, however, for the medicine-chest, no such thing was to be discovered in the safe. The laboratory was searched from end to end, on the chance that some mistake had been made. Still no medicine-chest was to be found.

"Upon this the Widow Fontaine was questioned. Did she know what had become of the medicine-chest? She was not even aware that such a thing existed. Had she been careful to keep the sealed box so safely that no other person could get at it? Certainly! She had kept it locked in one of her drawers, and the key in her pocket.

"The lock of the drawer, and the locks of the laboratory door and the safe, were examined. They showed no sign of having been tampered with. Persons employed in the University, who were certain to know, were asked if duplicate keys existed, and all united in answering in the negative. The medical attendant was examined, and declared that it was physically impossible for Doctor Fontaine to have left his bed, and visited the laboratory, between the time of writing his Instructions and the time of his death.

"While these investigations were proceeding, Doctor Fontaine's senior assistant obtained leave to examine through a microscope the sealing-wax left on the box which had contained the keys.

"The result of this examination, and of the chemical analyses which followed, proved that two different kinds of sealing-wax (both of the same red color, superficially viewed) had been used on the seal of the box--an undermost layer of one kind of wax, and an uppermost layer of another, mingled with the undermost in certain places only. The plain inference followed that the doctor's sealing-wax had been softened by heat so as to allow of the opening of the box, and that new sealing-wax had been

afterwards added, and impressed by the Doctor's seal so that the executor might suspect nothing. Here, again, the evidence of the medical attendant (present at the time) proved that Doctor Fontaine had only used one stick of sealing-wax to secure the box. The seal itself was found in the possession of the widow; placed carelessly in the china tray in which she kept her rings after taking them off for the night.

"The affair is still under judicial investigation. I will not trouble you by reporting the further proceedings in detail.

"Of course, Widow Fontaine awaits the result of the investigation with the composure of conscious innocence. Of course, she has not only submitted to an examination of her lodgings, but has insisted on it. Of course, no red sealing-wax and no medicine-chest have been found. Of course, some thief unknown, for some purpose quite inconceivable, got at the box and the seal, between the Doctor's death and the return of the Professor from Munich, and read the Instructions and stole the terrible medicine-chest. Such is the theory adopted by the defense. If you can believe it--then I have written in vain. If, on the other hand, you are the sensible young man I take you to be, follow my advice. Pity poor little Minna as much as you please, but look out for another young lady with an unimpeachable mother; and think yourself lucky to have two such advisers as your excellent father, and Your Unknown Friend."

CHAPTER VIII

"I will lay any wager you like," said Fritz, when we had come to the end of the letter, "that the wretch who has written this is a woman."

"What makes you think so?"

"Because all the false reports about poor Madame Fontaine, when I was at Wurzburg, were traced to women. They envy and hate Minna's mother. She is superior to them in everything; handsome, distinguished, dresses to perfection, possesses all the accomplishments--a star, I tell you, a brilliant star among a set of dowdy domestic drudges. Isn't it infamous, without an atom of evidence against her, to take it for granted that she is guilty? False to her dead husband's confidence in her, a breaker of seals, a stealer of poisons--what an accusation against a defenseless woman! Oh, my poor dear Minna! how she must feel it; she doesn't possess her mother's strength of mind. I shall fly to Wurzburg to comfort her. My father may say what he pleases; I can't leave these two persecuted women without a friend. Suppose the legal decision goes against the widow? How do I know that judgment has not been pronounced already? The suspense is intolerable. Do you mean to tell me I am bound to obey my father, when his conduct is neither just nor reasonable?"

"Gently, Fritz--gently!"

"I tell you, David, I can prove what I say. Just listen to this. My father has never even seen Minna's mother; he blindly believes the scandals afloat about her--he denies that any woman can be generally disliked and distrusted among her neighbors without some good reason for it. I assure you, on my honor, he has no better excuse for forbidding me to marry Minna than that. Is it just, is it reasonable, to condemn a woman without first hearing what she has to say in her own defense? Ah, now indeed I feel the loss of my own dear mother! If she had been alive she would have exerted her influence, and have made my father ashamed of his own narrow prejudices. My position is maddening; my head whirls when I think of it. If I go to Wurzburg, my father will never speak to me again. If I stay here, I shall cut my throat."

There was still a little beer left in the bottom of the second bottle. Fritz poured it out, with a gloomy resolution to absorb it to the last drop.

I took advantage of this momentary pause of silence to recommend the virtue of patience to the consideration of my friend. News from Wurzburg, I reminded him, might be obtained in our immediate neighborhood by consulting a file of German journals, kept at a foreign coffee-house. By way of strengthening the good influence of this suggestion, I informed Fritz that I expected to be shortly sent to Frankfort, as the bearer of a business communication addressed to Mr. Keller by my aunt; and I offered privately to make inquiries, and (if possible) even to take messages to Wurzburg--if he would only engage to wait patiently for the brighter prospects that might show themselves in the time to come.

I had barely succeeded in tranquilizing Fritz, when my attention was claimed by the more serious and pressing subject of the liberation of Jack Straw. My aunt sent to say that she wished to see me.

I found her at her writing-table, with the head-clerk established at the desk opposite.

Mr. Hartrey was quite as strongly opposed as the lawyer to any meddling with the treatment of mad people on the part of my aunt. But he placed his duty to his employer before all other considerations; and he rendered, under respectful protest, such services as were required of him. He was now engaged in drawing out the necessary memorials and statements, under the instructions of my aunt. Her object in sending for me was to inquire if I objected to making fair copies of the rough drafts thus produced. In the present stage of the affair, she was unwilling to take the clerks at the office into her confidence. As a matter of course, I followed Mr. Hartrey's example, and duly subordinated my own opinions to my aunt's convenience.

On the next day, she paid her promised visit to poor Jack.

The bag which she had committed to his care was returned to her without the slightest injury. Naturally enough, she welcomed this circumstance as offering a new encouragement to the design that she had in view. Mad Jack could not only understand a responsibility, but could prove himself worthy of it. The superintendent smiled, and said, in his finely ironical way, "I never denied, madam, that Jack was cunning."

From that date, my aunt's venturesome enterprise advanced towards completion with a rapidity that astonished us.

Applying, in the first instance, to the friend of her late husband, holding a position in the Royal Household, she was met once more by the inevitable

objections to her design. She vainly pleaded that her purpose was to try the experiment modestly in the one pitiable case of Jack Straw, and that she would willingly leave any further development of her husband's humane project to persons better qualified to encounter dangers and difficulties than herself. The only concession that she could obtain was an appointment for a second interview, in the presence of a gentleman whose opinion it would be important to consult. He was one of the physicians attached to the Court, and he was known to be a man of liberal views in his profession. Mrs. Wagner would do well, in her own interests, to be guided by his disinterested advice.

Keeping this second appointment, my aunt provided herself with a special means of persuasion in the shape of her husband's diary, containing his unfinished notes on the treatment of insanity by moral influence.

As she had anticipated, the physician invited to advise her was readier to read the notes than to listen to her own imperfect explanation of the object in view. He was strongly impressed by the novelty and good sense of the ideas that her husband advocated, and was candid enough openly to acknowledge it. But he, too, protested against any attempt on the part of a woman to carry out any part of the proposed reform, even on the smallest scale. Exasperated by these new remonstrances, my aunt's patience gave way. Refusing to submit herself to the physician's advice, she argued the question boldly from her own point of view. The discussion was at its height, when the door of the room was suddenly opened from without. A lady in walking-costume appeared, with two ladies in attendance on her. The two gentlemen started to their feet, and whispered to my aunt, "The Princess!"

This was the exalted personage whom the superintendent at Bethlehem had been too discreet to describe more particularly as a daughter of George the Third. Passing the door on her way to the Palace-gardens, the Princess had heard the contending voices, and the name of Jack distinctly pronounced in a woman's tones. Inheriting unusually vigorous impulses of curiosity from her august father, her Highness opened the door and joined the party without ceremony.

"What are you quarreling about?" inquired the Princess. "And who is this lady?"

Mrs. Wagner was presented, to answer for herself. She made the best of the golden opportunity that had fallen into her hands. The Princess was first astonished, then interested, then converted to my aunt's view of the case. In the monotonous routine of Court life, here was a romantic adventure in

which even the King's daughter could take some share. Her Highness quoted Boadicea, Queen Elizabeth, and Joan of Arc, as women who had matched the men on their own ground--and complimented Mrs. Wagner as a heroine of the same type.

"You are a fine creature," said the Princess, "and you may trust to me to help you with all my heart. Come to my apartments tomorrow at this time--and tell poor Jack that I have not forgotten him."

Assailed by Royal influence, all the technical obstacles that lawyers, doctors, and governors could raise to the liberation of Jack Straw were set aside by an ingenious appeal to the letter of the law, originating in a suggestion made by the Princess herself.

"It lies in a nutshell, my dear," said her Highness to my aunt. "They tell me I broke the rules when I insisted on having Jack admitted to the Hospital. Now, your late husband was one of the governors; and you are his sole executor. Very good. As your husband's representative, complain of the violation of the rules, and insist on the discharge of Jack. He occupies a place which ought to be filled by an educated patient in a higher rank of life. Oh, never mind me! I shall express my regret for disregarding the regulations--and, to prove my sincerity, I shall consent to the poor creature's dismissal, and assume the whole responsibility of providing for him myself. There is the way out of our difficulty. Take it--and you shall have Jack whenever you want him."

In three weeks from that time, the "dangerous lunatic" was free (as our friend the lawyer put it) to "murder Mrs. Wagner, and to burn the house down."

How my aunt's perilous experiment was conducted--in what particulars it succeeded and in what particulars it failed--I am unable to state as an eyewitness, owing to my absence at the time. This curious portion of the narrative will be found related by Jack himself, on a page still to come. In the meanwhile, the course of events compels me to revert to the circumstances which led to my departure from London.

While Mrs. Wagner was still in attendance at the palace, a letter reached her from Mr. Keller, stating the necessity of increasing the number of clerks at the Frankfort branch of our business. Closely occupied as she then was, she found time to provide me with those instructions to her German partners, preparing them for the coming employment of women in their office, to which she had first alluded when the lawyer and I had our interview with

her after the reading of the will.

"The cause of the women," she said to me, "must not suffer because I happen to be just now devoted to the cause of poor Jack. Go at once to Frankfort, David. I have written enough to prepare my partners there for a change in the administration of the office, and to defer for the present the proposed enlargement of our staff of clerks. The rest you can yourself explain from your own knowledge of the plans that I have in contemplation. Start on your journey as soon as possible--and understand that you are to say No positively, if Fritz proposes to accompany you. He is not to leave London without the express permission of his father."

Fritz did propose to accompany me, the moment he heard of my journey. I must own that I thought the circumstances excused him.

On the previous evening, we had consulted the German newspapers at the coffee-house, and had found news from Wurzburg which quite overwhelmed my excitable friend.

Being called upon to deliver their judgment, the authorities presiding at the legal inquiry into the violation of the seals and the loss of the medicine-chest failed to agree in opinion, and thus brought the investigation to a most unsatisfactory end. The moral effect of this division among the magistrates was unquestionably to cast a slur on the reputation of Widow Fontaine. She was not pronounced to be guilty--but she was also not declared to be innocent. Feeling, no doubt, that her position among her neighbors had now become unendurable, she and her daughter had left Wurzburg. The newspaper narrative added that their departure had been privately accomplished. No information could be obtained of the place of their retreat.

But for this last circumstance, I believe Fritz would have insisted on traveling with me. Ignorant of what direction to begin the search for Minna and her mother, he consented to leave me to look for traces of them in Germany, while he remained behind to inquire at the different foreign hotels, on the chance that they might have taken refuge in London.

The next morning I started for Frankfort.

My spirits were high as I left the shores of England. I had a young man's hearty and natural enjoyment of change. Besides, it flattered my self-esteem to feel that I was my aunt's business-representative; and I was almost equally proud to be Fritz's confidential friend. Never could any poor human creature have been a more innocent instrument of mischief in the hands of

Destiny than I was, on that fatal journey. The day was dark, when the old weary way of traveling brought me at last to Frankfort. The unseen prospect, at the moment when I stepped out of the mail-post-carriage, was darker still.

CHAPTER IX

I had just given a porter the necessary directions for taking my portmanteau to Mr. Keller's house, when I heard a woman's voice behind me asking the way to the Poste Restante--or, in our roundabout English phrase, the office of letters to be left till called for.

The voice was delightfully fresh and sweet, with an undertone of sadness, which made it additionally interesting. I did what most other young men in my place would have done--I looked round directly.

Yes! the promise of the voice was abundantly kept by the person. She was quite a young girl, modest and ladylike; a little pale and careworn, poor thing, as if her experience of life had its sad side already. Her face was animated by soft sensitive eyes--the figure supple and slight, the dress of the plainest material, but so neatly made and so perfectly worn that I should have doubted her being a German girl, if I had not heard the purely South-German accent in which she put her question. It was answered, briefly and civilly, by the conductor of the post-carriage in which I had traveled. But, at that hour, the old court-yard of the post-office was thronged with people arriving and departing, meeting their friends and posting their letters. The girl was evidently not used to crowds. She was nervous and confused. After advancing a few steps in the direction pointed out to her, she stopped in bewilderment, hustled by busy people, and evidently in doubt already about which way she was to turn next.

If I had followed the strict line of duty, I suppose I should have turned my steps in the direction of Mr. Keller's house. I followed my instincts instead, and offered my services to the young lady. Blame the laws of Nature and the attraction between the sexes. Don't blame me.

"I heard you asking for the post-office," I said. "Will you allow me to show you the way?"

She looked at me, and hesitated. I felt that I was paying the double penalty of being a young man, and of being perhaps a little too eager as well.

"Forgive me for venturing to speak to you," I pleaded. "It is not very pleasant for a young lady to find herself alone in such a crowded place as this. I only ask permission to make myself of some trifling use to you."

She looked at me again, and altered her first opinion.

"You are very kind, sir; I will thankfully accept your assistance."

"May I offer you my arm?"

She declined this proposal--with perfect amiability, however. "Thank you, sir, I will follow you, if you please."

I pushed my way through the crowd, with the charming stranger close at my heels. Arrived at the post-office, I drew aside to let her make her own inquiries. Would she mention her name? No; she handed in a passport, and asked if there was a letter waiting for the person named in it. The letter was found; but was not immediately delivered. As well as I could understand, the postage had been insufficiently paid, and the customary double-rate was due. The young lady searched in the pocket of her dress--a cry of alarm escaped her. "Oh!" she exclaimed, "I have lost my purse, and the letter is so important!"

It occurred to me immediately that she had had her pocket picked by some thief in the crowd. The clerk thought so too. He looked at the clock. "You must be quick about it if you return for the letter," he said, "the office closes in ten minutes."

She clasped her hands in despair. "It's more than ten minutes' walk," she said, "before I can get home."

I immediately offered to lend her the money. "It is such a very small sum," I reminded her, "that it would be absurd to consider yourself under any obligation to me."

Between her eagerness to get possession of the letter, and her doubt of the propriety of accepting my offer, she looked sadly embarrassed, poor soul.

"You are very good to me," she said confusedly; "but I am afraid it might not be quite right in me to borrow money of a stranger, however little it may be. And, even if I did venture, how am I----?" She looked at me shyly, and shrank from finishing the sentence.

"How are you to pay it back?" I suggested.

"Yes, sir."

"Oh, it's not worth the trouble of paying back. Give it to the first poor person you meet with to-morrow." I said this, with the intention of reconciling her to the loan of the money. It had exactly the contrary effect on this singularly delicate and scrupulous girl. She drew back a step directly.

"No, I couldn't do that," she said. "I could only accept your kindness, if----" She stopped again. The clerk looked once more at the clock. "Make up your mind, Miss, before it's too late."

In her terror of not getting the letter that day, she spoke out plainly at last. "Will you kindly tell me, sir, to what address I can return the money when I get home?"

I paid for the letter first, and then answered the question.

"If you will be so good as to send it to Mr. Keller's house----"

Before I could add the name of the street, her pale face suddenly flushed. "Oh!" she exclaimed impulsively, "do you know Mr. Keller?"

A presentiment of the truth occurred to my mind for the first time.

"Yes," I said; "and his son Fritz too."

She trembled; the color that had risen in her face left it instantly; she looked away from me with a pained, humiliated expression. Doubt was no longer possible. The charming stranger was Fritz's sweetheart--and "Jezebel's Daughter."

My respect for the young lady forbade me to attempt any concealment of the discovery that I had made. I said at once, "I believe I have the honor of speaking to Miss Minna Fontaine?"

She looked at me in wonder, not unmixed with distrust.

"How do you know who I am?" she asked.

"I can easily tell you, Miss Minna. I am David Glenney, nephew of Mrs. Wagner, of London. Fritz is staying in her house, and he and I have talked about you by the hour together."

The poor girl's face, so pale and sad the moment before, became radiant with happiness. "Oh!" she cried innocently, "has Fritz not forgotten me?"

Even at this distance of time, my memory recalls her lovely dark eyes riveted in breathless interest on my face, as I spoke of Fritz's love and devotion, and told her that she was still the one dear image in his thoughts by day, in his dreams by night. All her shyness vanished. She impulsively gave me her hand. "How can I be grateful enough to the good angel who has brought us together!" she exclaimed. "If we were not in the street, I do believe, Mr. David, I should go down on my knees to thank you! You have made me the happiest girl living." Her voice suddenly failed her; she drew her veil down. "Don't mind me," she said; "I can't help crying for joy."

Shall I confess what my emotions were? For the moment, I forgot my own little love affair in England--and envied Fritz from the bottom of my heart.

The chance-passengers in the street began to pause and look at us. I offered Minna my arm, and asked permission to attend her on the way home.

"I should like it," she answered, with a friendly frankness that charmed me. "But you are expected at Mr. Keller's--you must go there first."

"May I call and see you to-morrow?" I persisted, "and save you the trouble of sending my money to Mr. Keller's?"

She lifted her veil and smiled at me brightly through her tears. "Yes," she said; "come to-morrow and be introduced to my mother. Oh! how glad my dear mother will be to see you, when I tell her what has happened! I am a selfish wretch; I have not borne my sorrow and suspense as I ought; I have made her miserable about me, because I was miserable about Fritz. It's all over now. Thank you again and again. There is our address on that card. No, no, we must say good-bye till to-morrow. My mother is waiting for her letter; and Mr. Keller is wondering what has become of you." She pressed my hand warmly and left me.

On my way alone to Mr. Keller's house, I was not quite satisfied with myself. The fear occurred to me that I might have spoken about Fritz a little too freely, and might have excited hopes which could never be realized. The contemplation of the doubtful future began to oppress my mind. Minna might have reason to regret that she had ever met with me.

I was received by Mr. Keller with truly German cordiality. He and his partner Mr. Engelman--one a widower, the other an old bachelor--lived together in the ancient building, in Main Street, near the river, which served for house and for offices alike.

The two old gentlemen offered the completest personal contrast imaginable. Mr. Keller was lean, tall, and wiry--a man of considerable attainments beyond the limits of his business, capable (when his hot temper was not excited) of speaking sensibly and strongly on any subject in which he was interested. Mr. Engelman, short and fat, devoted to the office during the hours of business, had never read a book in his life, and had no aspiration beyond the limits of his garden and his pipe. "In my leisure moments," he used to say, "give me my flowers, my pipe, and my peace of mind--and I ask no more." Widely as they differed in character, the two partners had the truest regard for one another. Mr. Engelman believed Mr. Keller to be the most accomplished and remarkable man in Germany. Mr. Keller was as firmly persuaded, on his side, that Mr. Engelman was an angel in sweetness of temper, and a model of modest and unassuming good sense. Mr. Engelman listened to Mr. Keller's learned talk with an ignorant admiration which knew no limit. Mr. Keller, detesting tobacco in all its forms, and taking no sort of interest in horticulture, submitted to the fumes of Mr. Engelman's pipe, and passed hours in Mr. Engelman's garden without knowing the names of nine-tenths of the flowers that grew in it. There are still such men to be found in Germany and in England; but, oh! dear me, the older I get the fewer I find there are of them.

The two old friends and partners were waiting for me to join them at their early German supper. Specimens of Mr. Engelman's flowers adorned the table in honor of my arrival. He presented me with a rose from the nosegay when I entered the room.

"And how did you leave dear Mrs. Wagner?" he inquired.

"And how is my boy Fritz?" asked Mr. Keller.

I answered in terms which satisfied them both, and the supper proceeded gaily. But when the table was cleared, and Mr. Engelman had lit his pipe, and I had kept him company with a cigar, then Mr. Keller put the fatal question. "And now tell me, David, do you come to us on business or do you come to us on pleasure?"

I had no alternative but to produce my instructions, and to announce the contemplated invasion of the office by a select army of female clerks. The effect produced by the disclosure was highly characteristic of the widely different temperaments of the two partners.

Mild Mr. Engelman laid down his pipe, and looked at Mr. Keller in helpless

silence.

Irritable Mr. Keller struck his fist on the table, and appealed to Mr. Engelman with fury in his looks.

"What did I tell you," he asked, "when we first heard that Mr. Wagner's widow was appointed head-partner in the business? How many opinions of philosophers on the moral and physical incapacities of women did I quote? Did I, or did I not, begin with the ancient Egyptians, and end with Doctor Bernastrokius, our neighbor in the next street?"

Poor Mr. Engelman looked frightened.

"Don't be angry, my dear friend," he said softly.

"Angry?" repeated Mr. Keller, more furiously than ever. "My good Engelman, you never were more absurdly mistaken in your life! I am delighted. Exactly what I expected, exactly what I predicted, has come to pass. Put down your pipe! I can bear a great deal--but tobacco smoke is beyond me at such a crisis as this. And do for once overcome your constitutional indolence. Consult your memory; recall my own words when we were first informed that we had a woman for head-partner."

"She was a very pretty woman when I first saw her," Mr. Engelman remarked.

"Pooh!" cried Mr. Keller.

"I didn't mean to offend you," said Mr. Engelman. "Allow me to present you with one of my roses as a peace-offering."

"Will you be quiet, and let me speak?"

"My dear Keller, I am always too glad to hear you speak! You put ideas into my poor head, and my poor head lets them out, and then you put them in again. What noble perseverance! If I live a while longer I do really think you will make a clever man of me. Let me put the rose in your buttonhole for you. And I say, I wish you would allow me to go on with my pipe."

Mr. Keller made a gesture of resignation, and gave up his partner in despair. "I appeal to you, David," he said, and poured the full flow of his learning and his indignation into my unlucky ears.

Mr. Engelman, enveloped in clouds of tobacco-smoke, enjoyed in silence the composing influence of his pipe. I said, "Yes, sir," and "No, sir," at the right intervals in the flow of Mr. Keller's eloquence. At this distance of time, I cannot pretend to report the long harangue of which I was made the victim. In substance, Mr. Keller held that there were two irremediable vices in the composition of women. Their dispositions presented, morally speaking, a disastrous mixture of the imitativeness of a monkey and the restlessness of a child. Having proved this by copious references to the highest authorities, Mr. Keller logically claimed my aunt as a woman, and, as such, not only incapable of "letting well alone," but naturally disposed to imitate her husband on the most superficial and defective sides of his character. "I predicted, David, that the fatal disturbance of our steady old business was now only a question of time--and there, in Mrs. Wagner's ridiculous instructions, is the fulfillment of my prophecy!"

Before we went to bed that night, the partners arrived at two resolutions. Mr. Keller resolved to address a written remonstrance to my aunt. Mr. Engelman resolved to show me his garden the first thing in the morning.

CHAPTER X

On the afternoon of the next day, while my two good friends were still occupied by the duties of the office, I stole out to pay my promised visit to Minna and Minna's mother.

It was impossible not to arrive at the conclusion that they were indeed in straitened circumstances. Their lodgings were in the cheap suburban quarter of Frankfort on the left bank of the river. Everything was scrupulously neat, and the poor furniture was arranged with taste--but no dexterity of management could disguise the squalid shabbiness of the sitting-room into which I was shown. I could not help thinking how distressed Fritz would feel, if he could have seen his charming Minna in a place so unworthy of her as this.

The rickety door opened, and the "Jezebel" of the anonymous letter (followed by her daughter) entered the room.

There are certain remarkable women in all countries who, whatever sphere they may be seen in, fill that sphere as completely as a great actor fills the stage. Widow Fontaine was one of these noteworthy persons. The wretched little room seemed to disappear when she softly glided into it; and even the pretty Minna herself receded into partial obscurity in her mother's presence. And yet there was nothing in the least obtrusive in the manner of Madame Fontaine, and nothing remarkable in her stature. Her figure, reaching to no more than the middle height, was the well-rounded figure of a woman approaching forty years of age. The influence she exercised was, in part, attributable, as I suppose, to the supple grace of all her movements; in part, to the commanding composure of her expression and the indescribable witchery of her manner. Her dark eyes, never fully opened in my remembrance, looked at me under heavy overhanging upper eyelids. Her enemies saw something sensual in their strange expression. To my mind it was rather something furtively cruel--except when she looked at her daughter. Sensuality shows itself most plainly in the excessive development of the lower part of the face. Madame Fontaine's lips were thin, and her chin was too small. Her profuse black hair was just beginning to be streaked with gray. Her complexion wanted color. In spite of these drawbacks, she was still a striking, I might almost say a startling, creature, when you first looked at her. And, though she only wore the plainest widow's weeds, I don't scruple to assert that she was the most perfectly dressed woman I ever saw.

Minna made a modest attempt to present me in due form. Her mother put her aside playfully, and held out both her long white powerful hands to me as cordially as if we had known each other for years.

"I wait to prove other people before I accept them for my friends," she said. "Mr. David, you have been more than kind to my daughter--and you are my friend at our first meeting."

I believe I repeat the words exactly. I wish I could give any adequate idea of the exquisite charm of voice and manner which accompanied them.

And yet, I was not at my ease with her--I was not drawn to her irresistibly, as I had felt drawn to her daughter. Those dark, steady, heavy-lidded eyes of hers seemed to be looking straight into my heart, and surprising all my secrets. To say that I actually distrusted and disliked her would be far from the truth. Distrust and dislike would have protected me, in some degree at least, from feeling her influence as I certainly did feel it. How that influence was exerted--whether it was through her eyes, or through her manner, or, to speak the jargon of these latter days, through some "magnetic emanation" from her, which invisibly overpowered me--is more than I can possibly say. I can only report that she contrived by slow degrees to subject the action of my will more and more completely to the action of hers, until I found myself answering her most insidious questions as unreservedly as if she had been in very truth my intimate and trusted friend.

"And is this your first visit to Frankfort, Mr. David?" she began.

"Oh, no, madam! I have been at Frankfort on two former occasions."

"Ah, indeed? And have you always stayed with Mr. Keller?"

"Always."

She looked unaccountably interested when she heard that reply, brief as it was.

"Then, of course, you are intimate with him," she said. "Intimate enough, perhaps, to ask a favor or to introduce a friend?"

I made a futile attempt to answer this cautiously.

"As intimate, madam, as a young clerk in the business can hope to be with a partner," I said.

"A clerk in the business?" she repeated. "I thought you lived in London, with your aunt."

Here Minna interposed for the first time.

"You forget, mamma, that there are three names in the business. The inscription over the door in Main Street is Wagner, Keller, and Engelman. Fritz once told me that the office here in Frankfort was only the small office--and the grand business was Mr. Wagner's business in London. Am I right, Mr. David?"

"Quite right, Miss Minna. But we have no such magnificent flower-garden at the London house as Mr. Engelman's flower-garden here. May I offer you a nosegay which he allowed me to gather?"

I had hoped to make the flowers a means of turning the conversation to more interesting topics. But the widow resumed her questions, while Minna was admiring the flowers.

"Then you are Mr. Wagner's clerk?" she persisted.

"I was Mr. Wagner's clerk. Mr. Wagner is dead."

"Ha! And who takes care of the great business now?"

Without well knowing why, I felt a certain reluctance to speak of my aunt and her affairs. But Widow Fontaine's eyes rested on me with a resolute expectation in them which I felt myself compelled to gratify. When she understood that Mr. Wagner's widow was now the chief authority in the business, her curiosity to hear everything that I could tell her about my aunt became all but insatiable. Minna's interest in the subject was, in quite another way, as vivid as her mother's. My aunt's house was the place to which cruel Mr. Keller had banished her lover. The inquiries of the mother and daughter followed each other in such rapid succession that I cannot pretend to remember them now. The last question alone remains vividly impressed on my memory, in connection with the unexpected effect which my answer produced. It was put by the widow in these words:

"Your aunt is interested, of course, in the affairs of her partners in this place. Is it possible, Mr. David, that she may one day take the journey to Frankfort?"

"It is quite likely, madam, that my aunt may be in Frankfort on business before the end of the year."

As I replied in those terms the widow looked round slowly at her daughter. Minna was evidently quite as much at a loss to understand the look as I was. Madame Fontaine turned to me again, and made an apology.

"Pardon me, Mr. David, there is a little domestic duty that I had forgotten." She crossed the room to a small table, on which writing-materials were placed, wrote a few lines, and handed the paper, without enclosing it, to Minna. "Give that, my love, to our good friend downstairs--and, while you are in the kitchen, suppose you make the tea. You will stay and drink tea with us, Mr. David? It is our only luxury, and we always make it ourselves."

My first impulse was to find an excuse for declining the invitation. There was something in the air of mystery with which Madame Fontaine performed her domestic duties that was not at all to my taste. But Minna pleaded with me to say Yes. "Do stay with us a little longer," she said, in her innocently frank way, "we have so few pleasures in this place." I might, perhaps, have even resisted Minna--but her mother literally laid hands on me. She seated herself, with the air of an empress, on a shabby little sofa in the corner of the room, and beckoning me to take my place by her side, laid her cool firm hand persuasively on mine. Her touch filled me with a strange sense of disturbance, half pleasurable, half painful--I don't know how to describe it. Let me only record that I yielded, and that Minna left us together.

"I want to tell you the whole truth," said Madame Fontaine, as soon as we were alone; "and I can only do so in the absence of my daughter. You must have seen for yourself that we are very poor?"

Her hand pressed mine gently. I answered as delicately as I could--I said I was sorry, but not surprised, to hear it.

"When you kindly helped Minna to get that letter yesterday," she went on, "you were the innocent means of inflicting a disappointment on me--one disappointment more, after others that had gone before it. I came here to place my case before some wealthy relatives of mine in this city. They refused to assist me. I wrote next to other members of my family, living in Brussels. The letter of yesterday contained their answer. Another refusal! The landlady of this house is an afflicted creature, with every claim on my sympathies; she, too, is struggling with poverty. If I failed to pay her, it would be too cruel. Only yesterday I felt it my hard duty to give her notice of our departure in a week more. I have just written to recall that notice. The

reason is, that I see a gleam of hope in the future--and you, Mr. David, are the friend who has shown it to me."

I was more than surprised at this. "May I ask how?" I said.

She patted my hand with a playful assumption of petulance.

"A little more patience," she rejoined; "and you shall soon hear. If I had only myself to think of, I should not feel the anxieties that now trouble me. I could take a housekeeper's place to-morrow. Yes! I was brought up among surroundings of luxury and refinement; I descended in rank when I married--but for all that, I could fill a domestic employment without repining my lot, without losing my self-respect. Adversity is a hard teacher of sound lessons, David. May I call you David? And if you heard of a housekeeper's place vacant, would you tell me of it?"

I could hardly understand whether she was in jest or in earnest. She went on without waiting for me to reply.

"But I have my daughter to think of," she resumed, "and to add to my anxieties my daughter has given her heart to Mr. Keller's son. While I and my dear Minna had only our own interests to consider, we might have earned our daily bread together; we might have faced the future with courage. But what might once have been the calm course of our lives is now troubled by a third person--a rival with me in my daughter's love--and, worse still, a man who is forbidden to marry her. Is it wonderful that I feel baffled, disheartened, helpless? Oh, I am not exaggerating! I know my child's nature. She is too delicate, too exquisitely sensitive, for the rough world she lives in. When she loves, she loves with all her heart and soul. Day by day I have seen her pining and fading under her separation from Fritz. You have revived her hopes for the moment--but the prospect before her remains unaltered. If she loses Fritz she will die of a broken heart. Oh, God! the one creature I love--and how I am to help her and save her I don't know!"

For the first time, I heard the fervor of true feeling in her voice. She turned aside from me, and hid her face with a wild gesture of despair that was really terrible to see. I tried, honestly tried, to comfort her.

"Of one thing at least you may be sure." I said. "Fritz's whole heart is given to your daughter. He will be true to her, and worthy of her, through all trials."

"I don't doubt it," she answered sadly, "I have nothing to say against my

girl's choice. Fritz is good, and Fritz is true, as you say. But you forget his father. Personally, mind, I despise Mr. Keller." She looked round at me with unutterable contempt flashing through the tears that filled her eyes. "A man who listens to every lie that scandal can utter against the character of a helpless woman--who gives her no opportunity of defending herself (I have written to him and received no answer)--who declares that his son shall never marry my daughter (because we are poor, of course); and who uses attacks on my reputation which he has never verified, as the excuse for his brutal conduct--can anybody respect such a man as that? And yet on this despicable creature my child's happiness and my child's life depend! For her sake, no matter what my own feeling may be, I must stoop to defend myself. I must make my opportunity of combating his cowardly prejudice, and winning his good opinion in spite of himself. How am I to get a hearing? how am I to approach him? I understand that you are not in a position to help me. But you have done wonders for me nevertheless, and God bless you for it!"

She lifted my hand to her lips. I foresaw what was coming; I tried to speak. But she gave me no opportunity; her eloquent enthusiasm rushed into a new flow of words.

"Yes, my best of friends, my wisest of advisers," she went on; "you have suggested the irresistible interference of a person whose authority is supreme. Your excellent aunt is the head of the business; Mr. Keller must listen to his charming chief. There is my gleam of hope. On that chance, I will sell the last few valuables I possess, and wait till Mrs. Wagner arrives at Frankfort. You start, David! What is there to alarm you? Do you suppose me capable of presuming on your aunt's kindness--of begging for favors which it may not be perfectly easy for her to grant? Mrs. Wagner knows already from Fritz what our situation is. Let her only see my Minna; I won't intrude on her myself. My daughter shall plead for me; my daughter shall ask for all I want--an interview with Mr. Keller, and permission to speak in my own defense. Tell me, honestly, am I expecting too much, if I hope that your aunt will persuade Fritz's father to see me?"

It sounded modestly enough in words. But I had my own doubts, nevertheless.

I had left Mr. Keller working hard at his protest against the employment of women in the office, to be sent to my aunt by that day's post. Knowing them both as I did, I thought it at least probable that a written controversy might be succeeded by a personal estrangement. If Mr. Keller proved obstinate, Mrs. Wagner would soon show him that she had a will of her own. Under

those circumstances, no favors could be asked, no favors could be granted--and poor Minna's prospects would be darker than ever.

This was one view of the case. I must own, however, that another impression had been produced on me. Something in Madame Fontaine's manner suggested that she might not be quite so modest in her demands on my aunt, when they met at Frankfort, as she had led me to believe. I was vexed with myself for having spoken too unreservedly, and was quite at a loss to decide what I ought to say in answer to the appeal that had been made to me. In this state of perplexity I was relieved by a welcome interruption. Minna's voice reached us from the landing outside. "I have both hands engaged," she said; "please let me in."

I ran to the door. The widow laid her finger on her lips. "Not a word, mind, to Minna!" she whispered. "We understand each other--don't we?"

I said, "Yes, certainly." And so the subject was dropped for the rest of the evening.

The charming girl came in carrying the tea-tray. She especially directed my attention to a cake which she had made that day with her own hands. "I can cook," she said, "and I can make my own dresses--and if Fritz is a poor man when he marries me, I can save him the expense of a servant." Our talk at the tea-table was, I dare say, too trifling to be recorded. I only remember that I enjoyed it. Later in the evening, Minna sang to me. I heard one of those simple German ballads again, not long since, and the music brought the tears into my eyes.

The moon rose early that night. When I looked at my watch, I found that it was time to go. Minna was at the window, admiring the moonlight. "On such a beautiful night," she said, "it seems a shame to stay indoors. Do let us walk a part of the way back with Mr. David, mamma! Only as far as the bridge, to see the moon on the river."

Her mother consented, and we three left the house together.

Arrived at the bridge, we paused to look at the view. But the clouds were rising already, and the moonlight only showed itself at intervals. Madame Fontaine said she smelt rain in the air, and took her daughter's arm to go home. I offered to return with them as far as their own door; but they positively declined to delay me on my way back. It was arranged that I should call on them again in a day or two.

Just as we were saying good-night, the fitful moonlight streamed out brightly again through a rift in the clouds. At the same moment a stout old gentleman, smoking a pipe, sauntered past us on the pavement, noticed me as he went by, stopped directly, and revealed himself as Mr. Engelman. "Good-night, Mr. David," said the widow. The moon shone full on her as she gave me her hand; Minna standing behind her in the shadow. In a moment more the two ladies had left us.

Mr. Engelman's eyes followed the smoothly gliding figure of the widow, until it was lost to view at the end of the bridge. He laid his hand eagerly on my arm. "David!" he said, "who is that glorious creature?"

"Which of the two ladies do you mean?" I asked, mischievously.

"The one with the widow's cap, of course!"

"Do you admire the widow, sir?"

"Admire her!" repeated Mr. Engelman. "Look here, David!" He showed me the long porcelain bowl of his pipe. "My dear boy, she has done what no woman ever did with me yet--she has put my pipe out!"

CHAPTER XI

There was something so absurd in the association of Madame Fontaine's charms with the extinction of Mr. Engelman's pipe, that I burst out laughing. My good old friend looked at me in grave surprise.

"What is there to laugh at in my forgetting to keep my pipe alight?" he asked. "My whole mind, David, was absorbed in that magnificent woman the instant I set eyes on her. The image of her is before me at this moment--an image of an angel in moonlight. Am I speaking poetically for the first time in my life? I shouldn't wonder. I really don't know what is the matter with me. You are a young man, and perhaps you can tell. Have I fallen in love, as the saying is?" He took me confidentially by the arm, before I could answer this formidable question. "Don't tell friend Keller!" he said, with a sudden outburst of alarm. "Keller is an excellent man, but he has no mercy on sinners. I say, David! couldn't you introduce me to her?"

Still haunted by the fear that I had spoken too unreservedly during my interview with the widow, I was in the right humor to exhibit extraordinary prudence in my intercourse with Mr. Engelman.

"I couldn't venture to introduce you," I said; "the lady is living here in the strictest retirement."

"At any rate, you can tell me her name," pleaded Mr. Engelman. "I dare say you have mentioned it to Keller?"

"I have done nothing of the sort. I have reasons for saying nothing about the lady to Mr. Keller."

"Well, you can trust me to keep the secret, David. Come! I only want to send her some flowers from my garden. She can't object to that. Tell me where I am to send my nosegay, there's a dear fellow."

I dare say I did wrong--indeed, judging by later events, I know I did wrong. But I could not view the affair seriously enough to hold out against Mr. Engelman in the matter of the nosegay. He started when I mentioned the widow's name.

"Not the mother of the girl whom Fritz wants to marry?" he exclaimed.

"Yes, the same. Don't you admire Fritz's taste? Isn't Miss Minna a charming girl?"

"I can't say, David. I was bewitched--I had no eyes for anybody but her mother. Do you think Madame Fontaine noticed me?"

"Oh, yes. I saw her look at you."

"Turn this way, David. The effect of the moonlight on you seems to make you look younger. Has it the same effect on me? How old should you guess me to be to-night? Fifty or sixty?"

"Somewhere between the two, sir."

(He was close on seventy. But who could have been cruel enough to say so, at that moment?)

My answer proved to be so encouraging to the old gentleman that he ventured on the subject of Madame Fontaine's late husband. "Was she very fond of him, David? What sort of man was he?"

I informed him that I had never even seen Dr. Fontaine; and then, by way of changing the topic, inquired if I was too late for the regular supper-hour at Main Street.

"My dear boy, the table was cleared half an hour ago. But I persuaded our sour-tempered old housekeeper to keep something hot for you. You won't find Keller very amiable to-night, David. He was upset, to begin with, by writing that remonstrance to your aunt--and then your absence annoyed him. 'This is treating our house like an hotel; I won't allow anybody to take such liberties with us.' Yes! that was really what he said of you. He was so cross, poor fellow, that I left him, and went out for a stroll on the bridge. And met my fate," added poor Mr. Engelman, in the saddest tones I had ever heard fall from his lips.

My reception at the house was a little chilly.

"I have written my mind plainly to your aunt," said Mr. Keller; "you will probably be recalled to London by return of post. In the meantime, on the next occasion when you spend the evening out, be so obliging as to leave word to that effect with one of the servants." The crabbed old housekeeper (known in the domestic circle as Mother Barbara) had her fling at me next. She set down the dish which she had kept hot for me, with a bang that tried

the resisting capacity of the porcelain severely. "I've done it this once," she said. "Next time you're late, you and the dog can sup together."

The next day, I wrote to my aunt, and also to Fritz, knowing how anxious he must be to hear from me.

To tell him the whole truth would probably have been to bring him to Frankfort as fast as sailing-vessels and horses could carry him. All I could venture to say was, that I had found the lost trace of Minna and her mother, and that I had every reason to believe there was no cause to feel any present anxiety about them. I added that I might be in a position to forward a letter secretly, if it would comfort him to write to his sweetheart.

In making this offer, I was, no doubt, encouraging my friend to disobey the plain commands which his father had laid on him.

But, as the case stood, I had really no other alternative. With Fritz's temperament, it would have been simply impossible to induce him to remain in London, unless his patience was sustained in my absence by a practical concession of some kind. In the interests of peace, then--and I must own in the interests of the pretty and interesting Minna as well--I consented to become a medium for correspondence, on the purely Jesuitical principle that the end justified the means. I had promised to let Minna know of it when I wrote to Fritz. My time being entirely at my own disposal, until the vexed question of the employment of women was settled between Mr. Keller and my aunt, I went to the widow's lodgings, after putting my letters in the post.

Having made Minna happy in the anticipation of hearing from Fritz, I had leisure to notice an old china punch-bowl on the table, filled to overflowing with magnificent flowers. To anyone who knew Mr. Engelman as well as I did, the punch-bowl suggested serious considerations. He, who forbade the plucking of a single flower on ordinary occasions, must, with his own hands, have seriously damaged the appearance of his beautiful garden.

"What splendid flowers!" I said, feeling my way cautiously. "Mr. Engelman himself might be envious of such a nosegay as that."

The widow's heavy eyelids drooped lower for a moment, in unconcealed contempt for my simplicity.

"Do you really think you can mystify me?" she asked ironically. "Mr. Engelman has done more than send the flowers--he has written me a too-

flattering note. And I," she said, glancing carelessly at the mantelpiece, on which a letter was placed, "have written the necessary acknowledgment. It would be absurd to stand on ceremony with the harmless old gentleman who met us on the bridge. How fat he is! and what a wonderful pipe he carries--almost as fat as himself!"

Alas for Mr. Engelman! I could not resist saying a word in his favor--she spoke of him with such cruelly sincere contempt.

"Though he only saw you for a moment," I said, "he is your ardent admirer already."

"Is he indeed?" She was so utterly indifferent to Mr. Engelman's admiration that she could hardly take the trouble to make that commonplace reply. The next moment she dismissed the subject. "So you have written to Fritz?" she went on. "Have you also written to your aunt?"

"Yes, by the same post."

"Mainly on business, no doubt? Is it indiscreet to ask if you slipped in a little word about the hopes that I associate with Mrs. Wagner's arrival at Frankfort?"

This seemed to give me a good opportunity of moderating her "hopes," in mercy to her daughter and to herself.

"I thought it undesirable to mention the subject--for the present, at least," I answered. "There is a serious difference of opinion between Mrs. Wagner and Mr. Keller, on a subject connected with the management of the office here. I say serious, because they are both equally firm in maintaining their convictions. Mr. Keller has written to my aunt by yesterday's post; and I fear it may end in an angry correspondence between them."

I saw that I had startled her. She suddenly drew her chair close to mine.

"Do you think the correspondence will delay your aunt's departure from England?" she asked.

"On the contrary. My aunt is a very resolute person, and it may hasten her departure. But I am afraid it will indispose her to ask any favors of Mr. Keller, or to associate herself with his personal concerns. Any friendly intercourse between them will indeed be impossible, if she asserts her authority as head-partner, and forces him to submit to a woman in a matter

of business."

She sank back in her chair. "I understand." she said faintly.

While we had been talking, Minna had walked to the window, and had remained there looking out. She suddenly turned round as her mother spoke.

"Mamma! the landlady's little boy has just gone out. Shall I tap at the window and call him back?"

The widow roused herself with an effort. "What for, my love?" she asked, absently.

Minna pointed to the mantelpiece. "To take your letter to Mr. Engelman, mamma." Madame Fontaine looked at the letter--paused for a moment--and answered, "No, my dear; let the boy go. It doesn't matter for the present."

She turned to me, with an abrupt recovery of her customary manner.

"I am fortunately, for myself, a sanguine person," she resumed. "I always did hope for the best; and (feeling the kind motive of what you have said to me) I shall hope for the best still. Minna, my darling, Mr. David and I have been talking on dry subjects until we are tired. Give us a little music." While her daughter obediently opened the piano, she looked at the flowers. "You are fond of flowers, David?" she went on. "Do you understand the subject? I ignorantly admire the lovely colors, and enjoy the delicious scents--and I can do no more. It was really very kind of your old friend Mr. Engelman. Does he take any part in this deplorable difference of opinion between your aunt and Mr. Keller?"

What did that new allusion to Mr. Engelman mean? And why had she declined to despatch her letter to him, when the opportunity offered of sending it by the boy?

Troubled by the doubts which these considerations suggested, I committed an act of imprudence--I replied so reservedly that I put her on her guard. All I said was that I supposed Mr. Engelman agreed with Mr. Keller, but that I was not in the confidence of the two partners. From that moment she saw through me, and was silent on the subject of Mr. Engelman. Even Minna's singing had lost its charm, in my present frame of mind. It was a relief to me when I could make my excuses, and leave the house.

On my way back to Main Street, when I could think freely, my doubts began to develop into downright suspicion. Madame Fontaine could hardly hope, after what I had told her, to obtain the all-important interview with Mr. Keller, through my aunt's intercession. Had she seen her way to trying what Mr. Engelman's influence with his partner could do for her? Would she destroy her formal acknowledgment of the receipt of his flowers, as soon as my back was turned, and send him a second letter, encouraging him to visit her? And would she cast him off, without ceremony, when he had served her purpose?

These were the thoughts that troubled me on my return to the house. When we met at supper, some hours later, my worst anticipations were realized. Poor innocent Mr. Engelman was dressed with extraordinary smartness, and was in the highest good spirits. Mr. Keller asked him jestingly if he was going to be married. In the intoxication of happiness that possessed him, he was quite reckless; he actually retorted by a joke on the sore subject of the employment of women! "Who knows what may happen," he cried gaily, "when we have young ladies in the office for clerks?" Mr. Keller was so angry that he kept silence through the whole of our meal. When Mr. Engelman left the room I slipped out after him.

"You are going to Madame Fontaine's," I said.

He smirked and smiled. "Just a little evening visit, David. Aha! you young men are not to have it all your own way." He laid his hand tenderly on the left breast-pocket of his coat. "Such a delightful letter!" he said. "It is here, over my heart. No, a woman's sentiments are sacred; I mustn't show it to you."

I was on the point of telling him the whole truth, when the thought of Minna checked me for the time. My interest in preserving Mr. Engelman's tranquillity was in direct conflict with my interest in the speedy marriage of my good friend Fritz. Besides, was it likely that anything I could say would have the slightest effect on the deluded old man, in the first fervor of his infatuation? I thought I would give him a general caution, and wait to be guided by events.

"One word, sir, for your private ear," I said. "Even the finest women have their faults. You will find Madame Fontaine perfectly charming; but don't be too ready to believe that she is in earnest."

Mr. Engelman felt infinitely flattered, and owned it without the slightest reserve.

"Oh, David! David!" he said, "are you jealous of me already?"

He put on his hat (with a jaunty twist on one side), and swung his stick gaily, and left the room. For the first time, in my experience of him, he went out without his pipe; and (a more serious symptom still) he really did not appear to miss it.

CHAPTER XII

Two days passed, and I perceived another change in Mr. Engelman.

He was now transformed into a serious and reticent man. Had he committed indiscretions which might expose him to ridicule if they were known? Or had the widow warned him not to be too ready to take me into his confidence? In any case, he said not one word to me about Madame Fontaine's reception of him, and he left the house secretly when he paid his next visit to her. Having no wish to meet him unexpectedly, and feeling (if the truth be told) not quite at ease about the future, I kept away from Minna and her mother, and waited for events.

On the third day, an event happened. I received a little note from Minna:--

"Dear Mr. David,--If you care to see mamma and me, stay at home this evening. Good Mr. Engelman has promised to show us his interesting old house, after business hours."

There was nothing extraordinary in making an exhibition of "the old house." It was one among the many picturesque specimens of the domestic architecture of bygone days, for which Frankfort is famous; and it had been sketched by artists of all nations, both outside and in. At the same time, it was noticeable (perhaps only as a coincidence) that the evening chosen for showing the house to the widow, was also the evening on which Mr. Keller had an engagement with some friends in another part of the city.

As the hour approached for the arrival of the ladies, I saw that Mr. Engelman looked at me with an expression of embarrassment.

"Are you not going out this evening, David?" he asked.

"Am I in the way, sir?" I inquired mischievously.

"Oh, no!"

"In that case then, I think I shall stay at home."

He said no more, and walked up and down the room with an air of annoyance. The bell of the street-door rang. He stopped and looked at me again.

"Visitors?" I said.

He was obliged to answer me. "Friends of mine, David, who are coming to see the house."

I was just sufficiently irritated by his persistence in keeping up the mystery to set him the example of speaking plainly.

"Madame Fontaine and her daughter?" I said.

He turned quickly to answer me, and hesitated. At the same moment, the door was opened by the sour old housekeeper, frowning suspiciously at the two elegantly-dressed ladies whom she ushered into the room.

If I had been free to act on my own impulse, I should certainly (out of regard for Mr. Engelman) have refrained from accompanying the visitors when they were shown over the house. But Minna took my arm. I had no choice but to follow Mr. Engelman and her mother when they left the room.

Minna spoke to me as confidentially as if I had been her brother.

"Do you know," she whispered, "that nice old gentleman and mamma are like old friends already. Mamma is generally suspicious of strangers. Isn't it odd? And she actually invites him to bring his pipe when he comes to see us! He sits puffing smoke, and admiring mamma--and mamma does all the talking. Do come and see us soon! I have nobody to speak to about Fritz. Mamma and Mr. Engelman take no more notice of me than if I was a little dog in the room."

As we passed from the ground floor to the first floor, Madame Fontaine's admiration of the house rose from one climax of enthusiasm to another. Among the many subjects that she understood, the domestic architecture of the seventeenth century seemed to be one, and the art of water-color painting soon proved to be another.

"I am not quite contemptible as a lady-artist," I heard her say to Mr. Engelman; "and I should so like to make some little studies of these beautiful old rooms--as memorials to take with me when I am far away from Frankfort. But I don't ask it, dear Mr. Engelman. You don't want enthusiastic ladies with sketch-books in this bachelor paradise of yours. I hope we are not intruding on Mr. Keller. Is he at home?"

"No," said Mr. Engelman; "he has gone out."

Madame Fontaine's flow of eloquence suddenly ran dry. She was silent as we ascended from the first floor to the second. In this part of the house our bedrooms were situated. The chamber in which I slept presented nothing particularly worthy of notice. But the rooms occupied by Mr. Keller and Mr. Engelman contained some of the finest carved woodwork in the house.

It was beginning to get dark. Mr. Engelman lit the candles in his own room. The widow took one of them from him, and threw the light skillfully on the different objects about her. She was still a little subdued; but she showed her knowledge of wood-carving by picking out the two finest specimens in the room--a wardrobe and a toilet-table.

"My poor husband was fond of old carving," she explained modestly; "what I know about it, I know from him. Dear Mr. Engelman, your room is a picture in itself. What glorious colors! How simple and how grand! Might we----" she paused, with a becoming appearance of confusion. Her voice dropped softly to lower tones. "Might we be pardoned, do you think, if we ventured to peep into Mr. Keller's room?"

She spoke of "Mr. Keller's room" as if it had been a shrine, approachable only by a few favored worshippers. "Where is it?" she inquired, with breathless interest. I led the way out into the passage, and threw open the door without ceremony. Madame Fontaine looked at me as if I had committed an act of sacrilege.

Mr. Engelman, following us with one of his candles, lit an ancient brass lamp which hung from the middle of the ceiling. "My learned partner," he explained, "does a great deal of his reading in his bedroom, and he likes plenty of light. You will have a good view when the lamp has burnt up. The big chimney-piece is considered the finest thing of that sort in Frankfort."

The widow confronted the chimney-piece, and clasped her hands in silent rapture. When she was able to speak, she put her arm round Minna's waist.

"Let me teach you, my love, to admire this glorious work," she said, and delivered quite a little lecture on the merits of the chimney-piece. "Oh, if I could but take the merest sketch of it!" she exclaimed, by way of conclusion. "But no, it is too much to ask." She examined everything in the room with the minutest attention. Even the plain little table by the bed-side, with a jug and a glass on it, did not escape her observation. "Is that his drink?" she asked, with an air of respectful curiosity. "Do you think I might taste it?"

Mr. Engelman laughed. "It's only barley-water, dear lady," he said. "Our rheumatic old housekeeper makes as few journeys as possible up and down stairs. When she sets the room in order in the evening, she takes the night-drink up with her, and so saves a second journey."

"Taste it, Minna," said the widow, handing the glass to her daughter. "How refreshing! how pure!"

Mr. Engelman, standing on the other side of her, whispered in her ear. I was just behind them, and could not help hearing him. "You will make me jealous," he said; "you never noticed my night-drink--I have beer."

The widow answered him by a look; he heaved a little sigh of happiness. Poor Mr. Engelman!

Minna innocently broke in on this mute scene of sentiment.

She was looking at the pictures in the room, and asked for explanations of them which Mr. Engelman only could afford. It struck me as odd that her mother's artistic sympathies did not appear to be excited by the pictures. Instead of joining her daughter at the other end of the room, she stood by the bedside with her hand resting on the little table, and her eyes fixed on the jug of barley-water, absorbed in thought. On a sudden, she started, turned quickly, and caught me observing her. I might have been deceived by the lamp-light; but I thought I saw a flash of expression under her heavy eyelids, charged with such intensity of angry suspicion that it startled me. She was herself again, before I could decide whether to trust my own strong impression or not.

"Do I surprise you, David?" she asked in her gentlest tones. "I ought to be looking at the pictures, you think? My friend! I can't always control my own sad recollections. They will force themselves on me--sometimes when the most trifling associations call them up. Dear Mr. Engelman understands me. He, no doubt, has suffered too. May I sit down for a moment?"

She dropped languidly into a chair, and sat looking at the famous chimney-piece. Her attitude was the perfection of grace. Mr. Engelman hurried through his explanation of the pictures, and placed himself at her side, and admired the chimney-piece with her.

"Artists think it looks best by lamplight," he said. "The big pediment between the windows keeps out the light in the daytime."

Madame Fontaine looked round at him with a softly approving smile. "Exactly what I was thinking myself, when you spoke," she said. "The effect by this light is simply perfect. Why didn't I bring my sketch-book with me? I might have stolen some little memorial of it, in Mr. Keller's absence." She turned towards me when she said that.

"If you can do without colors," I suggested, "we have paper and pencils in the house."

The clock in the corridor struck the hour.

Mr. Engelman looked uneasy, and got up from his chair. His action suggested that the time had passed by us unperceived, and that Mr. Keller's return might take place at any moment. The same impression was evidently produced on Minna. For once in her life, the widow's quick perception seemed to have deserted her. She kept her seat as composedly as if she had been at home.

"I wonder whether I could manage without my colors?" she said placidly. "Perhaps I might try."

Mr. Engelman's uneasiness increased to downright alarm. Minna perceived the change, as I did, and at once interfered.

"I am afraid, mamma, it is too late for sketching to-night," she said. "Suppose Mr. Keller should come back?"

Madame Fontaine rose instantly, with a look of confusion. "How very stupid of me not to think of it!" she exclaimed. "Forgive me, Mr. Engelman--I was so interested, so absorbed--thank you a thousand times for your kindness!" She led the way out, with more apologies and more gratitude. Mr. Engelman recovered his tranquillity. He looked at her lovingly, and gave her his arm to lead her down-stairs.

On this occasion, Minna and I were in front. We reached the first landing, and waited there. The widow was wonderfully slow in descending the stairs. Judging by what we heard, she was absorbed in the old balusters now. When she at last joined us on the landing, the doors of the rooms on the first floor delayed her again: it was simply impossible, she said, to pass them without notice. Once more, Minna and I waited on the ground floor. Here, there was another ancient brass lamp which lighted the hall; and, therefore, another object of beauty which it was impossible to pass over in a

hurry.

"I never knew mamma to behave so oddly before," said Minna. "If such a thing wasn't impossible, in our situation, one would really think she wanted Mr. Keller to catch us in the house!"

There was not the least doubt in my mind (knowing as I did, how deeply Madame Fontaine was interested in forcing her acquaintance on Mr. Keller) that this was exactly what she did want. Fortune is proverbially said to favor the bold; and Fortune offered to the widow the perilous opportunity of which she had been in search.

While she was still admiring the lamp, the grating sound became audible of a key put into the street door.

The door opened, and Mr. Keller walked into the hall.

He stopped instantly at the sight of two ladies who were both strangers to him, and looked interrogatively at his partner. Mr. Engelman had no choice but to risk an explanation of some kind. He explained, without mentioning names.

"Friends of mine, Keller," he said confusedly, "to whom I have been showing the house."

Mr. Keller took off his hat, and bowed to the widow. With a boldness that amazed me, under the circumstances, she made a low curtsey to him, smiled her sweetest smile, and deliberately mentioned her name.

"I am Madame Fontaine, sir," she said. "And this is my daughter, Minna."

CHAPTER XIII

Mr. Keller fixed his eyes on the widow in stern silence; walked past her to the inner end of the hall; and entered a room at the back of the house, closing the door behind him. Even if he had felt inclined to look at Minna, it would not have been possible for him to see her. After one timid glance at him, the poor girl hid herself behind me, trembling piteously. I took her hand to encourage her. "Oh, what hope is there for us," she whispered, "with such a man as that?"

Madame Fontaine turned as Mr. Keller passed her, and watched his progress along the hall until he disappeared from view. "No," she said quietly to herself, "you don't escape me in that way."

As if moved by a sudden impulse, she set forth on the way by which Mr. Keller had gone before her; walking, as he had walked, to the door at the end of the hall.

I had remained with Minna, and was not in a position to see how her mother looked. Mr. Engelman's face, as he stretched out his hands entreatingly to stop Madame Fontaine, told me that the fierce passions hidden deep in the woman's nature had risen to the surface and shown themselves. "Oh, dear lady! dear lady!" cried the simple old man, "Don't look like that! It's only Keller's temper--he will soon be himself again."

Without answering him, without looking at him, she lifted her hand, and put him back from her as if he had been a troublesome child. With her firm graceful step, she resumed her progress along the hall to the room at the end, and knocked sharply at the door.

Mr. Keller's voice answered from within, "Who is there?"

"Madame Fontaine," said the widow. "I wish to speak to you."

"I decline to receive Madame Fontaine."

"In that case, Mr. Keller, I will do myself the honor of writing to you."

"I refuse to read your letter."

"Take the night to think of it, Mr. Keller, and change your mind in the

morning."

She turned away, without waiting for a reply, and joined us at the outer end of the hall.

Minna advanced to meet her, and kissed her tenderly. "Dear, kind mamma, you are doing this for my sake," said the grateful girl. "I am ashamed that you should humble yourself--it is so useless!"

"It shall not be useless," her mother answered. "If fifty Mr. Kellers threatened your happiness, my child, I would brush the fifty out of your way. Oh, my darling, my darling!"

Her voice--as firm as the voice of a man, while she declared her resolution--faltered and failed her when the last words of endearment fell from her lips. She drew Minna to her bosom, and embraced in silent rapture the one creature whom she loved. When she raised her head again she was, to my mind, more beautiful than I had ever yet seen her. The all-ennobling tears of love and grief filled her eyes. Knowing the terrible story that is still to be told, let me do that miserable woman justice. Hers was not a wholly corrupted heart. It was always in Minna's power to lift her above her own wickedness. When she held out the hand that had just touched her daughter to Mr. Engelman, it trembled as if she had been the most timid woman living.

"Good night, dear friend," she said to him; "I am sorry to have been the innocent cause of this little embarrassment."

Simple Mr. Engelman put his handkerchief to his eyes; never, in all his life, had he been so puzzled, so frightened, and so distressed. He kissed the widow's hand. "Do let me see you safe home!" he said, in tones of the tenderest entreaty.

"Not to-night," she answered. He attempted a faint remonstrance. Madame Fontaine knew perfectly well how to assert her authority over him--she gave him another of those tender looks which had already become the charm of his life. Mr. Engelman sat down on one of the hall chairs completely overwhelmed. "Dear and admirable woman!" I heard him say to himself softly.

Taking leave of me in my turn, the widow dropped my hand, struck, to all appearance, by a new idea.

"I have a favor to ask of you, David," she said. "Do you mind going back with us?"

As a matter of course I took my hat, and placed myself at her service. Mr. Engelman got on his feet, and lifted his plump hands in mute and melancholy protest. "Don't be uneasy," Madame Fontaine said to him, with a faint smile of contempt. "David doesn't love me!"

I paused for a moment, as I followed her out, to console Mr. Engelman. "She is old enough to be my mother, sir," I whispered; "and this time, at any rare, she has told you the truth."

Hardly a word passed between us on our way through the streets and over the bridge. Minna was sad and silent, thinking of Fritz; and whatever her mother might have to say to me, was evidently to be said in private. Arrived at the lodgings, Madame Fontaine requested me to wait for her in the shabby little sitting-room, and graciously gave me permission to smoke. "Say good night to David," she continued, turning to her daughter. "Your poor little heart is heavy to-night, and mamma means to put you to bed as if you were a child again. Ah! me, if those days could only come back!"

After a short absence the widow returned to me, with a composed manner and a quiet smile. The meeting with Mr. Keller seemed to have been completely dismissed from her thoughts, in the brief interval since I had seen her last.

"We often hear of parents improving their children," she said. "It is my belief that the children quite as often improve the parents. I have had some happy minutes with Minna--and (would you believe it?) I am already disposed to forgive Mr. Keller's brutality, and to write to him in a tone of moderation, which must surely have its effect. All Minna's doing--and my sweet girl doesn't in the least suspect it herself! If you ever have children of your own, David, you will understand me and feel for me. In the meantime, I must not detain you by idle talk--I must say plainly what I want of you." She opened her writing-desk and took up a pen. "If I write to Mr. Keller under your own eye, do you object to take charge of my letter?"

I hesitated how to answer. To say the least of it, her request embarrassed me.

"I don't expect you to give it to Mr. Keller personally," she explained. "It is of very serious importance to me" (she laid a marked emphasis on those words) "to be quite sure that my letter has reached him, and that he has really had

the opportunity of reading it. If you will only place it on his desk in the office, with your own hand, that is all I ask you to do. For Minna's sake, mind; not for mine!"

For Minna's sake, I consented. She rose directly, and signed to me to take her place at the desk.

"It will save time," she said, "if you write the rough draft of the letter from my dictation. I am accustomed to dictate my letters, with Minna for secretary. Of course, you shall see the fair copy before I seal it."

She began to walk up and down the little room, with her hands crossed behind her in the attitude made famous by the great Napoleon. After a minute of consideration, she dictated the draft as follows:

"Sir,--I am well aware that scandalous reports at Wurzburg have prejudiced you against me. Those reports, so far as I know, may be summed up under three heads.

"(First.) That my husband died in debt through my extravagance.

"(Second.) That my respectable neighbors refuse to associate with me.

"(Third.) That I entrapped your son Fritz into asking for my daughter's hand in marriage, because I knew his father to be a rich man.

"To the first calumny I reply, that the debts are due to expensive chemical experiments in which my late husband engaged, and that I have satisfied the creditors to the last farthing. Grant me an audience, and I will refer you to the creditors themselves.

"To the second calumny I reply, that I received invitations, on my arrival in Wurzburg after my marriage, from every lady of distinguished social position in the town. After experience of the society thus offered to me, I own to having courteously declined subsequent invitations, and having devoted myself in retirement to my husband, to my infant child, and to such studies in literature and art as I had time to pursue. Gossip and scandal, with an eternal accompaniment of knitting, are not to my taste; and, while I strictly attend to domestic duties, I do not consider them as constituting, in connection with tea-drinking, the one great interest of a woman's life. I plead guilty to having been foolish enough to openly acknowledge these sentiments, and to having made bitter enemies everywhere as the necessary consequence. If this plain defense of myself fails to satisfy you, grant me an

audience, and I will answer your questions, whatever they may be.

"To the third calumny, I reply, that if you had been a Prince instead of a merchant, I would still have done everything in my power to keep your son away from my daughter--for this simple reason, that the idea of parting with her to any man fills me with grief and dismay. I only yielded to the marriage engagement, when the conviction was forced upon me that my poor child's happiness depended on her union with your son. It is this consideration alone which induces me to write to you, and to humiliate myself by pleading for a hearing. As for the question of money, if through some unexpected misfortune you became a bankrupt to-morrow, I would entreat you to consent to the marriage exactly as I entreat you now. Poverty has no terrors for me while I have health to work. But I cannot face the idea of my child's life being blighted, because you choose to believe the slanders that are spoken of her mother. For the third time I ask you to grant me an audience, and to hear me in my own defense."

There she paused, and looked over my shoulder.

"I think that is enough," she said. "Do you see anything objectionable in my letter?"

How could I object to the letter? From beginning to end, it was strongly, and yet moderately, expressed. I resigned my place at the desk, and the widow wrote the fair copy, with her own hand. She made no change whatever, except by adding these ominous lines as a postscript:

"I implore you not to drive me to despair. A mother who is pleading for her child's life--it is nothing less, in this case--is a woman who surely asserts a sacred claim. Let no wise man deny it."

"Do you think it quite discreet," I ventured to ask, "to add those words?"

She looked at me with a moment's furtive scrutiny, and only answered after she had sealed the letter, and placed it in my hands.

"I have my reasons," she replied. "Let the words remain."

Returning to the house at rather a late hour for Frankfort, I was surprised to find Mr. Keller waiting to see me.

"I have had a talk with my partner," he said. "It has left (for the time only, I hope), a painful impression on both sides--and I must ask you to do me a

service, in the place of Mr. Engelman--who has an engagement to-morrow, which prevents him from leaving Frankfort."

His tone indicated plainly enough that the "engagement" was with Madame Fontaine. Hard words must have passed between the two old friends on the subject of the widow. Even Mr. Engelman's placid temper had, no doubt, resented Mr. Keller's conduct at the meeting in the hall.

"The service I ask of you," he resumed, "will be easily rendered. The proprietor of a commercial establishment at Hanau is desirous of entering into business-relations with us, and has sent references to respectable persons in the town and neighborhood, which it is necessary to verify. We are so busy in the office that it is impossible for me to leave Frankfort myself, or to employ our clerks on this errand. I have drawn out the necessary instructions--and Hanau, as you are aware, is within an easy distance of Frankfort. Have you any objection to be the representative of the house in this matter?"

It is needless to say that I was gratified by the confidence that had been placed in me, and eager to show that I really deserved it. We arranged that I should leave Frankfort by the earliest conveyance the next morning.

On our way upstairs to our bed-chambers, Mr. Keller detained me for a moment more.

"I have no claim to control you in the choice of your friends," he said; "but I am old enough to give you a word of advice. Don't associate yourself too readily, David, with the woman whom I found here to-night."

He shook hands cordially, and left me. I thought of Madame Fontaine's letter in my pocket, and felt a strong conviction that he would persist in his refusal to read it.

The servants were the only persons stirring in the house, when I rose the next morning. Unobserved by anyone, I placed the letter on the desk in Mr. Keller's private room. That done, I started on my journey to Hanau.

CHAPTER XIV

Thanks to the instructions confided to me, my errand presented no difficulties. There were certain persons to whom I was introduced, and certain information to be derived from them, which it was my duty to submit to Mr. Keller on my return. Fidelity was required of me, and discretion was required of me--and that was all.

At the close of my day's work, the hospitable merchant, whose references I had been engaged in verifying, refused to permit me to return to the hotel. His dinner-hour had been put off expressly to suit my convenience. "You will only meet the members of my family," he said, "and a cousin of my wife's who is here with her daughter, on a visit to us--Frau Meyer, of Wurzburg."

I accepted the invitation, feeling privately an Englishman's reluctance to confronting an assembly of strangers, and anticipating nothing remarkable in reference to Frau Meyer, although she did come from Wurzburg. Even when I was presented to the ladies in due form, as "the honored representative of Mr. Keller, of Frankfort," I was too stupid, or too much absorbed in the business on which I had been engaged, to be much struck by the sudden interest with which Frau Meyer regarded me. She was a fat florid old lady, who looked coarsely clever and resolute; and she had a daughter who promised to resemble her but too faithfully, in due course of time. It was a relief to me, at dinner, to find myself placed between the merchant's wife and her eldest son. They were far more attractive neighbors at table, to my thinking, than Frau Meyer.

Dinner being over, we withdrew to another room to take our coffee. The merchant and his son, both ardent musicians in their leisure hours, played a sonata for pianoforte and violin. I was at the opposite extremity of the room, looking at some fine proof impressions of prints from the old masters, when a voice at my side startled me by an unexpected question.

"May I ask, sir, if you are acquainted with Mr. Keller's son?"

I looked round, and discovered Frau Meyer.

"Have you seen him lately?" she proceeded, when I had acknowledged that I was acquainted with Fritz. "And can you tell me where he is now?"

I answered both these questions. Frau Meyer looked thoroughly well

satisfied with me. "Let us have a little talk," she said, and seated herself, and signed to me to take a chair near her.

"I feel a true interest in Fritz," she resumed, lowering her voice so as not to be heard by the musicians at the other end of the room. "Until to-day, I have heard nothing of him since he left Wurzburg. I like to talk about him--he once did me a kindness a long time since. I suppose you are in his confidence? Has he told you why his father sent him away from the University?"

My reply to this was, I am afraid, rather absently given. The truth is, my mind was running on some earlier words which had dropped from the old lady's lips. "He once did me a kindness a long time since." When had I last heard that commonplace phrase? and why did I remember it so readily when I now heard it again?

"Ah, his father did a wise thing in separating him from that woman and her daughter!" Frau Meyer went on. "Madame Fontaine deliberately entrapped the poor boy into the engagement. But perhaps you are a friend of hers? In that case, I retract and apologize."

"Quite needless," I said.

"You are not a friend of Madame Fontaine?" she persisted.

This cool attempt to force an answer from me failed in its object. It was like being cross-examined in a court of law; and, in our common English phrase, "it set my back up." In the strict sense of the word, Madame Fontaine might be termed an acquaintance, but certainly not a friend, of mine. For once, I took the prudent course, and said, No.

Frau Meyer's expansive bosom emitted a hearty sigh of relief. "Ah!" she said, "now I can talk freely--in Fritz's interest, mind. You are a young man like himself, he will be disposed to listen to you. Do all you can to back his father's influence, and cure him of his infatuation. I tell you plainly, his marriage would be his ruin!"

"You speak very strongly, madam. Do you object to the young lady?"

"Not I; a harmless insignificant creature--nothing more and nothing less. It's her vile mother that I object to."

"As I have heard, Frau Meyer, there are two sides to that question. Fritz is

persuaded that Madame Fontaine is an injured woman. He assures me, for instance, that she is the fondest of mothers."

"Bah! What does that amount to? It's as much a part of a woman's nature to take to her child when she has got one, as it is to take to her dinner when she is hungry. A fond mother? What stuff! Why, a cat is a fond mother!--What's the matter?"

A cat is a fond mother. Another familiar phrase--and this time a phrase remarkable enough to lead my memory back in the right direction. In an instant I recollected the anonymous letter to Fritz. In an instant I felt the conviction that Frau Meyer, in her eagerness to persuade me, had unconsciously repeated two of the phrases which she had already used, in her eagerness to persuade Fritz. No wonder I started in my chair, when I felt that I was face to face with the writer of the anonymous letter!

I made some excuse--I forget what--and hastened to resume the conversation. The opportunity of making discoveries which might be invaluable to Fritz (to say nothing of good Mr. Engelman) was not an opportunity to be neglected. I persisted in quoting Fritz's authority; I repeated his assertion relative to the love of scandal at Wurzburg, and the envy of Madame Fontaine's superior attractions felt among the ladies. Frau Meyer laughed disdainfully.

"Poor Fritz!" she said. "An excellent disposition--but so easily persuaded, so much too amiable. Our being all envious of Widow Fontaine is too ridiculous. It is a mere waste of time to notice such nonsense. Wait a little, Mr. David, and you will see. If you and Mr. Keller can only keep Fritz out of the widow's way for a few months longer, his eyes will be opened in spite of himself. He may yet come back to us with a free heart, and he may choose his future wife more wisely next time."

As she said this her eyes wandered away to her daughter, at the other end of the room. Unless her face betrayed her, she had evidently planned, at some past time, to possess herself of Fritz as a son-in-law, and she had not resigned the hope of securing him yet. Madame Fontaine might be a deceitful and dangerous woman. But what sort of witness against her was this abusive old lady, the unscrupulous writer of an anonymous letter? "You prophesy very confidently about what is to come in the future," I ventured to say.

Frau Meyer's red face turned a shade redder. "Does that mean that you don't believe me?" she asked.

"Certainly not, madam. It only means that you speak severely of Doctor Fontaine's widow--without mentioning any facts that justify you."

"Oh! you want facts, do you? I'll soon show you whether I know what I am talking about or not. Has Fritz mentioned that among Madame Fontaine's other virtues, she has paid her debts? I'll tell you how she has paid them--as an example, young gentleman, that I am not talking at random. Your admirable widow, sir, is great at fascinating old men; they are always falling in love with her, the idiots! A certain old man at Wurzburg--close on eighty, mind--was one of her victims. I had a letter this morning which tells me that he was found dead in his bed, two days since, and that his nephew is the sole heir to all that he leaves behind him. Examination of his papers has shown that he paid the widow's creditors, and that he took a promissory note from her--ha! ha! ha!--a promissory note from a woman without a farthing!--in payment of the sum that he had advanced. The poor old man would, no doubt, have destroyed the note if he had known that his end was so near. His sudden death has transferred it to the hands of his heir. In money-matters, the nephew is reported to be one of the hardest men living. When that note falls due, he will present it for payment. I don't know where Madame Fontaine is now. No matter! Sooner or later, she is sure to hear of what has happened--and she must find the money, or see the inside of a debtor's prison. Those are the facts that I had in my mind, Mr. David, when I spoke of events opening Fritz's eyes to the truth."

I submitted with all possible humility to the lady's triumph over me. My thoughts were with Minna. What a prospect for the innocent, affectionate girl! Assuming the statement that I had just heard to be true, there was surely a chance that Madame Fontaine (with time before her) might find the money. I put this view of the case to Frau Meyer.

"If I didn't know Mr. Keller to be a thoroughly resolute man," she answered, "I should say she might find the money too. She has only to succeed in marrying her daughter to Fritz, and Mr. Keller would be obliged to pay the money for the sake of the family credit. But he is one of the few men whom she can't twist round her finger. If you ever fall in with her, take care of yourself. She may find your influence with Fritz an obstacle in her way--and she may give you reason to remember that the mystery of her husband's lost chest of poisons is not cleared up yet. It was all in the German newspapers--you know what I mean."

This seemed to me to be passing all bounds of moderation. "And you know, madam," I answered sharply, "that there was no evidence against her--

nothing whatever to associate her with the robbery of the medicine chest."

"Not even suspicion, Mr. David?"

"Not even suspicion."

I rose from my chair as I spoke. Minna was still in my thoughts; I was not merely unwilling, I was almost afraid to hear more.

"One minute," said Frau Meyer. "Which of the two hotels here are you staying at? I want to send you something to read to-night, after you have left us."

I told her the name of the hotel; and we joined our friends at the other end of the room. Not long afterwards I took my leave. My spirits were depressed; a dark cloud of uncertainty seemed to hang over the future. Even the prospect of returning to Frankfort, the next day, became repellent to me. I was almost inclined to hope that my aunt might (as Mr. Keller had predicted) recall me to London.

CHAPTER XV

From these reflections I was roused by the appearance of a waiter, with a letter for me. The envelope contained a slip cut from a German newspaper, and these lines of writing, signed by Frau Meyer:--

"You are either a very just, or a very obstinate young man. In either case, it will do you no harm to read what I enclose. I am not such a scandal-mongering old woman as you seem to think. The concealment of the names will not puzzle you. Please return the slip. It belongs to our excellent host, and forms part of his collection of literary curiosities."

Such was the introduction to my reading. I translate it from the German newspaper into English as literally as I can.

The Editor's few prefatory words were at the top of the column, bearing the date of September 1828.

"We have received, in strictest confidence, extracts from letters written by a lady to a once-beloved female friend. The extracts are dated and numbered, and are literally presented in this column--excepting the obviously necessary precaution of suppressing names, places, and days of the month. Taken in connection with a certain inquiry which is just now occupying the public mind, these fragments may throw some faint glimmer of light on events which are at present involved in darkness."

Number I. 1809.--"Yes, dearest Julie, I have run the grand risk. Only yesterday, I was married to Doctor ----. The people at the church were our only witnesses.

"My father declares that I have degraded his noble blood by marrying a medical man. He forbade my mother to attend the ceremony. Poor simple soul! She asked me if I loved my young doctor, and was quite satisfied when I said Yes. As for my father's objections, my husband is a man of high promise in his profession. In his country--I think I told you in my last letter that he was a Frenchman--a famous physician is ennobled by the State. I shall leave no stone unturned, my dear, to push my husband forward. And when he is made a Baron, we shall see what my father will say to us then."

Number II. 1810.--"We have removed, my Julie, to this detestably dull old German town, for no earthly reason but that the University is famous as a

medical school.

"My husband informs me, in his sweetest manner, that he will hesitate at no sacrifice of our ordinary comforts to increase his professional knowledge. If you could see how the ladies dress in this lost hole of a place, if you could hear the twaddle they talk, you would pity me. I have but one consolation--a lovely baby, Julie, a girl: I had almost said an angel. Were you as fond of your first child, I wonder, as I am of mine? And did you utterly forget your husband, when the little darling was first put into your arms? Write and tell me."

Number III. 1811.--"I have hardly patience to take up my pen But I shall do something desperate, if I don't relieve my overburdened mind in some way.

"After I wrote to you last year, I succeeded in getting my husband away from the detestable University. But he persisted in hanging about Germany, and conferring with moldy old doctors (whom he calls "Princes of Science"!) instead of returning to Paris, taking a handsome house, and making his way to the top of the tree with my help. I am the very woman to give brilliant parties, and to push my husband's interests with powerful people of all degrees. No; I really must not dwell on it. When I think of what has happened since, it will drive me mad.

"Six weeks ago, a sort of medical congress was announced to be at the University. Something in the proposed discussion was to be made the subject of a prize-essay. The doctor's professional interest in this matter decided him on trying for the prize--and the result is our return to the hateful old town and its society.

"Of course, my husband resumes his professional studies; of course, I am thrown once more among the dowdy gossiping women. But that is far from being the worst of it. Among the people in the School of Chemistry here, there is a new man, who entered the University shortly after we left it last year. This devil--it is the only right word for him--has bewitched my weak husband; and, for all I can see to the contrary, has ruined our prospects in life.

"He is a Hungarian. Small, dirty, lean as a skeleton, with hands like claws, eyes like a wild beast's, and the most hideously false smile you ever saw in a human face. What his history is, nobody knows. The people at the medical school call him the most extraordinary experimental chemist living. His ideas astonish the Professors themselves. The students have named him 'The new Paracelsus.'

"I ventured to ask him, one day, if he believed he could make gold. He looked at me with his frightful grin, and said, "Yes, and diamonds too, with time and money to help me." He not only believes in The Philosopher's Stone; he says he is on the trace of some explosive compound so terrifically destructive in its effect, that it will make war impossible. He declares that he will annihilate time and space by means of electricity; and that he will develop steam as a motive power, until travelers can rush over the whole habitable globe at the rate of a mile in a minute.

"Why do I trouble you with these ravings? My dear, this boastful adventurer has made himself master of my husband, has talked him out of his senses, has reduced my influence over him to nothing. Do you think I am exaggerating? Hear how it has ended. My husband absolutely refuses to leave this place. He cares no longer even to try for the prize. The idea of medical practice has become distasteful to him, and he has decided on devoting his life to discovery in chemical science.

"And this is the man whom I married with the sincerest belief in the brilliant social career that was before him! For this contemptible creature I have sacrificed my position in the world, and alienated my father from me for ever. I may look forward to being the wife of a poor Professor, who shows experiments to stupid lads in a school. And the friends in Paris, who, to my certain knowledge, are now waiting to give him introductions to the Imperial Court itself, may transfer their services to some other man.

"No words can tell you what I feel at this complete collapse of all my hopes and plans. The one consideration of my child is all that restrains me from leaving my husband, never to see him again. As it is, I must live a life of deceit, and feign respect and regard for a man whom I despise with my whole heart.

"Power--oh, if I had the power to make the fury that consumes me felt! The curse of our sex is its helplessness. Every day, Julie, the conviction grows on me that I shall end badly. Who among us knows the capacity for wickedness that lies dormant in our natures, until the fatal event comes and calls it forth?

"No! I am letting you see too much of my tortured soul. Let me close my letter, and play with my child."

Number IV. 1812.--"My heartfelt congratulations, dearest, on your return to Germany, after your pleasant visit to the United States. And more congratulations yet on the large addition to your income, due to your husband's intelligence and spirit of enterprise on American ground. Ah, you have married a Man! Happy woman! I am married to a Machine.

"Why have I left your kind letters from America without reply? My Julie, I have constantly thought of you; but the life I lead is slowly crushing my energies. Over and over again, I have taken up my pen; and over and over again, I have laid it aside, recoiling from the thought of myself and my existence; too miserable (perhaps too proud) to tell you what a wretched creature I am, and what thoughts come to me sometimes in the wakeful hours of the night.

"After this confession, you wonder, perhaps, why I write to you now.

"I really believe it is because I have been threatened with legal proceedings by my creditors, and have just come victoriously out of a hard struggle to appease them for the time. This little fight has roused me from my apathy; it has rallied my spirits, and made me feel like my old self again. I am no longer content with silently loving my dearest friend; I open my heart and write to her.

"'Oh, dear, how sad that she should be in debt!' I can hear you say this, and sigh to yourself--you who have never known what it was to be in want of money since you were born. Shall I tell you what my husband earns at the University? No: I feel the blood rushing into my face at the bare idea of revealing it.

"Let me do the Professor justice. My Animated Mummy has reached the height of his ambition at last--he is Professor of Chemistry, and is perfectly happy for the rest of his life. My dear, he is as lean, and almost as dirty, as the wretch who first perverted him. Do you remember my once writing to you about a mysterious Hungarian, whom we found in the University? A few years since, this man died by suicide, as mysteriously as he had lived. They found him in the laboratory, with a strange inscription traced in chalk on the wall by which he lay dead. These were the words:--'After giving it a fair trial, I find that life is not worth living for. I have decided to destroy myself with a poison of my own discovery. My chemical papers and preparations are hereby bequeathed to my friend Doctor ----, and my body is presented as a free gift to the anatomy school. Let a committee of surgeons and analysts examine my remains. I defy them to discover a trace of the drug that has killed me.' And they did try, Julie--and discovered nothing. I wonder

whether the suicide has left the receipt for that poison, among his other precious legacies, to his 'friend Doctor ----.'

"Why do I trouble you with these nauseous details? Because they are in no small degree answerable for my debts. My husband devotes all his leisure hours to continuing the detestable experiments begun by the Hungarian; and my yearly dress-money for myself and my child has been reduced one half, to pay the chemical expenses.

"Ought I, in this hard case, to have diminished my expenditure to the level of my reduced income?

"If you say Yes, I answer that human endurance has its limits. I can support the martyrdom of my life; the loss of my dearest illusions and hopes; the mean enmity of our neighbors; the foul-mouthed jealousy of the women; and, more than all, the exasperating patience of a husband who never resents the hardest things I can say to him, and who persists in loving and admiring me as if we were only married last week. But I cannot see my child in a stuff frock, on promenade days in the Palace Gardens, when other people's children are wearing silk. And plain as my own dress may be, I must and will have the best material that is made. When the wife of the military commandant (a woman sprung from the people) goes out in an Indian shawl with Brussels lace in her bonnet, am I to meet her and return her bow, in a camelot cloak and a beaver hat? No! When I lose my self-respect let me lose my life too. My husband may sink as low as he pleases. I always have stood above him, and I always will!

"And so I am in debt, and my creditors threaten me. What does it matter? I have pacified them, for the time, with some small installments of money, and a large expenditure of smiles.

"I wish you could see my darling little Minna; she is the loveliest and sweetest child in the world--my pride at all times, and my salvation in my desperate moods. There are moments when I feel inclined to set fire to the hateful University, and destroy all the moldy old creatures who inhabit it. I take Minna out and buy her a little present, and see her eyes sparkle and her color rise, and feel her innocent kisses, and become, for awhile, quite a good woman again. Yesterday, her father--no, I shall work myself up into a fury if I tell you about it. Let me only say that Minna saved me as usual. I took her to the jeweler's and bought her a pair of pearl earrings. If you could have heard her, if you could have seen her, when the little angel first looked at herself in the glass! I wonder when I shall pay for the earrings?

"Ah, Julie, if I only had such an income as yours, I would make my power felt in this place. The insolent women should fawn on me and fear me. I would have my own house and establishment in the country, to purify me after the atmosphere of the Professor's drugs. I would--well! well! never mind what else I would have.

"Talking of power, have you read the account of the execution last year of that wonderful criminal, Anna Maria Zwanziger? Wherever she went, the path of this terrific woman is strewed with the dead whom she has poisoned. She appears to have lived to destroy her fellow-creatures, and to have met her doom with the most undaunted courage. What a career! and what an end! (1)

"The foolish people in Wurzburg are at a loss to find motives for some of the murders she committed, and try to get out of the difficulty by declaring that she must have been a homicidal maniac. That is not my explanation. I can understand the murderess becoming morally intoxicated with the sense of her own tremendous power. A mere human creature--only a woman, Julie!--armed with the means of secretly dealing death with her, wherever she goes--meeting with strangers who displease her, looking at them quietly, and saying to herself, "I doom you to die, before you are a day older"--is there no explanation, here, of some of Zwanziger's poisonings which are incomprehensible to commonplace minds?

"I put this view, in talking of the trial, to the military commandant a few days since. His vulgar wife answered me before he could speak. 'Madame Fontaine,' said this spitfire, 'my husband and I don't feel your sympathy with poisoners!' Take that as a specimen of the ladies of Wurzburg--and let me close this unmercifully long letter. I think you will acknowledge, my dear, that, when I do write, I place a flattering trust in my friend's patient remembrance of me."

There the newspaper extracts came to an end.

As a picture of a perverted mind, struggling between good and evil, and slowly losing ground under the stealthy influence of temptation, the letters certainly possessed a melancholy interest for any thoughtful reader. But (not being a spiteful woman) I failed to see, in these extracts, the connection which Frau Meyer had attempted to establish between the wickedness of Madame Fontaine and the disappearance of her husband's medicine chest.

At the same time, I must acknowledge that a vague impression of distrust was left on my mind by what I had read. I felt a certain sense of

embarrassment at the prospect of renewing my relations with the widow, on my return to Frankfort; and I was also conscious of a decided increase of anxiety to hear what had been Mr. Keller's reception of Madame Fontaine's letter. Add to this, that my brotherly interest in Minna was sensibly strengthened--and the effect on me of the extracts in the newspaper is truly stated, so far as I can remember it at this distant time.

On the evening of the next day, I was back again at Frankfort.

(1) The terrible career of Anna Maria Zwanziger, sentenced to death at Bamberg in the year 1811, will be found related in Lady Duff-Gordon's translation of Feuerbach's "Criminal Trials."

CHAPTER XVI

Mr. Keller and Mr. Engelman were both waiting to receive me. They looked over my written report of my inquiries at Hanau, and expressed the warmest approval of it. So far, all was well.

But, when we afterwards sat down to our supper, I noticed a change in the two partners, which it was impossible to see without regret. On the surface they were as friendly towards each other as ever. But a certain constraint of look and manner, a palpable effort, on either side, to speak with the old unsought ease and gaiety, showed that the disastrous discovery of Madame Fontaine in the hall had left its evil results behind it. Mr. Keller retired, when the meal was over, to examine my report minutely in all its details.

When we were alone, Mr. Engelman lit his pipe. He spoke to me once more with the friendly familiarity of past days--before he met the too-fascinating widow on the bridge.

"My dear boy, tell me frankly, do you notice any change in Keller?"

"I see a change in both of you," I answered: "you are not such pleasant companions as you used to be."

Mr. Engelman blew out a mouthful of smoke, and followed it by a heavy sigh.

"Keller has become so bitter," he said. "His hasty temper I never complained of, as you know. But in these later days he is hard--hard as stone. Do you know what he did with dear Madame Fontaine's letter? A downright insult, David--he sent it back to her!"

"Without explanation or apology?" I asked.

"With a line on the envelope. 'I warned you that I should refuse to read your letter. You see that I am a man of my word.' What a message to send to a poor mother, who only asks leave to plead for her child's happiness! You saw the letter. Enough to melt the heart of any man, as I should have thought. I spoke to Keller on the subject; I really couldn't help it."

"Wasn't that rather indiscreet, Mr. Engelman?"

"I said nothing that could reasonably offend him. 'Do you know of some discreditable action on the part of Madame Fontaine, which has not been found out by anyone else?' I asked. 'I know the character she bears in Wurzburg,' he said; 'and the other night I saw her face. That is all I know, friend Engelman, and that is enough for me.' With those sour words, he walked out of the room. What lamentable prejudice! What an unchristian way of thinking! The name of Madame Fontaine will never be mentioned between us again. When that much-injured lady honors me with another visit, I can only receive her where she will be protected from insult, in a house of my own."

"Surely you are not going to separate yourself from Mr. Keller?" I said.

"Not for the present. I will wait till your aunt comes here, and brings that restless reforming spirit of hers into the business. Changes are sure to follow--and my change of residence may pass as one of them."

He got up to leave the room, and stopped at the door.

"I wish you would come with me, David, to Madame Fontaine's. She is very anxious to see you." Feeling no such anxiety on my side, I attempted to excuse myself; but he went on without giving me time to speak--"Nice little Miss Minna is very dull, poor child. She has no friend of her own age here at Frankfort, excepting yourself. And she has asked me more than once when Mr. David would return from Hanau."

My excuses failed me when I heard this. Mr. Engelman and I left the house together.

As we approached the door of Madame Fontaine's lodgings, it was opened from within by the landlady, and a stranger stepped out into the street. He was sufficiently well dressed to pass for a gentleman--but there were obstacles in his face and manner to a successful personation of the character. He cast a peculiarly furtive look at us both, as we ascended the house-steps. I thought he was a police spy. Mr. Engelman set him down a degree lower in the social scale.

"I hope you are not in debt, ma'am," he said to the landlady; "that man looks to me like a bailiff in disguise."

"I manage to pay my way, sir, though it is a hard struggle," the woman replied. "As for the gentleman who has just gone out, I know no more of him than you do."

"May I ask what he wanted here?"

"He wanted to know when Madame Fontaine was likely to quit my apartments. I told him my lodger had not appointed any time for leaving me yet."

"Did he mention Madame Fontaine's name?"

"Yes, sir."

"How did he know that she lived here?"

"He didn't say."

"And you didn't think of asking him?"

"It was very stupid of me, sir--I only asked him how he came to know that I let apartments. He said, 'Never mind, now; I am well recommended, and I'll call again, and tell you about it.' And then I opened the door for him, as you saw."

"Did he ask to see Madame Fontaine?"

"No, sir."

"Very odd!" said Mr. Engelman, as we went upstairs. "Do you think we ought to mention it?"

I thought not. There was nothing at all uncommon in the stranger's inquiries, taken by themselves. We had no right, that I could see, to alarm the widow, because we happened to attach purely fanciful suspicions to a man of whom we knew nothing. I expressed this opinion to Mr. Engelman; and he agreed with me.

The same subdued tone which had struck me in the little household in Main Street, was again visible in the welcome which I received in Madame Fontaine's lodgings. Minna looked weary of waiting for the long-expected letter from Fritz. Minna's mother pressed my hand in silence, with a melancholy smile. Her reception of my companion struck me as showing some constraint. After what had happened on the night of her visit to the house, she could no longer expect him to help her to an interview with Mr. Keller. Was she merely keeping up appearances, on the chance that he

might yet be useful to her, in some other way? The trifling change which I observed did not appear to present itself to Mr. Engelman. I turned away to Minna. Knowing what I knew, it grieved me to see that the poor old man was fonder of the widow, and prouder of her than ever.

It was no very hard task to revive the natural hopefulness of Minna's nature. Calculating the question of time in the days before railroads, I was able to predict the arrival of Fritz's letter in two, or at most three days more. This bright prospect was instantly reflected in the girl's innocent face. Her interest in the little world about her revived. When her mother joined us, in our corner of the room, I was telling her all that could be safely related of my visit to Hanau. Madame Fontaine seemed to be quite as attentive as her daughter to the progress of my trivial narrative--to Mr. Engelman's evident surprise.

"Did you go farther than Hanau?" the widow asked.

"No farther."

"Were there any guests to meet you at the dinner-party?"

"Only the members of the family."

"I lived so long, David, in dull old Wurzburg, that I can't help feeling a certain interest in the town. Did the subject turn up? Did you hear of anything that was going on there?"

I answered this as cautiously as I had answered the questions that had gone before it. Frau Meyer had, I fear, partially succeeded in perverting my sense of justice. Before my journey to Hanau, I might have attributed the widow's inquiries to mere curiosity. I believed suspicion to be the ruling motive with her, now.

Before any more questions could be asked, Mr. Engelman changed the topic to a subject of greater interest to himself. "I have told David, dear lady, of Mr. Keller's inhuman reception of your letter."

"Don't say 'inhuman,'" Madame Fontaine answered gently; "it is I alone who am to blame. I have been a cause of estrangement between you and your partner, and I have destroyed whatever little chance I might once have had of setting myself right in Mr. Keller's estimation. All due to my rashness in mentioning my name. If I had been less fond of my little girl here, and less eager to seize the first opportunity of pleading for her, I should never have

committed that fatal mistake."

So far, this was sensibly said--and, as an explanation of her own imprudence, was unquestionably no more than the truth.

I was less favorably impressed by what followed, when she went on;

"Pray understand, David, that I don't complain. I feel no ill-will towards Mr. Keller. If chance placed the opportunity of doing him a service in my hands, I should be ready and willing to make use of it--I should be only too glad to repair the mischief that I have so innocently done."

She raised her handkerchief to her eyes. Mr. Engelman raised his handkerchief to his eyes. Minna took her mother's hand. I alone sat undemonstrative, with my sympathies in a state of repose. Frau Meyer again! Nothing but the influence of Frau Meyer could have hardened me in this way!

"I have entreated our sweet friend not to leave Frankfort in despair," Mr. Engelman explained in faltering tones. "Although my influence with Keller is, for the present, a lost influence in this matter, I am more than willing--I am eager--to speak to Mrs. Wagner on Madame Fontaine's behalf. My advice is, Wait for Mrs. Wagner's arrival, and trust to my zeal, and my position in the firm. When both his partners summon him to do justice to an injured woman, even Keller must submit!"

The widow's eyes were still hidden behind her handkerchief. But the lower part of her face was visible. Unless I completely misinterpreted the mute language of her lips, she had not the faintest belief in the fulfillment of Mr. Engelman's prediction. Whatever reason she might have for remaining in Frankfort, after the definite rejection of her too-confident appeal to Mr. Keller's sympathies, was thus far undoubtedly a reason known only to herself. That very night, after we had left her, an incident occurred which suggested that she had some motive for ingratiating herself with one of the servants in Mr. Keller's house.

Our domestic establishment indoors consisted of the sour-tempered old housekeeper (who was perfectly unapproachable); of a little kitchen-maid (too unimportant a person to be worth conciliating); and of the footman Joseph, who performed the usual duties of waiting on us at table, and answering the door. This last was a foolish young man, excessively vain of his personal appearance--but a passably good servant, making allowance for these defects.

Having occasion to ring for Joseph, to do me some little service, I noticed that the loose ends of his necktie were connected by a smart new pin, presenting a circle of malachite set in silver.

"Have you had a present lately," I asked, "or are you extravagant enough to spend your money on buying jewelry?"

Joseph simpered in undisguised satisfaction with himself. "It's a present, sir, from Madame Fontaine. I take her flowers almost every day from Mr. Engelman, and I have done one or two trifling errands for her in the town. She was pleased with my attention to her wishes. 'I have very little money, Mr. Joseph,' she said; 'oblige me by accepting this pin in return for the trouble I have given you.' And she took the pin out of the beautiful white lace round her neck, and made me a present of it with her own hand. A most liberal lady, isn't she, sir?"

"Liberal indeed, Joseph, considering the small services which you seem to have rendered to her. Are you quite sure that she doesn't expect something more of you?"

"Oh, quite sure, sir." He blushed as he said that--and rather hurriedly left the room. How would Frau Meyer have interpreted Joseph's blushes, and the widow's liberality? I went to bed without caring to pursue that question.

A lapse of two days more brought with it two interesting events: the opening night of a traveling opera company on a visit to Frankfort, and the arrival by a late post of our long-expected letters from London.

The partners (both of them ardent lovers of music) had taken a box for the short season, and, with their usual kindness, had placed a seat at my disposal. We were all three drinking our coffee before going to the theater, and Joseph was waiting on us, when the rheumatic old housekeeper brought in the letters, and handed them to me, as the person who sat nearest to the door.

"Why, my good creature, what has made you climb the stairs, when you might have rung for Joseph?" asked kind-hearted Mr. Engelman.

"Because I have got something to ask of my masters," answered crabbed Mother Barbara. "There are your letters, to begin with. Is it true that you are, all three of you, going to the theater to-night?"

She never used any of the ordinary terms of respect. If she had been their mother, instead of their housekeeper, she could not have spoken more familiarly to the two old gentlemen who employed her.

"Well," she went on, "my daughter is in trouble about her baby, and wants my advice. Teething, and convulsions, and that sort of thing. As you are all going out for the evening, you don't want me, after I have put your bedrooms tidy. I can go to my daughter for an hour or two, I suppose--and Joseph (who isn't of much use, heaven knows) can take care of the house."

Mr. Keller, refreshing his memory of the opera of the night (Gluck's "Armida") by consulting the book, nodded, and went on with his reading. Mr. Engelman said, "Certainly, my good soul; give my best wishes to your daughter for the baby's health." Mother Barbara grunted, and hobbled out of the room.

I looked at the letters. Two were for me--from my aunt and Fritz. One was for Mr. Keller--addressed also in the handwriting of my aunt. When I handed it to him across the table, he dropped "Armida" the moment he looked at the envelope. It was the answer to his remonstrance on the subject of the employment of women.

For Minna's sake, I opened Fritz's letter first. It contained the long-expected lines to his sweetheart. I went out at once, and, enclosing the letter in an envelope, sent Joseph away with it to the widow's lodgings before Mother Barbara's departure made it necessary for him to remain in the house.

Fritz's letter to me was very unsatisfactory. In my absence, London was unendurably dull to him, and Minna was more necessary to the happiness of his life than ever. He desired to be informed, by return of post, of the present place of residence of Madame Fontaine and her daughter. If I refused to comply with this request, he could not undertake to control himself, and he thought it quite likely that he might "follow his heart's dearest aspirations," and set forth on the journey to Frankfort in search of Minna.

My aunt's letter was full of the subject of Jack Straw.

In the first place she had discovered, while arranging her late husband's library, a book which had evidently suggested his ideas of reformation in the treatment of the insane. It was called, "Description of the Retreat, an institution near York for insane persons of the Society of Friends. Written by Samuel Tuke." She had communicated with the institution; had received the

most invaluable help; and would bring the book with her to Frankfort, to be translated into German, in the interests of humanity. (1)

(1) Tuke's Description of the Retreat near York is reviewed by Sydney Smith in a number of the "Edinburgh Review," for 1814.

As for her merciful experiment with poor Jack, it had proved to be completely successful--with one serious drawback. So long as he was under her eye, and in daily communication with her, a more grateful, affectionate, and perfectly harmless creature never breathed the breath of life. Even Mr. Hartrey and the lawyer had been obliged to confess that they had been in the wrong throughout, in the view they had taken of the matter. But, when she happened to be absent from the house, for any length of time, it was not to be denied that Jack relapsed. He did nothing that was violent or alarming--he merely laid himself down on the mat before the door of her room, and refused to eat, drink, speak, or move, until she returned. He heard her outside the door, before anyone else was aware that she was near the house; and his joy burst out in a scream which did certainly recall Bedlam. That was the drawback, and the only drawback; and how she was to take the journey to Frankfort, which Mr. Keller's absurd remonstrance had rendered absolutely necessary, was more than my aunt's utmost ingenuity could thus far discover. Setting aside the difficulty of disposing of Jack, there was another difficulty, represented by Fritz. It was in the last degree doubtful if he could be trusted to remain in London in her absence. "But I shall manage it," the resolute woman concluded. "I never yet despaired of anything--and I don't despair now."

Returning to the sitting-room, when it was time to go to the theater, I found Mr. Keller with his temper in a flame, and Mr. Engelman silently smoking as usual.

"Read that!" cried Mr. Keller, tossing my aunt's reply to him across the table. "It won't take long."

It was literally a letter of four lines! "I have received your remonstrance. It is useless for two people who disagree as widely as we do, to write to each other. Please wait for my answer, until I arrive at Frankfort."

"Let's go to the music!" cried Mr. Keller. "God knows, I want a composing influence of some kind."

At the end of the first act of the opera, a new trouble exhausted his small stock of patience. He had been too irritated, on leaving the house, to

remember his opera-glass; and he was sufficiently near-sighted to feel the want of it. It is needless to say that I left the theater at once to bring back the glass in time for the next act.

My instructions informed me that I should find it on his bedroom-table.

I thought Joseph looked confused when he opened the house-door to me. As I ran upstairs, he followed me, saying something. I was in too great a hurry to pay any attention to him.

Reaching the second floor by two stairs at a time, I burst into Mr. Keller's bedroom, and found myself face to face with--Madame Fontaine!

CHAPTER XVII

The widow was alone in the room; standing by the bedside table on which Mr. Keller's night-drink was placed. I was so completely taken by surprise, that I stood stock-still like a fool, and stared at Madame Fontaine in silence.

On her side she was, as I believe, equally astonished and equally confounded, but better able to conceal it. For the moment, and only for the moment, she too had nothing to say. Then she lifted her left hand from under her shawl. "You have caught me, Mr. David!" she said--and held up a drawing-book as she spoke.

"What are you doing here?" I asked.

She pointed with the book to the famous carved mantelpiece.

"You know how I longed to make a study of that glorious work," she answered. "Don't be hard on a poor artist who takes her opportunity when she finds it."

"May I ask how you came to know of the opportunity, Madame Fontaine?"

"Entirely through your kind sympathy, my friend," was the cool reply.

"My sympathy? What do you mean?"

"Was it not you, David, who considerately thought of Minna when the post came in? And did you not send the man-servant to us, with her letter from Fritz?"

The blubbering voice of Joseph, trembling for his situation, on the landing outside, interrupted me before I could speak again.

"I'm sure I meant no harm, sir. I only said I was in a hurry to get back, because you had all gone to the theater, and I was left (with nobody but the kitchen girl) to take care of the house. When the lady came, and showed me her drawing-book----"

"That will do, friend Joseph," said the widow, signing to him to go downstairs in her easy self-possessed way. "Mr. David is too sensible to take notice of trifles. There! there! go down," She turned to me, with an

expression of playful surprise. "How very serious you look!" she said gaily.

"It might have been serious for you, Madame Fontaine, if Mr. Keller had returned to the house to fetch his opera-glass himself."

"Ah! he has left his opera-glass behind him? Let me help you to look for it. I have done my sketch; I am quite at your service." She forestalled me in finding the opera-glass. "I really had no other chance of making a study of the chimney-piece," she went on, as she handed the glass to me. "Impossible to ask Mr. Engelman to let me in again, after what happened on the last occasion. And, if I must confess it, there is another motive besides my admiration for the chimney-piece. You know how poor we are. The man who keeps the picture-shop in the Zeil is willing to employ me. He can always sell these memorials of old Frankfort to English travelers. Even the few forms he gives me will find two half-starved women in housekeeping money for a week."

It was all very plausible; and perhaps (in my innocent days before I met with Frau Meyer) I might have thought it quite likely to be true. In my present frame of mind, I only asked the widow if I might see her sketch.

She shook her head, and sheltered the drawing-book again under her shawl.

"It is little better than a memorandum at present," she explained. "Wait till I have touched it up, and made it saleable--and I will show it to you with pleasure. You will not make mischief, Mr. David, by mentioning my act of artistic invasion to either of the old gentlemen? It shall not be repeated--I give you my word of honor. There is poor Joseph, too. You don't want to ruin a well-meaning lad, by getting him turned out of his place? Of course not! We part as friends who understand each other, don't we? Minna would have sent her love and thanks, if she had known I was to meet you. Good-night."

She ran downstairs, humming a little tune to herself, as blithe as a young girl. I heard a momentary whispering with Joseph in the hall. Then the house-door closed--and there was an end of Madame Fontaine for that time.

After no very long reflection, I decided that my best course would be to severely caution Joseph, and to say nothing to the partners of what had happened--for the present, at least. I should certainly do mischief, by setting the two old friends at variance again on the subject of the widow, if I spoke; to say nothing (as another result) of the likelihood of Joseph's dismissal by Mr. Keller. Actuated by these reasonable considerations, I am bound frankly to add that I must have felt some vague misgivings as well. Otherwise, why

did I carefully examine Mr. Keller's room (before I returned to the theater), without any distinct idea of any conceivable discovery that I might make? Not the vestige of a suspicious appearance rewarded my search. The room was in its customary state of order, from the razors and brushes on the toilet-table to the regular night-drink of barley-water, ready as usual in the jug by the bedside.

I left the bedchamber at last. Why was I still not at my ease? Why was I rude enough, when I thought of the widow, to say to myself, "Damn her!" Why did I find Gluck's magnificent music grow wearisome from want of melody as it went on? Let the learned in such things realize my position, and honor me by answering those questions for themselves.

We were quite gay at supper; the visit to the theater had roused the spirits of the two partners, by means of a wholesome break in the monotony of their lives. I had seldom seen Mr. Keller so easy and so cheerful. Always an abstemious man, he exercised his usual moderation in eating and drinking; and he was the first to go to bed. But, while he was with us, he was, in the best sense of the word, a delightful companion; and he looked forward to the next opera night with the glee of a schoolboy looking forward to a holiday.

CHAPTER XVIII

The breakfast-room proved to be empty when I entered it the next morning. It was the first time in my experience that I had failed to find Mr. Keller established at the table. He had hitherto set the example of early rising to his partner and to myself. I had barely noticed his absence, when Mr. Engelman followed me into the room with a grave and anxious face, which proclaimed that something was amiss.

"Where is Mr. Keller?" I asked.

"In bed, David."

"Not ill, I hope?"

"I don't know what is the matter with him, my dear boy. He says he has passed a bad night, and he can't leave his bed and attend to business as usual. Is it the close air of the theater, do you think?"

"Suppose I make him a comfortable English cup of tea?" I suggested.

"Yes, yes! And take it up yourself. I should like to know what you think of him."

Mr. Keller alarmed me in the first moment when I looked at him. A dreadful apathy had possessed itself of this naturally restless and energetic man. He lay quite motionless, except an intermittent trembling of his hands as they rested on the counterpane. His eyes opened for a moment when I spoke to him--then closed again as if the effort of looking at anything wearied him. He feebly shook his head when I offered him the cup of tea, and said in a fretful whisper, "Let me be!" I looked at his night-drink. The jug and glass were both completely empty. "Were you thirsty in the night?" In the same fretful whisper he answered, "Horribly!" "Are you not thirsty now?" He only repeated the words he had first spoken--"Let me be!" There he lay, wanting nothing, caring for nothing; his face looking pinched and wan already, and the intermittent trembling still at regular intervals shaking his helpless hands.

We sent at once for the physician who had attended him in trifling illnesses at former dates.

The doctor who is not honest enough to confess it when he is puzzled, is a well-known member of the medical profession in all countries. Our present physician was one of that sort. He pronounced the patient to be suffering from low (or nervous) fever--but it struck Mr. Engelman, as it struck me, that he found himself obliged to say something, and said it without feeling sure of the correctness of his own statement. He prescribed, and promised to pay us a second visit later in the day. Mother Barbara, the housekeeper, was already installed as nurse. Always a domestic despot, she made her tyranny felt even in the sick-room. She declared that she would leave the house if any other woman presumed to enter it as nurse. "When my master is ill," said Mother Barbara, "my master is my property." It was plainly impossible that a woman, at her advanced age, could keep watch at the bedside by day and night together. In the interests of peace we decided on waiting until the next day. If Mr. Keller showed no signs of improvement by that time, I undertook to inquire at the hospital for a properly qualified nurse.

Later in the day, our doubts of the doctor were confirmed. He betrayed his own perplexity in arriving at a true "diagnosis" of the patient's case, by bringing with him, at his second visit, a brother-physician, whom he introduced as Doctor Dormann, and with whom he asked leave to consult at the bedside.

The new doctor was the younger, and evidently the firmer person of the two.

His examination of the sick man was patient and careful in the extreme. He questioned us minutely about the period at which the illness had begun; the state of Mr. Keller's health immediately before it; the first symptoms noticed; what he had eaten, and what he had drunk; and so on. Next, he desired to see all the inmates of the house who had access to the bed-chamber; looking with steady scrutiny at the housekeeper, the footman, and the maid, as they followed each other into the room--and dismissing them again without remark. Lastly, he astounded his old colleague by proposing to administer an emetic. There was no prevailing on him to give his reasons. "If I prove to be right, you shall hear my reasons. If I prove to be wrong, I have only to say so, and no reasons will be required. Clear the room, administer the emetic, and keep the door locked till I come back."

With those parting directions he hurried out of the house.

"What can he mean?" said Mr. Engelman, leading the way out of the bedchamber.

The elder doctor left in charge heard the words, and answered them, addressing himself, not to Mr. Engelman, but to me. He caught me by the arm, as I was leaving the room in my turn.

"Poison!" the doctor whispered in my ear. "Keep it a secret; that's what he means."

I ran to my own bedchamber and bolted myself in. At that one word, "Poison," the atrocious suggestion of Frau Meyer, when she had referred to Doctor Fontaine's lost medicine-chest, instantly associated itself in my memory with Madame Fontaine's suspicious intrusion into Mr. Keller's room. Good God! had I not surprised her standing close by the table on which the night-drink was set? and had I not heard Doctor Dormann say, "That's unlucky," when he was told that the barley-water had been all drunk by the patient, and the jug and glass washed as usual? For the first few moments, I really think I must have been beside myself, so completely was I overpowered by the horror of my own suspicions. I had just sense enough to keep out of Mr. Engelman's way until I felt my mind restored in some degree to its customary balance.

Recovering the power of thinking connectedly, I began to feel ashamed of the panic which had seized on me.

What conceivable object had the widow to gain by Mr. Keller's death? Her whole interest in her daughter's future centered, on the contrary, in his living long enough to be made ashamed of his prejudices, and to give his consent to the marriage. To kill him for the purpose of removing Fritz from the influence of his father's authority would be so atrocious an act in itself, and would so certainly separate Minna and Fritz for ever, in the perfectly possible event of a discovery, that I really recoiled from the contemplation of this contingency as I might have recoiled from deliberately disgracing myself. Doctor Dormann had rashly rushed at a false conclusion--that was the one comforting reflection that occurred to me. I threw open my door again in a frenzy of impatience to hear the decision, whichever way it might turn.

The experiment had been tried in my absence. Mr. Keller had fallen into a broken slumber. Doctor Dormann was just closing the little bag in which he had brought his testing apparatus from his own house. Even now there was no prevailing on him to state his suspicions plainly.

"It's curious," he said, "to see how all mortal speculations on events, generally resolve themselves into threes. Have we given the emetic too late?

Are my tests insufficient? Or have I made a complete mistake?" He turned to his elder colleague. "My dear doctor, I see you want a positive answer. No need to leave the room, Mr. Engelman! You and the young English gentleman, your friend, must not be deceived for a single moment so far as I am concerned. I see in the patient a mysterious wasting of the vital powers, which is not accompanied by the symptoms of any disease known to me to which I can point as a cause. In plain words, I tell you, I don't understand Mr. Keller's illness."

It was perhaps through a motive of delicacy that he persisted in making a needless mystery of his suspicions. In any case he was evidently a man who despised all quackery from the bottom of his heart. The old doctor looked at him with a frown of disapproval, as if his frank confession had violated the unwritten laws of medical etiquette.

"If you will allow me to watch the case," he resumed, "under the superintendence of my respected colleague, I shall be happy to submit to approval any palliative treatment which may occur to me. My respected colleague knows that I am always ready to learn."

His respected colleague made a formal bow, looked at his watch, and hastened away to another patient. Doctor Dormann, taking up his hat, stopped to look at Mother Barbara, fast asleep in her easy chair by the bedside.

"I must find you a competent nurse to-morrow," he said. "No, not one of the hospital women--we want someone with finer feelings and tenderer hands than theirs. In the meantime, one of you must sit up with Mr. Keller to-night. If I am not wanted before, I will be with you to-morrow morning."

I volunteered to keep watch; promising to call Mr. Engelman if any alarming symptoms showed themselves. The old housekeeper, waking after her first sleep, characteristically insisted on sending me to bed, and taking my place. I was too anxious and uneasy (if I may say it of myself) to be as compliant as usual. Mother Barbara, for once, found that she had a resolute person to deal with. At a less distressing time, there would have been something irresistibly comical in her rage and astonishment, when I settled the dispute by locking her out of the room.

Soon afterwards Joseph came in with a message. If there was no immediate necessity for his presence in the bedchamber, Mr. Engelman would go out to get a breath of fresh air, before he retired for the night. There was no necessity for his presence; and I sent a message downstairs to that effect.

An hour later Mr. Engelman came in to see his old friend, and to say good-night. After an interval of restlessness, the sufferer had become composed, and was dozing again under the influence of his medicine. Making all allowances for the sorrow and anxiety which Mr. Engelman must necessarily feel under the circumstances, I thought his manner strangely absent and confused. He looked like a man with some burden on his mind which he was afraid to reveal and unable to throw off.

"Somebody must be found, David, who does understand the case," he said, looking at the helpless figure on the bed.

"Who can we find?" I asked.

He bade me good-night without answering. It is no exaggeration to say that I passed my night at the bedside in a miserable state of indecision and suspense. The doctor's experiment had failed to prove absolutely that the doctor's doubts were without foundation. In this state of things, was it my bounden duty to tell the medical men what I had seen, when I went back to the house to look for Mr. Keller's opera-glass? The more I thought of it, the more I recoiled from the idea of throwing a frightful suspicion on Minna's mother which would overshadow an innocent woman for the rest of her life. What proof had I that she had lied to me about the sketch and the mantlepiece? And, without proof, how could I, how dare I, open my lips? I succeeded in deciding firmly enough for the alternative of silence, during the intervals when my attendance on the sick man was not required. But, when he wanted his medicine, when his pillows needed a little arrangement, when I saw his poor eyes open, and look at me vacantly--then my resolution failed me; my indecision returned; the horrid necessity of speaking showed itself again, and shook me to the soul. Never in the trials of later life have I passed such a night as that night at Mr. Keller's bedside.

When the light of the new day shone in at the window, it was but too plainly visible that the symptoms had altered for the worse.

The apathy was more profound, the wan pinched look of the face had increased, the intervals between the attacks of nervous trembling had grown shorter and shorter. Come what might of it, when Dr. Dormann paid his promised visit, I felt I was now bound to inform him that another person besides the servants and ourselves had obtained access secretly to Mr. Keller's room.

I was so completely worn out by agitation and want of sleep--and I showed

it, I suppose, so plainly--that good Mr. Engelman insisted on my leaving him in charge, and retiring to rest. I lay down on my bed, with the door of my room ajar, resolved to listen for the doctor's footsteps on the stairs, and to speak to him privately after he had seen the patient.

If I had been twenty years older, I might have succeeded in carrying out my intention. But, with the young, sleep is a paramount necessity, and nature insists on obedience to its merciful law. I remember feeling drowsy; starting up from the bed, and walking about my room, to keep myself awake; then lying down again from sheer fatigue; and after that--total oblivion! When I woke, and looked at my watch, I found that I had been fast asleep for no less than six hours!

Bewildered and ashamed of myself--afraid to think of what might have happened in that long interval--I hurried to Mr. Keller's room, and softly knocked at the door.

A woman's voice answered me, "Come in!"

I paused with my hand on the door--the voice was familiar to me. I had a moment's doubt whether I was mad or dreaming. The voice softly repeated, "Come in!" I entered the room.

There she was, seated at the bedside, smiling quietly and lifting her finger to her lips! As certainly as I saw the familiar objects in the room, and the prostrate figure on the bed, I saw--Madame Fontaine!

"Speak low," she said. "He sleeps very lightly; he must not be disturbed."

I approached the bed and looked at him. There was a faint tinge of color in his face; there was moisture on his forehead; his hands lay as still on the counterpane, in the blessed repose that possessed him, as the hands of a sleeping child. I looked round at Madame Fontaine.

She smiled again; my utter bewilderment seemed to amuse her. "He is left entirely to me, David," she said, looking tenderly at her patient. "Go downstairs and see Mr. Engelman. There must be no talking here."

She lightly wiped the perspiration from his forehead; lightly laid her fingers on his pulse--then reclined in the easy chair, with her eyes fixed in silent interest on the sleeping man. She was the very ideal of the nurse with fine feelings and tender hands, contemplated by Doctor Dormann when I had last seen him. Any stranger looking into the room at that moment would

have said, "What a charming picture! What a devoted wife!"

CHAPTER XIX

"A tumbler of the old Marcobrunner, David, and a slice of the game pie--before I say one word about what we owe to that angel upstairs. Off with the wine, my dear boy; you look as pale as death!"

With those words Mr. Engelman lit his pipe, and waited in silence until the good eating and drinking had done their good work.

"Now carry your mind back to last night," he began. "You remember my going out to get a breath of fresh air. Can you guess what that meant?"

I guessed of course that it meant a visit to Madame Fontaine.

"Quite right, David. I promised to call on her earlier in the day; but poor Keller's illness made that impossible. She wrote to me under the impression that something serious must have happened to prevent me, for the first time, from keeping an appointment that I had made with her. When I left you I went to answer her note personally. She was not only distressed to hear of Mr. Keller's illness, she was interested enough in my sad news to ask particularly in what form the illness declared itself. When I mentioned what the symptoms were, she showed an agitation which took me quite by surprise. 'Do the doctors understand what is the matter with him?' she asked. I told her that one of the doctors was evidently puzzled, and that the other had acknowledged that the malady was so far incomprehensible to him. She clasped her hands in despair--she said, 'Oh, if my poor husband had been alive!' I naturally asked what she meant. I wish I could give her explanation, David, in her own delightful words. It came in substance to this. Some person in her husband's employment at the University of Wurzburg had been attacked by a malady presenting exactly the same symptoms from which Mr. Keller was suffering. The medical men had been just as much at a loss what to do as our medical men. Alone among them Doctor Fontaine understood the case. He made up the medicine that he administered with his own hand. Madame Fontaine, under her husband's instructions, assisted in nursing the sick man, and in giving the nourishment prescribed when he was able to eat. His extraordinary recovery is remembered in the University to this day."

I interrupted Mr. Engelman at that point. "Of course you asked her for the prescription?" I said. "I begin to understand it now."

"No, David; you don't understand it yet. I certainly asked her for the prescription. No such thing was known to be in existence--she reminded me that her husband had made up the medicine himself. But she remembered that the results had exceeded his anticipations, and that only a part of the remedy had been used. The bottle might still perhaps be found at Wurzburg. Or it might be in a small portmanteau belonging to her husband, which she had found in his bedroom, and had brought away with her, to be examined at some future time. 'I have not had the heart to open it yet,' she said; 'but for Mr. Keller's sake, I will look it over before you go away.' There is a Christian woman, David, if ever there was one yet! After the manner in which poor Keller had treated her, she was as eager to help him as if he had been her dearest friend. Minna offered to take her place. 'Why should you distress yourself, mamma?' she said. 'Tell me what the bottle is like, and let me try if I can find it.' No! It was quite enough for Madame Fontaine that there was an act of mercy to be done. At any sacrifice of her own feelings, she was prepared to do it."

I interrupted him again, eager to hear the end.

"And she found the bottle?" I said.

"She found the bottle," Mr. Engelman resumed. "I can show it to you, if you like. She has herself requested me to keep it under lock and key, so long as it is wanted in this house."

He opened an old cabinet, and took out a long narrow bottle of dark-blue glass. In form, it was quaintly and remarkably unlike any modern bottle that I had ever seen. The glass stopper was carefully secured by a piece of leather, for the better preservation, I suppose, of the liquid inside. Down one side of the bottle ran a narrow strip of paper, notched at regular intervals to indicate the dose that was to be given. No label appeared on it; but, examining the surface of the glass carefully, I found certain faintly-marked stains, which suggested that the label might have been removed, and that some traces of the paste or gum by which it had been secured had not been completely washed away. I held the bottle up to the light, and found that it was still nearly half full. Mr. Engelman forbade me to remove the stopper. It was very important, he said, that no air should be admitted to the bottle, except when there was an actual necessity for administering the remedy.

"I took it away with me the same night," he went on. "And a wretched state of mind I was in, between my anxiety to give the medicine to poor dear Keller immediately, and my fear of taking such a serious responsibility entirely on myself. Madame Fontaine, always just in her views, said, 'You had better

wait and consult the doctors.' She made but one condition (the generous creature!) relating to herself. 'If the remedy is tried,' she said, 'I must ask you to give it a fair chance by permitting me to act as nurse; the treatment of the patient when he begins to feel the benefit of the medicine is of serious importance. I know this from my husband's instructions, and it is due to his memory (to say nothing of what is due to Mr. Keller) that I should be at the bedside.' It is needless to say that I joyfully accepted the offered help. So the night passed. The next morning, soon after you fell asleep, the doctors came. You may imagine what they thought of poor Keller, when I tell you that they recommended me to write instantly to Fritz in London summoning him to his father's bedside. I was just in time to catch the special mail which left this morning. Don't blame me, David. I could not feel absolutely sure of the new medicine; and, with time of such terrible importance, and London so far off, I was really afraid to miss a post."

I was far from blaming him--and I said so. In his place I should have done what he did. We arranged that I should write to Fritz by that night's mail, on the chance that my announcement of the better news might reach him before he left London.

"My letter despatched," Mr. Engelman continued, "I begged both the doctors to speak with me before they went away, in my private room. There I told them, in the plainest words I could find, exactly what I have told you. Doctor Dormann behaved like a gentleman. He said, 'Let me see the lady, and speak to her myself, before the new remedy is tried.' As for the other, what do you think he did? Walked out of the house (the old brute!) and declined any further attendance on the patient. And who do you think followed him out of the house, David, when I sent for Madame Fontaine? Another old brute--Mother Barbara!"

After what I had seen myself of the housekeeper's temper on the previous evening, this last piece of news failed to surprise me. To be stripped of her authority as nurse in favor of a stranger, and that stranger a handsome lady, was an aggravation of the wrong which Mother Barbara had contemplated, when she threatened us with the alternative of leaving the house.

"Well," Mr. Engelman resumed, "Doctor Dormann asked his questions, and smelt and tasted the medicine, and with Madame Fontaine's full approval took away a little of it to be analyzed. That came to nothing! The medicine kept its own secret. All the ingredients but two set analysis at defiance! In the meantime we gave the first dose. Half an hour since we tried the second. You have seen the result with your own eyes. She has saved his life, David,

and we have you to thank for it. But for you we might never have known Madame Fontaine."

The door opened as he spoke, and I found myself confronted by a second surprise. Minna came in, wearing a cook's apron, and asked if her mother had rung for her yet. Under the widow's instructions, she was preparing the peculiar vegetable diet which had been prescribed by Doctor Fontaine as part of the cure. The good girl was eager to make herself useful to us in any domestic capacity. What a charming substitute for the crabbed old housekeeper who had just left us!

So here were Madame Fontaine and Minna actually established as inmates under the same roof with Mr. Keller! What would Fritz think, when he knew of it? What would Mr. Keller say when he recognized his nurse, and when he heard that she had saved his life? "All's well that ends well" is a good proverb. But we had not got as far as that yet. The question in our case was, How will it end?

CHAPTER XX

When, late that night, I entered my bedroom again, how I blessed the lucky accident of my six hours' sleep, after a night's watching at Mr. Keller's bedside!

If I had spoken to Doctor Dormann as I had positively resolved to speak, he would, beyond all doubt, have forbidden the employment of Madame Fontaine's remedy; Mr. Keller would have died; and the innocent woman who had saved his life would have been suspected, perhaps even tried, on a charge of murdering him. I really trembled when I looked back on the terrible consequences which must have followed, if I had succeeded that morning in keeping myself awake.

The next day, the doses of the wonderful medicine were renewed at the regular intervals; and the prescribed vegetable diet was carefully administered. On the day after, the patient was so far advanced on the way to recovery, that the stopper of the dark-blue bottle was permanently secured again under its leather guard. Mr. Engelman told me that nearly two doses of it were still left at the bottom. He also mentioned, on my asking to look at it again, that the widow had relieved him of the care of the bottle, and had carefully locked it up in her own room.

Late on this day also, the patient being well-enough to leave his bed and to occupy the armchair in his room, the inevitable disclosure took place; and Madame Fontaine stood revealed in the character of the Good Samaritan who had saved Mr. Keller's life.

By Doctor Dormann's advice, those persons only were permitted to enter the bedroom whose presence was absolutely necessary. Besides Madame Fontaine and the doctor himself, Mr. Engelman and Minna were the other witnesses of the scene. Mr. Engelman had his claim to be present as an old friend; and Minna was to be made useful, at her mother's suggestion, as a means of gently preparing Mr. Keller's mind for the revelation that was to come. Under these circumstances, I can only describe what took place, by repeating the little narrative with which Minna favored me, after she had left the room.

"We arranged that I should wait downstairs," she said, "until I heard the bedroom bell ring--and then I myself was to take up Mr. Keller's dinner of lentils and cream, and put it on his table without saying a word."

"Exactly like a servant!" I exclaimed.

Gentle sweet-tempered Minna answered my foolish interruption with her customary simplicity and good sense.

"Why not?" she asked. "Fritz's father may one day be my father; and I am happy to be of the smallest use to him, whenever he wants me. Well, when I went in, I found him in his chair, with the light let into the room, and with plenty of pillows to support him. Mr. Engelman and the doctor were on either side of him; and poor dear mamma was standing back in a corner behind the bed, where he could not see her. He looked up at me, when I came in with my tray. 'Who's this?' he asked of Mr. Engelman--'is she a new servant?' Mr. Engelman, humoring him, answered, 'Yes.' 'A nice-looking girl,' he said; 'but what does Mother Barbara say to her?' Upon this, Mr. Engelman told him how the housekeeper had left her place and why. As soon as he had recovered his surprise, he looked at me again. 'But who has been my nurse?' he inquired; 'surely not this young girl?' 'No, no; the young girl's mother has nursed you,' said Mr. Engelman. He looked at the doctor as he spoke; and the doctor interfered for the first time. 'She has not only nursed you, sir,' he said; 'I can certify medically that she has saved your life. Don't excite yourself. You shall hear exactly how it happened.' In two minutes, he told the whole story, so clearly and beautifully that it was quite a pleasure to hear him. One thing only he concealed--the name. 'Who is she?' Mr. Keller cried out. 'Why am I not allowed to express my gratitude? Why isn't she here?' 'She is afraid to approach you, sir,' said the doctor; 'you have a very bad opinion of her.' 'A bad opinion,' Mr. Keller repeated, 'of a woman I don't know? Who is the slanderer who has said that of me?' The doctor signed to Mr. Engelman to answer. 'Speak plainly,' he whispered, behind the chair. Mr. Engelman did speak plainly. 'Pardon me, my dear Keller, there is no slanderer in this matter. Your own action has spoken for you. A short time since--try if you cannot remember it yourself--a lady sent a letter to you; and you sent the letter back to her, refusing to read it. Do you know how she has returned the insult? That noble creature is the woman to whom you owe your life.' When he had said those words, the doctor crossed the room, and returned again to Mr. Keller, leading my mother by the hand."

Minna's voice faltered; she stopped at the most interesting part of her narrative.

"What did Mr. Keller say?" I asked.

"There was silence in the room," Minna answered softly. "I heard nothing except the ticking of the clock."

"But you must have seen something?"

"No, David. I couldn't help it--I was crying. After a while, my mother put her arm round me and led me to Mr. Keller. I dried my eyes as well as I could, and saw him again. His head was bent down on his breast--his hands hung helpless over the arms of the chair--it was dreadful to see him so overwhelmed by shame and sorrow! 'What can I do?' he groaned to himself. 'God help me, what can I do?' Mamma spoke to him--so sweetly and so prettily--'You can give this poor girl of mine a kiss, sir; the new servant who has waited on you is my daughter Minna.' He looked up quickly, and drew me to him. 'I can make but one atonement, my dear,' he said--and then he kissed me, and whispered, 'Send for Fritz.' Oh, don't ask me to tell you any more, David; I shall only begin crying again--and I am so happy!"

She left me to write to Fritz by that night's post. I tried vainly to induce her to wait a little. We had no electric telegraphs at our disposal, and we were reduced to guessing at events. But there was certainly a strong probability that Fritz might have left London immediately on the receipt of Mr. Engelman's letter, announcing that his father was dangerously ill. In this case, my letter, despatched by the next mail to relieve his anxiety, would be left unopened in London; and Fritz might be expected to arrive (if he traveled without stopping) in the course of the next day or two. I put this reasonable view of the matter to Minna, and received a thoroughly irrational and womanly reply.

"I don't care, David; I shall write to him, for all that."

"Why?"

"Because I like writing to him.

"What! whether he receives your letter or not?"

"Whether he receives it or not," she answered saucily, "I shall have the pleasure of writing to him--that is all I want."

She covered four pages of note-paper, and insisted on posting them herself.

The next morning Mr. Keller was able, with my help and Mr. Engelman's, to get downstairs to the sitting-room. We were both with him, when Madame

Fontaine came in.

"Well," he asked, "have you brought it with you?"

She handed to him a sealed envelope, and then turned to explain herself to me.

"The letter that you put on Mr. Keller's desk," she said pleasantly. "This time, David, I act as my own postman--at Mr. Keller's request."

In her place, I should certainly have torn it up. To keep it, on the bare chance of its proving to be of some use in the future, seemed to imply either an excessive hopefulness or an extraordinary foresight, on the widow's part. Without in the least comprehending my own state of mind, I felt that she had, in some mysterious way, disappointed me by keeping that letter. As a matter of course, I turned to leave the room, and Mr. Engelman (from a similar motive of delicacy) followed me to the door. Mr. Keller called us both back.

"Wait, if you please," he said, "until I have read it."

Madame Fontaine was looking out of the window. It was impossible for us to discover whether she approved of our remaining in the room or not.

Mr. Keller read the closely written pages with the steadiest attention. He signed to the widow to approach him, and took her hand when he had arrived at the last words.

"Let me ask your pardon," he said, "in the presence of my partner and in the presence of David Glenney, who took charge of your letter. Madame Fontaine, I speak the plain truth, in the plainest words, when I tell you that I am ashamed of myself."

She dropped on her knees before him, and entreated him to say no more. Mr. Engelman looked at her, absorbed in admiration. Perhaps it was the fault of my English education--I thought the widow's humility a little overdone. What Mr. Keller's opinion might be, he kept to himself. He merely insisted on her rising, and taking a chair by his side.

"To say that I believe every word of your letter," he resumed, "is only to do you the justice which I have too long delayed. But there is one passage which I must feel satisfied that I thoroughly understand, if you will be pleased to give me the assurance of it with your own lips. Am I right in

concluding, from what is here written of your husband's creditors, that his debts (which have now, in honor, become your debts) have been all actually paid to the last farthing?"

"To the last farthing!" Madame Fontaine answered, without a moment's hesitation. "I can show you the receipts, sir, if you like."

"No, madam! I take your word for it--I require nothing more. Your title to my heart-felt respect is now complete. The slanders which I have disgraced myself by believing would never have found their way to my credulity, if they had not first declared you to have ruined your husband by your debts. I own that I have never been able to divest myself of my inbred dislike and distrust of people who contract debts which they are not able to pay. The light manner in which the world is apt to view the relative positions of debtor and creditor is abhorrent to me. If I promise to pay a man money, and fail to keep my promise, I am no better than a liar and a cheat. That always has been, and always will be, my view." He took her hand again as he made that strong declaration. "There is another bond of sympathy between us," he said warmly; "you think as I do."

Good Heavens, if Frau Meyer had told me the truth, what would happen when Madame Fontaine discovered that her promissory note was in the hands of a stranger--a man who would inexorably present it for payment on the day when it fell due? I tried to persuade myself that Frau Meyer had not told me the truth. Perhaps I might have succeeded--but for my remembrance of the disreputable-looking stranger on the door-step, who had been so curious to know if Madame Fontaine intended to leave her lodgings.

CHAPTER XXI

The next day, my calculation of possibilities in the matter of Fritz turned out to be correct.

Returning to Main Street, after a short absence from the house, the door was precipitately opened to me by Minna. Before she could say a word, her face told me the joyful news. Before I could congratulate her, Fritz himself burst headlong into the hall, and made one of his desperate attempts at embracing me. This time I succeeded (being the shorter man of the two) in slipping through his arms in the nick of time.

"Do you want to kiss me," I exclaimed, "when Minna is in the house!"

"I have been kissing Minna," Fritz answered with perfect gravity, until we are both of us out of breath. "I look upon you as a sort of safety-valve."

At this, Minna's charming face became eloquent in another way. I only waited to ask for news of my aunt before I withdrew. Mrs. Wagner was already on the road to Frankfort, following Fritz by easy stages.

"And where is Jack Straw?" I inquired.

"Traveling with her," said Fritz.

Having received this last extraordinary piece of intelligence, I put off all explanations until a fitter opportunity, and left the lovers together until dinner-time.

It was one of the last fine days of the autumn. The sunshine tempted me to take a turn in Mr. Engelman's garden.

A shrubbery of evergreens divided the lawn near the house from the flower-beds which occupied the further extremity of the plot of ground. While I was on one side of the shrubbery, I heard the voices of Mr. Keller and Madame Fontaine on the other side. Then, and then only, I remembered that the doctor had suggested a little walking exercise for the invalid, while the sun was at its warmest in the first hours of the afternoon. Madame Fontaine was in attendance, in the absence of Mr. Engelman, engaged in the duties of the office.

I had just turned back again towards the house, thinking it better not to disturb them, when I heard my name on the widow's lips. Better men than I, under stress of temptation, have been known to commit actions unworthy of them. I was mean enough to listen; and I paid the proverbial penalty for gratifying my curiosity--I heard no good of myself.

"You have honored me by asking my advice, sir," I heard Madame Fontaine say. "With regard to young David Glenney, I can speak quite impartially. In a few days more, if I can be of no further use to you, I shall have left the house."

Mr. Keller interrupted her there.

"Pardon me, Madame Fontaine; I can't let you talk of leaving us. We are without a housekeeper, as you know. You will confer a favor on me and on Mr. Engelman, if you will kindly undertake the direction of our domestic affairs--for the present, at least. Besides, your charming daughter is the light of our household. What will Fritz say, if you take her away just when he has come home? No! no! you and Minna must stay with us."

"You are only too good to me, sir! Perhaps I had better ascertain what Mr. Engelman's wishes are, before we decide?"

Mr. Keller laughed--and, more extraordinary still, Mr. Keller made a little joke.

"My dear madam, if you don't know what Mr. Engelman's wishes are likely to be, without asking him, you are the most unobservant lady that ever lived! Speak to him, by all means, if you think it formally necessary--and let us return to the question of taking David Glenney into our office here. A letter which he has lately received from Mrs. Wagner expresses no intention of recalling him to London--and he has managed so cleverly in a business matter which I confided to him, that he would really be an acquisition to us. Besides (until the marriage takes place), he would be a companion for Fritz."

"That is exactly where I feel a difficulty," Madame Fontaine replied. "To my mind, sir, Mr. David is not at all a desirable companion for your son. The admirable candor and simplicity of Fritz's disposition might suffer by association with a person of Mr. David's very peculiar character."

"May I ask, Madame Fontaine, in what you think his character peculiar?"

"I will endeavor to express what I feel, sir. You have spoken of his

cleverness. I venture to say that he is too clever And I have observed that he is--for a young man--far too easily moved to suspect others. Do I make myself understood?"

"Perfectly. Pray go on."

"I find, Mr. Keller, that there is something of the Jesuit about our young friend. He has a way of refining on trifles, and seeing under the surface, where nothing is to be seen. Don't attach too much importance to what I say! It is quite likely that I am influenced by the popular prejudice against 'old heads on young shoulders.' At the same time, I confess I wouldn't keep him here, if I were in your place. Shall we move a little further on?"

Madame Fontaine was, I daresay, perfectly right in her estimate of me. Looking back at the pages of this narrative, I discover some places in which I certainly appear to justify her opinion. I even justified it at the time. Before she and Mr. Keller were out of my hearing, I began to see "under the surface," and "to refine" on what she had said.

Was it Jesuitical to doubt the disinterestedness of her advice? I did doubt it. Was it Jesuitical to suspect that she privately distrusted me, and had reasons of her own for keeping me out of her way, at the safe distance of London? I did suspect it.

And yet she was such a good Christian! And yet she had so nobly and so undeniably saved Mr. Keller's life! What right had I to impute self-seeking motives to such a woman as this? Mean! mean! there was no excuse for me.

I turned back to the house, with my head feeling very old on my young shoulders.

Madame Fontaine's manner to me was so charming, when we all met at the dinner-table, that I fell into a condition of remorseful silence. Fortunately, Fritz took most of the talking on himself, and the general attention was diverted from me. His high spirits, his boisterous nonsense, his contempt for all lawful forms and ceremonies which placed impediments in the way of his speedy marriage, were amusingly contrasted by Mr. Engelman's courteous simplicity in trying to argue the question seriously with his reckless young friend.

"Don't talk to me about the customary delays and the parson's duty!" cried Fritz. "Tell me this: does he do his duty without being paid for it?"

"We must all live," pleaded good Mr. Engelman; "the parson must pay the butcher and the baker, like the rest of us."

"That's shirking the question, my dear sir! Will the parson marry Minna and me, without being paid for it?"

"In all civilized countries, Fritz, there are fees for the performance of the marriage ceremony."

"Very well. Now follow my train of reasoning, Mr. Engelman! On your own showing, the whole affair is a matter of money. The parson gets his fee for making Minna my wife, after the customary delays."

There Minna modestly interposed. "Why do you object to the customary delays, dear Fritz?"

"I'll tell you, my angel, when we are married. In the meantime, I resume my train of reasoning, and I entreat Mr. Engelman not to forget that this is a matter of money. Make it worth the parson's while to marry us, without the customary delays. Double his fee, treble his fee--give him ten times his fee. It's merely a question of what his reverence can resist. My father is a rich man. Favor me with a blank cheque, papa--and I will make Minna Mrs. Keller before the end of the week!"

The father, hitherto content to listen and be amused, checked the son's flow of nonsense at this point.

"There is a time for everything, Fritz," he said. "We have had laughing enough. When you talk of your marriage, I am sorry to observe that you entirely pass over the consideration which is due to your father's only surviving relative."

Madame Fontaine laid down her knife and fork as if her dinner had come to an end. The sudden appearance in the conversation of the "surviving relative," had evidently taken her by surprise. Mr. Keller, observing her, turned away from his son, and addressed himself exclusively to the widow when he spoke next.

"I referred, Madame Fontaine, to my elder sister," he said. "She and I are the sole survivors of a large family."

"Does the lady live in this city, sir?" the widow inquired.

"No, she still lives in our birthplace--Munich."

"May I ask another question?"

"As many questions, dear madam, as you like."

"Is your sister married?"

"My sister has never been married."

"Not for want of suitors," said courteous Mr. Engelman. "A most majestic person. Witty and accomplished. Possessed of an enviable little fortune, entirely at her own disposal."

Mr. Keller gently reproved this latter allusion to the question of money.

"My good friend, Madame Fontaine has a mind above all mercenary considerations. My sister's place in her esteem and regard will not be influenced by my sister's fortune, when they meet (as I hope they will meet) at Fritz's marriage."

At this, Fritz burst into the conversation in his usual headlong way.

"Oh, dear me, papa, have some consideration for us! If we wait for my aunt, we shall never be married on this side of eternity."

"Fritz!"

"Don't be angry, sir, I meant no harm. I was thinking of my aunt's asthma. At her age, she will never take the long journey from Munich to Frankfort. Permit me to offer a suggestion. Let us be married first, and then pay her a visit in the honeymoon."

Mr. Keller passed his son's suggestion over without notice, and addressed himself once more to Madame Fontaine.

"I propose writing to my sister in a day or two," he resumed, "to inform her of the contemplated marriage. She already knows your name through Mr. Engelman, who kindly wrote to allay her anxiety about my illness."

"And to tell her," Mr. Engelman interposed, "to whose devotion he owes his recovery."

The widow received this tribute with eyes fixed modestly on her plate. Her black dress, rising and falling over her bosom, betrayed an agitation, which her enemies at Wurzburg might have attributed to the discovery of the rich sister at Munich. Mr. Keller went on--

"I am sure I may trust to your womanly sympathies to understand the affection which binds me to my last living relative. My sister's presence at the marriage will be an inexpressible comfort and happiness to me. In spite of what my son has said (you are sadly given to talking at random, Fritz), I believe she will not shrink from the journey to Frankfort, if we only make it easier to her by consulting her health and convenience. Our young people have all their lives before them--our young people can wait."

"Certainly, sir."

She gave that short answer very quietly, with her eyes still on her plate. It was impossible to discover in what frame of mind she viewed the prospect of delay, involved in Mr. Keller's consideration for his sister. For the moment, Fritz was simply confounded. He looked at Minna--recovered himself--and favored his father with another suggestion.

"I have got it now!" he exclaimed. "Why not spare my aunt the fatigue of the journey? Let us all start for Bavaria to--morrow, and have the marriage at Munich!"

"And leave the business at Frankfort to take care of itself, at the busiest time of the year!" his father added ironically. "When you open your mouth again, Fritz, put food and drink into it--and confine yourself to that."

With those words the question of the marriage was closed for the time.

When dinner was over, Mr. Keller retired, to take some rest in his own room. Fritz and his sweetheart left the house together, on an errand in which they were both equally interested--the purchase of the ring which was to typify Minna's engagement. Left alone with Mr. Engelman and the widow, I felt that I might be an obstacle to confidential conversation, and withdrew to the office. Though not regularly employed as one of the clerks, I had been admitted to serve as a volunteer, since my return from Hanau. In this way, I improved my experience of the details of our business, and I made some small return for the hospitable welcome which I had received from the two partners.

Half an hour or more had passed, when some papers arrived from the bank,

which required the signature of the firm. Mr. Engelman being still absent, the head-clerk, at my suggestion, proceeded to the dining-room with the papers in his charge.

He came back again immediately, looking very much alarmed.

"Pray go into the dining-room!" he said to me. "I am afraid something is seriously wrong with Mr. Engelman.

"Do you mean that he is ill?" I asked.

"I can hardly say. His arms are stretched out on the table, and his face is hidden on them. He paid no attention to me. I am almost afraid he was crying."

Crying? I had left him in excellent spirits, casting glances of the tenderest admiration at Madame Fontaine. Without waiting to hear more, I ran to the dining-room.

He was alone--in the position described by the clerk--and, poor old man, he was indeed weeping bitterly! I put my hand with all possible gentleness on his shoulder, and said, with the tenderness that I really felt for him: "Dear Mr. Engelman, what has happened to distress you?"

At the sound of my voice he looked up, and caught me fervently by the hand.

"Stay here with me a little while, David," he said. "I have got my death-blow."

I sat down by him directly. "Try and tell me what has happened," I went on. "I left you here with Madame Fontaine----"

His tears suddenly ceased; his hand closed convulsively on mine. "Don't speak of her," he cried, with an outburst of anger. "You were right about her, David. She is a false woman." As the words passed his lips, he changed again. His voice faltered; he seemed to be frightened by his own violent language. "Oh, what am I talking about! what right have I to say that of her! I am a brute--I am reviling the best of women. It was all my fault, David--I have acted like a madman, like a fool. Oh, my boy! my boy!--would you believe it?--I asked her to marry me!"

It is needless to say that I wanted no further explanation. "Did she encourage you to ask her?" I inquired.

"I thought she did, David--I thought I would be clever and seize the opportunity. She said she wanted to consult me. She said: 'Mr. Keller has asked me to stay here, and keep house for you; I have not given my answer yet, I have waited to know if you approved it.' Upon that, I said the rash words. I asked her to be more than our housekeeper--to be my wife. I am naturally stupid," said the poor simple gentleman; "whenever I try to do anything clever I always fail. She was very forbearing with me at first; she said No, but she said it considerately, as if she felt for me. I presumed on her kindness, like a fool; I couldn't help it, David, I was so fond of her. I pressed her to say why she refused me. I was mad enough to ask if there was some other man whom she preferred. Oh, she said some hard things to me in her anger! And, worse still, when I went down on my knees to her, she said, 'Get up, you old fool!'--and laughed--and left me. Take me away somewhere, David; I am too old to get over it, if I stay here. I can never see her or speak to her again. Take me to England with you--and, oh, don't tell Keller!"

He burst into another fit of tears. It was dreadful to see and hear him.

I tried to think of some consoling words. Before I could give expression to my thought, the door of the room was gently opened; and Madame Fontaine herself stood before us. Her eyes looked at Mr. Engelman from under their heavy lids, with a quiet and scornful compassion. The poor wretch was of no further use to her. Quite needless to be on her best behavior with him now!

"There is not the least occasion, sir, to disturb yourself," she said. "It is my duty to leave the house--and I will do it."

Without waiting to be answered, she turned back to the door, and left us.

CHAPTER XXII

"For heaven's sake, sir, allow me to go!"

"On no account, Madame Fontaine. If you won't remain here, in justice to yourself, remain as a favor to me."

When I opened my bedroom door the next morning, the widow and Mr. Keller were on the landing outside, and those were the words exchanged between them.

Mr. Keller approached, and spoke to me.

"What do you know, David, about the disappearance of Mr. Engelman?"

"Disappearance?" I repeated. "I was with him yesterday evening--and I bade him good-night in his own room."

"He must have left the house before the servants were up this morning," said Mr. Keller. "Read that."

He handed me a morsel of paper with writing on it in pencil:--

"Forgive me, dear friend and partner, for leaving you without saying good-bye; also for burdening you with the direction of business, before you are perhaps strong enough to accept the charge. My mind is in such a state of confusion that I should be worse than useless in the office. While I write this, my poor weak head burns as if there was fire in it. I cannot face her, I cannot face you--I must go, before I lose all control over myself. Don't attempt to trace me. If change and absence restore me to myself I will return. If not, a man at my age and in my state of mind is willing to die. Please tell Madame Fontaine that I ask her pardon with all my heart. Good-bye--and God bless and prosper you."

I was unaffectedly distressed. There was something terrible in this sudden break-up of poor Engelman's harmless life--something cruel and shocking in the passion of love fixing its relentless hold on an innocent old man, fast nearing the end of his days. There are hundreds of examples of this deplorable anomaly in real life; and yet, when we meet with it in our own experience, we are always taken by surprise, and always ready to express doubt or derision when we hear of it in the experience of others.

Madame Fontaine behaved admirably. She sat down on the window-seat at the end of the landing, and wrung her hands with a gesture of despair.

"Oh!" she said, "if he had asked me for anything else! If I could have made any other sacrifice to him! God knows I never dreamed of it; I never gave him the smallest encouragement. We might have all been so happy together here--and I, who would have gone to the world's end to serve Mr. Keller and Mr. Engelman, I am the unhappy creature who has broken up the household!"

Mr. Keller was deeply affected. He sat down on the window-seat by Madame Fontaine.

"My dear, dear lady," he said, "you are entirely blameless in this matter. Even my unfortunate partner feels it, and asks your pardon. If inquiries can discover him, they shall be set on foot immediately. In the meantime, let me entreat you to compose yourself. Engelman has perhaps done wisely, to leave us for a time. He will get over his delusion, and all may be well yet."

I went downstairs, not caring to hear more. All my sympathies, I confess, were with Mr. Engelman--though he was a fat simple old man. Mr. Keller seemed to me (here is more of the "old head on young shoulders!") to have gone from one extreme to the other. He had begun by treating the widow with unbecoming injustice; and he was now flattering her with unreasonable partiality.

For the next few days there was tranquillity, if not happiness, in the house. Mr. Keller wrote to his sister in Munich, inviting her to mention the earliest date at which it might suit her convenience to be present at the marriage of his son. Madame Fontaine assumed the regular management of our domestic affairs. Fritz and Minna found sufficient attraction in each other's society. The new week was just beginning, and our inquiries after Mr. Engelman had thus far led to no result--when I received a letter containing news of the fugitive, confided to me under strict reserve.

The writer of the letter proved to be a married younger brother of Mr. Engelman, residing at Bingen, on the Rhine.

"I write to you, dear sir, at my brother's request. My wife and I are doing all that we can to relieve and comfort him, but his mind has not yet sufficiently recovered to enable him to write to you himself. He desires to thank you heartily for your sympathy, at the most trying period of his life; and he

trusts to your kindness to let him hear, from time to time, of Mr. Keller's progress towards recovery, and of the well-being of the business. In addressing your letters to me at Bingen, you will be pleased to consider the information of my brother's whereabouts herein afforded to you as strictly confidential, until you hear from me to the contrary. In his present frame of mind, it would be in the last degree painful to him to be made the subject of inquiries, remonstrances, or entreaties to return."

The arrival of this sad news proved to be not the only noteworthy event of the day. While I was still thinking of poor Mr. Engelman, Fritz came into the office with his hat in his hand.

"Minna is not in very good spirits this morning," he said. "I am going to take her out for half an hour to look at the shops. Can you come with us?"

This invitation rather surprised me. "Does Minna wish it?" I asked.

Fritz dropped his voice so that the clerks in the room could not hear his reply. "Minna has sent me to you," he answered. "She is uneasy about her mother. I can make nothing of it--and she wants to ask your advice."

It was impossible for me to leave my desk at that moment. We arranged to put off the walk until after dinner. During the meal, I observed that not Minna only, but her mother also, appeared to be out of spirits. Mr. Keller and Fritz probably noticed the change as I did. We were all of us more silent than usual. It was a relief so find myself with the lovers, out in the cheerful street.

Minna seemed to want to be encouraged before she could speak to me. I was obliged to ask in plain words if anything had happened to annoy her mother and herself.

"I hardly know how to tell you," she said. "I am very unhappy about my mother."

"Begin at the beginning," Fritz suggested; "tell him where you went, and what happened yesterday."

Minna followed her instructions. "Mamma and I went to our lodgings yesterday," she began. "We had given notice to leave when it was settled we were to live in Mr. Keller's house. The time was nearly up; and there were some few things still left at the apartments, which we could carry away in our hands. Mamma, who speaks considerately to everybody, said she hoped

the landlady would soon let the rooms again. The good woman answered: 'I don't quite know, madam, whether I have not let them already.'--Don't you think that rather a strange reply?"

"It seems to require some explanation, certainly. What did the landlady say?"

"The landlady's explanation explained nothing," Fritz interposed. "She appears to have spoken of a mysterious stranger, who had once before inquired if Madame Fontaine was likely to leave the lodgings--and who came yesterday to inquire again. You tell him the rest of it, Minna."

Before she could speak, I had already recognized the suspicious-looking personage whom Mr. Engelman and I had some time since encountered on the door-step. I inquired what the man had said when he heard that the lodgings were to let.

"There is the suspicious part of it," cried Fritz. "Be very particular, Minna, to leave nothing out."

Fritz's interruptions seemed only to confuse Minna. I begged him to be silent, and did my best to help her to find the lost thread of her story.

"Did the man ask to see the lodgings?" I said.

"No."

"Did he talk of taking the lodgings?"

"He said he wished to have the refusal of them until the evening," Minna replied; "and then he asked if Madame Fontaine had left Frankfort. When the landlady said No, he had another question ready directly. He wanted to know in what part of Frankfort Madame Fontaine was now living."

"And the old fool of a landlady actually told him the address," said Fritz, interrupting again.

"And, I am afraid, did some serious mischief by her folly," Minna added. "I saw mamma start and turn pale. She said to the landlady, 'How long ago did this happen?' 'About half an hour ago,' the landlady answered. 'Which way did he turn when he left you--towards Mr. Keller's house or the other way?' The landlady said, 'Towards Mr. Keller's house.' Without another word, mamma took me by the arm. 'It's time we were home again,' she said--and

we went back at once to the house."

"You were too late, of course, to find the man there?"

"Yes, David--but we heard of him. Mamma asked Joseph if anyone had called while we were out. Joseph said a stranger had called, and had inquired if Madame Fontaine was at home. Hearing that she was out, he had said, 'I think I had better write to her. She is here for a short time only, I believe?' And innocent Joseph answered, 'Oh, dear no! Madame Fontaine is Mr. Keller's new housekeeper.' 'Well?' mamma asked, 'and what did he say when he heard that?' 'He said nothing,' Joseph answered, 'and went away directly.'"

"Was that all that passed between your mother and Joseph?"

"All," Minna replied. "My mother wouldn't even let me speak to her. I only tried to say a few words of sympathy--and I was told sharply to be silent. 'Don't interrupt me,' she said, 'I want to write a letter.'"

"Did you see the letter?"

"Oh, no! But I was so anxious and uneasy that I did peep over her shoulder while she was writing the address."

"Do you remember what it was?"

"I only saw the last word on it. The last word was 'Wurzburg.'"

"Now you know as much as we do," Fritz resumed. "How does it strike you, David? And what do you advise?"

How could I advise? I could only draw my own conclusions privately. Madame Fontaine's movements were watched by somebody; possibly in the interests of the stranger who now held the promissory note. It was, of course, impossible for me to communicate this view of the circumstances to either of my two companions. I could only suggest a patient reliance on time, and the preservation of discreet silence on Minna's part, until her mother set the example of returning to the subject.

My vaguely-prudent counsels were, naturally enough, not to the taste of my young hearers. Fritz openly acknowledged that I had disappointed him; and Minna turned aside her head, with a look of reproach. Her quick perception had detected, in my look and manner, that I was keeping my thoughts to

myself. Neither she nor Fritz made any objection to my leaving them, to return to the office before post-time. I wrote to Mr. Engelman before I left my desk that evening.

Recalling those memorable days of my early life, I remember that a strange and sinister depression pervaded our little household, from the time when Mr. Engelman left us.

In some mysterious way the bonds of sympathy, by which we had been hitherto more or less united, seemed to slacken and fall away. We lived on perfectly good terms with one another; but there was an unrecognized decrease of confidence among us, which I for one felt sometimes almost painfully. An unwholesome atmosphere of distrust enveloped us. Mr. Keller only believed, under reserve, that Madame Fontaine's persistent low spirits were really attributable, as she said, to nothing more important than nervous headaches. Fritz began to doubt whether Mr. Keller was really as well satisfied as he professed to be with the choice that his son had made of a portionless bride. Minna, observing that Fritz was occasionally rather more subdued and silent than usual, began to ask herself whether she was quite as dear to him, in the time of their prosperity, as in the time of their adversity. To sum up all, Madame Fontaine had her doubts of me--and I had my doubts (although she had saved Mr. Keller's life) of Madame Fontaine.

From this degrading condition of dullness and distrust, we were roused, one morning, by the happy arrival of Mrs. Wagner, attended by her maid, her courier--and Jack Straw.

CHAPTER XXIII

Circumstances had obliged my aunt to perform the last stage of her journey to Frankfort by the night mail. She had only stopped at our house on her way to the hotel; being unwilling to trespass on the hospitality of her partners, while she was accompanied by such a half-witted fellow as Jack. Mr. Keller, however, refused even to hear of the head partner in the business being reduced to accept a mercenary welcome at an hotel. One whole side of the house, situated immediately over the offices, had been already put in order in anticipation of Mrs. Wagner's arrival. The luggage was then and there taken off the carriage; and my aunt was obliged, by all the laws of courtesy and good fellowship, to submit.

This information was communicated to me by Joseph, on my return from an early visit to one of our warehouses at the riverside. When I asked if I could see my aunt, I was informed that she had already retired to rest in her room, after the fatigue of a seven hours' journey by night.

"And where is Jack Straw?" I asked.

"Playing the devil already, sir, with the rules of the house," Joseph answered.

Fritz's voice hailed me from the lower regions.

"Come down, David; here's something worth seeing!"

I descended at once to the servants' offices. There, crouched up in a corner of the cold stone corridor which formed the medium of communication between the kitchen and the stairs, I saw Jack Straw again--in the very position in which I had found him at Bedlam; excepting the prison, the chains, and the straw.

But for his prematurely gray hair and the strange yellow pallor of his complexion, I doubt if I should have recognized him again. He looked fat and happy; he was neatly and becomingly dressed, with a flower in his button-hole and rosettes on his shoes. In one word, so far as his costume was concerned, he might have been taken for a lady's page, dressed under the superintendence of his mistress herself.

"There he is!" said Fritz, "and there he means to remain, till your aunt wakes

and sends for him."

"Upsetting the women servants, on their way to their work," Joseph added, with an air of supreme disgust--"and freezing in that cold corner, when he might be sitting comfortably by the kitchen fire!"

Jack listened to this with an ironical expression of approval. "That's very well said, Joseph," he remarked. "Come here; I want to speak to you. Do you see that bell?" He pointed to a row of bells running along the upper wall of the corridor, and singled out one of them which was numbered ten. "They tell me that's the bell of Mistress's bedroom," he resumed, still speaking of my aunt by the name which he had first given to her on the day when they met in the madhouse. "Very well, Joseph! I don't want to be in anybody's way; but no person in the house must see that bell ring before me. Here I stay till Mistress rings--and then you will get rid of me; I shall move to the mat outside her door, and wait till she whistles for me. Now you may go. That's a poor half-witted creature," he said as Joseph retired. "Lord! what a lot of them there are in this world!" Fritz burst out laughing. "I'm afraid you're another of them," said Jack, looking at him with an expression of the sincerest compassion.

"Do you remember me?" I asked.

Jack nodded his head in a patronizing way. "Oh, yes--Mistress has been talking of you. I know you both. You're David, and he's Fritz. All right! all right!"

"What sort of journey from London have you had?" I inquired next.

He stretched out his shapely little arms and legs, and yawned. "Oh, a pretty good journey. We should have been better without the courier and the maid. The courier is a tall man. I have no opinion of tall men. I am a man myself of five foot--that's the right height for a courier. I could have done all the work, and saved Mistress the money. Her maid is another tall person; clumsy with her fingers. I could dress Mistress's hair a deal better than the maid, if she would only let me. The fact is, I want to do everything for her myself. I shall never be quite happy till I'm the only servant she has about her."

"Ah, yes," said Fritz, good-naturedly sympathizing with him. "You're a grateful little man; you remember what Mrs. Wagner has done for you."

"Remember?" Jack reported scornfully. "I say, if you can't talk more sensibly than that, you had better hold your tongue." He turned and appealed to me.

"Did you ever hear anything like Fritz? He seems to think it wonderful that I remember the day when she took me out of Bedlam!"

"Ah, Jack, that was a great day in your life, wasn't it?"

"A great day? Oh, good Lord in Heaven! where are there words that are big enough to speak about it?" He sprang to his feet, wild with the sudden tumult of his own recollections. "The sun--the warm, golden, glorious, beautiful sun--met us when we came out of the gates, and all but drove me stark-staring-mad with the joy of it! Forty thousand devils--little straw-colored, lively, tempting devils--(mind, I counted them!)--all crawled over me together. They sat on my shoulders--and they tickled my hands--and they scrambled in my hair--and they were all in one cry at me like a pack of dogs. 'Now, Jack! we are waiting for you; your chains are off, and the sun's shining, and Mistress's carriage is at the gate--join us, Jack, in a good yell; a fine, tearing, screeching, terrifying, mad yell!' I dropped on my knees, down in the bottom of the carriage; and I held on by the skirts of Mistress's dress. 'Look at me!' I said; 'I won't burst out; I won't frighten you, if I die for it. Only help me with your eyes! only look at me!' And she put me on the front seat of the carriage, opposite her, and she never took her eyes off me all the way through the streets till we got to the house. 'I believe in you, Jack,' she said. And I wouldn't even open my lips to answer her--I was so determined to be quiet. Ha! ha! how you two fellows would have yelled, in my place!" He sat down again in his corner, delighted with his own picture of the two fellows who would have yelled in his place.

"And what did Mistress do with you when she brought you home?" I asked.

His gaiety suddenly left him. He lifted one of his hands, and waved it to and fro gently in the air.

"You are too loud, David," he said. "All this part of it must be spoken softly--because all this part of it is beautiful, and kind, and good. There was a picture in the room, of angels and their harps. I wish I had the angels and the harps to help me tell you about it. Fritz there came in with us, and called it a bedroom. I knew better than that; I called it Heaven. You see, I thought of the prison and the darkness and the cold and the chains and the straw--and I named it Heaven. You two may say what you please; Mistress said I was right."

He closed his eyes with a luxurious sense of self-esteem, and appeared to absorb himself in his own thoughts. Fritz unintentionally roused him by continuing the story of Jack's introduction to the bedroom.

"Our little friend," Fritz began confidentially, "did the strangest things when he found himself in his new room. It was a cold day; and he insisted on letting the fire out. Then he looked at the bedclothes, and----"

Jack solemnly opened his eyes again, and stopped the narrative at that point.

"You are not the right person to speak of it," he said. "Nobody must speak of it but a person who understands me. You shan't be disappointed, David. I understand myself--I'll tell you about it. You saw what sort of place I lived in and slept in at the madhouse, didn't you?"

"I saw it, Jack--and I can never forget it."

"Now just think of my having a room, to begin with. And add, if you please, a fire--and a light--and a bed--and blankets and sheets and pillows--and clothes, splendid new clothes, for Me! And then ask yourself if any man could bear it, all pouring on him at once (not an hour after he had left Bedlam), without going clean out of his senses and screeching for joy? No, no. If I have a quality, it's profound common sense. Down I went on my knees before her again! 'If you have any mercy on me, Mistress, let me have all this by a bit at a time. Upon my soul, I can't swallow it at once!' She understood me. We let the fire out--and surprised that deficient person, Fritz. A little of the Bedlam cold kept me nice and quiet. The bed that night if you like--but Heaven defend me from the blankets and the sheets and the pillows till I'm able to bear them! And as to putting on coat, waistcoat, and breeches, all together, the next morning--it was as much as I could do, when I saw myself in my breeches, to give the word of command in the voice of a gentleman--'Away with the rest of them! The shirt for to-morrow, the waistcoat for next day, and the coat--if I can bear the sight of it without screaming--the day after!' A gradual process, you see, David. And every morning Mistress helped me by saying the words she said in the carriage, 'I believe in you, Jack.' You ask her, when she gets up, if I ever once frightened her, from the day when she took me home." He looked again, with undiminished resentment, at Fritz. "Now do you understand what I did when I got into my new room? Is Fritz in the business, David? He'll want a deal of looking after if he is. Just step this way--I wish to speak to you."

He got up again, and taking my arm with a look of great importance, led me a few steps away--but not far enough to be out of sight of my aunt's bell.

"I say," he began, "I've heard they call this place Frankfort. Am I right?"

"Quite right!"

"And there's a business here, like the business in London?"

"Certainly."

"And Mistress is Mistress here, like she is in London?"

"Yes."

"Very well, then, I want to know something. What about the Keys?"

I looked at him, entirely at a loss to understand what this last question meant. He stamped his foot impatiently.

"Do you mean to say, David, you have never heard what situation I held in the London office?"

"Never, Jack!"

He drew himself up and folded his arms, and looked at me from the immeasurable height of his own superiority.

"I was Keeper of the Keys in London!" he announced. "And what I want to know is--Am I to be Keeper of the Keys here?"

It was now plain enough that my aunt--proceeding on the wise plan of always cultivating the poor creature's sense of responsibility--had given him some keys to take care of, and had put him on his honor to be worthy of his little trust. I could not doubt that she would find some means of humoring him in the same way at Frankfort.

"Wait till the bells rings," I answered "and perhaps you will find the Keys waiting for you in Mistress' room."

He rubbed his hands in delight. "That's it!" he said. "Let's keep watch on the bell."

As he turned to go back again to his corner, Madame Fontaine's voice reached us from the top of the kitchen stairs. She was speaking to her daughter. Jack stopped directly and waited, looking round at the stairs.

"Where is the other person who came here with Mrs. Wagner?" the widow asked. "A man with an odd English name. Do you know, Minna, if they have found a room for him?"

She reached the lower stair as she spoke--advanced along the corridor--and discovered Jack Straw. In an instant, her languid indifferent manner disappeared. Her eyes opened wildly under their heavy lids. She stood motionless, like a woman petrified by surprise--perhaps by terror.

"Hans Grimm!" I heard her say to herself. "God in heaven! what brings him here?"

CHAPTER XXIV

Almost instantaneously Madame Fontaine recovered her self-control.

"I really couldn't help feeling startled," she said, explaining herself to Fritz and to me. "The last time I saw this man, he was employed in a menial capacity at the University of Wurzburg. He left us one day, nobody knew why. And he suddenly appears again, without a word of warning, in this house."

I looked at Jack. A smile of mischievous satisfaction was on his face. He apparently enjoyed startling Madame Fontaine. His expression changed instantly for the better, when Minna approached and spoke to him.

"Don't you remember me, Hans?" she said.

"Oh, yes, Missie, I remember you. You are a good creature. You take after your papa. He was a good creature--except when he had his beastly medical bottles in his hand. But, I say, I mustn't be called by the name they gave me at the University! I was a German then--I am an Englishman now. All nations are alike to me. But I am particular about my name, because it's the name Mistress knew me by. I will never have another. 'Jack Straw,' if you please. There's my name, and I am proud of it. Lord! what an ugly little hat you have got on your head! I'll soon make you a better one." He turned on Madame Fontaine, with a sudden change to distrust.

"I don't like the way you spoke of my leaving the University, just now. I had a right to go, if I liked--hadn't I?"

"Oh, yes, Hans."

"Not Hans! Didn't you hear what I mentioned just now? Say Jack."

She said it, with a ready docility which a little surprised me.

"Did I steal anything at the University?" Jack proceeded.

"Not that I know of."

"Then speak respectfully of me, next time. Say, 'Mr. Jack retired from the University, in the exercise of his discretion.'" Having stated this formula with

an air of great importance, he addressed himself to me. "I appeal to you," he said. "Suppose you had lost your color here" (he touched his cheek), "and your color there" (he touched his hair); "and suppose it had happened at the University--would you" (he stood on tip-toe, and whispered the next words in my ear) "would you have stopped there, to be poisoned again? No!" he cried, raising his voice once more, "you would have drifted away like me. From Germany to France; from France to England--and so to London, and so under the feet of her Highness's horses, and so to Bedlam, and so to Mistress. Oh, Lord help me, I'm forgetting the bell! good-bye, all of you. Let me be in my corner till the bell rings."

Madame Fontaine glanced at me compassionately, and touched her bead.

"Come to my sitting-room, Jack," she said, "and have something to eat and drink, and tell me your adventures after you left Wurzburg."

She favored him with her sweetest smile, and spoke in her most ingratiating tones. That objectionable tendency of mine to easily suspect others was, I suppose, excited once more. At any rate, I thought the widow showed a very remarkable anxiety to conciliate Jack. He was proof, however, against all attempts at fascination--he shook his head obstinately, and pointed to the bell. We went our several ways, and left the strange little man crouched up in his corner.

In the afternoon, I was sent for to see my aunt.

I found Jack at his post; established in a large empty wardrobe, on the landing outside his mistress's door. His fingers were already busy with the framework of the new straw hat which he had promised to make for Minna.

"All right, David!" he said, patronizing me as indulgently as ever. "Mistress has had her good sleep and her nice breakfast, and she looks lovely. Go in, and see her--go in!"

I thought myself that she looked perhaps a little worn, and certainly thinner than when I had seen her last. But these were trifles. It is not easy to describe the sense of relief and pleasure that I felt--after having been accustomed to the sleepy eyes and serpentine graces of Madame Fontaine--when I looked again at the lithe active figure and the bright well-opened gray eyes of my dear little English aunt.

"Tell me, David," she began, as soon as the first greetings were over, "what do you think of Jack Straw? Was my poor dear husband not right? and have

I not done well to prove it?"

I could, and did, honestly congratulate her on the result of the visit to Bedlam.

"And now about the people here," she went on. "I find Fritz's father completely changed on the subject of Fritz's marriage. And when I ask what it means, I am told that Madame Fontaine has set everything right, in the most wonderful manner, by saving Mr. Keller's life. Is this true?"

"Quite true. What do you think of Madame Fontaine?"

"Ask me that, David, to-morrow or the next day. My head is muddled by traveling--I have not made up my mind yet."

"Have you seen Minna?"

"Seen her, and kissed her too! There's a girl after my own heart. I consider our scatter-brained friend Fritz to be the luckiest young fellow living."

"If Minna was not going to be married," I suggested, "she would just do for one of your young-lady clerks, wouldn't she?"

My aunt laughed. "Exactly what I thought myself, when I saw her. But you are not to make a joke of my young-lady clerks. I am positively determined to carry out that useful reform in the office here. However, as Mr. Keller has been so lately ill, and as we are sure to have a fight about it, I will act considerately towards my opponent--I won't stir in the matter until he is quite himself again. In the meantime, I must find somebody, while I am away, to take my place in the London house. The business is now under the direction of Mr. Hartrey. He is perfectly competent to carry it on; but, as you know, our excellent head-clerk has his old--fashioned prejudices. According to strict rule, a partner ought always to be in command, at the London business--and Hartrey implores me (if Mr. Keller is not well enough to take the journey) to send Mr. Engelman to London. Where is Mr. Engelman? How is it that I have neither heard nor seen anything of him?"

This was a delicate and difficult question to answer--at least, to my way of thinking. There was little prospect of keeping the poor old gentleman's sad secret. It was known to Fritz and Minna, as well as to Mr. Keller. Still, I felt an unconquerable reluctance to be the first person who revealed the disaster that had befallen him.

"Mr. Engelman is not in good health and spirits," I said. "He has gone away for a little rest and change."

My aunt looked astonished.

"Both the partners ill!" she exclaimed. "I remember Mr. Engelman, in the days when I was first married. He used to boast of never having had a day's illness in his life. Not at all a clever man--but good as gold, and a far more sensitive person than most people gave him credit for being. He promised to be fat as years grew on him. Has he kept his promise? What is the matter with him?"

I hesitated. My aunt eyed me sharply, and put another question before I had quite made up my mind what to say.

"If you can't tell me what is the matter with him, can you tell me where he is? I may want to write to him."

I hesitated again. Mr. Engelman's address had been confidentially communicated to me, for reasons which I was bound to respect. "I am afraid I can't answer that question either," I said awkwardly enough.

"Good heavens!" cried my aunt, "what does all this mystery mean? Has Mr. Engelman killed a man in a duel? or run away with an opera-dancer? or squandered the whole profits of the business at the gambling-table? or what? As she put these bold views of the case, we heard voices outside, followed by a gentle knock at the door. Minna entered the room with a message.

"Mamma has sent me, Mrs. Wagner, to ask at what time you would like to dine."

"My dear, I am much obliged to your mother. I have only just breakfasted, and I can wait quite well till supper-time comes. Stop a minute! Here is my nephew driving me to the utmost verge of human endurance, by making a mystery of Mr. Engelman's absence from Frankfort. Should I be very indiscreet if I asked--Good gracious, how the girl blushes! You are evidently in the secret too, Miss Minna. Is it an opera-dancer? Leave us together, David."

This made Minna's position simply unendurable. She looked at me appealingly. I did at last, what I ought to have done at first--I spoke out plainly.

"The fact is, aunt," I said, "poor Mr. Engelman has left us for awhile, sadly mortified and distressed. He began by admiring Madame Fontaine; and he ended in making her an offer of marriage."

"Mamma was indeed truly sorry for him," Minna added; "but she had no other alternative than to refuse him, of course."

"Upon my word, child, I see no 'of course' in the matter!" my aunt answered sharply.

Minna was shocked. "Oh, Mrs. Wagner! Mr. Engelman is more than twenty years older than mamma--and (I am sure I pity him, poor man)--and so fat!"

"Fat is a matter of taste," my aunt remarked, more and more resolute in taking Mr. Engelman's part. "And as for his being twenty years older than your mother, I can tell you, young lady, that my dear lost husband was twenty years my senior when he married me--and a happier couple never lived. I know more of the world than you do; and I say Madame Fontaine has made a great mistake. She has thrown away an excellent position in life, and has pained and humiliated one of the kindest-hearted men living. No! no! I am not going to argue the matter with you now; I'll wait till you are married to Fritz. But I own I should like to speak to your mother about it. Ask her to favor me by stepping this way for a few minutes, when she has nothing to do."

Minna seemed to think this rather a high-handed method of proceeding, and entered a modest protest accordingly.

"Mamma is a very sensitive person," she began with dignity.

My aunt stopped her with a pat on the cheek.

"Good child! I like you for taking your mother's part. Mamma has another merit, my dear. She is old enough to understand me better than you do. Go and fetch her."

Minna left us, with her pretty little head carried high in the air. "Mrs. Wagner is a person entirely without sentiment!" she indignantly whispered to me in passing, when I opened the door for her.

"I declare that girl is absolute perfection!" my aunt exclaimed with enthusiasm. "The one thing she wanted, as I thought, was spirit--and I find

she has got it. Ah! she will take Fritz in hand, and make something of him. He is one of the many men who absolutely need being henpecked. I prophesy confidently--their marriage will be a happy one."

"I don't doubt it, aunt. But tell me, what are you going to say to Madame Fontaine?"

"It depends on circumstances. I must know first if Mr. Engelman has really set his heart on the woman with the snaky movements and the sleepy eyes. Can you certify to that?"

"Positively. Her refusal has completely crushed him."

"Very well. Then I mean to make Madame Fontaine marry him--always supposing there is no other man in his way."

"My dear aunt, how you talk! At Madame Fontaine's age! With a grown-up daughter!"

"My dear nephew, you know absolutely nothing about women. Counting by years, I grant you they grow old. Counting by sensations, they remain young to the end of their days. Take a word of advice from me. The evidence of their gray hair may look indisputable; the evidence of their grown-up children may look indisputable. Don't believe it! There is but one period in the women's lives when you may feel quite certain that they have definitely given the men their dismissal--the period when they are put in their coffins. Hush! What's that outside? When there is a noisy silk dress and a silent foot on the stairs, in this house, I know already what it means. Be off with you!"

She was quite right. Madame Fontaine entered, as I rose to leave the room.

The widow showed none of her daughter's petulance. She was sweet and patient; she saluted Mrs. Wagner with a sad smile which seemed to say, "Outrage my most sacred feelings, dear madam; they are entirely at your disposal." If I had believed that my aunt had the smallest chance of carrying her point, I should have felt far from easy about Mr. Engelman's prospects. As it was, I left the two ladies to their fruitless interview, and returned composedly to my work.

CHAPTER XXV

When supper was announced, I went upstairs again to show my aunt the way to the room in which we took our meals.

"Well?" I said.

"Well," she answered coolly, "Madame Fontaine has promised to reconsider it."

I confess I was staggered. By what possible motives could the widow have been animated? Even Mr. Engelman's passive assistance was now of no further importance to her. She had gained Mr. Keller's confidence; her daughter's marriage was assured; her employment in the house offered her a liberal salary, a respectable position, and a comfortable home. Why should she consent to reconsider the question of marrying a man, in whom she could not be said to feel any sort of true interest, in any possible acceptation of the words? I began to think that my aunt was right, and that I really did know absolutely nothing about women.

At supper Madame Fontaine and her daughter were both unusually silent. Open-hearted Minna was not capable of concealing that her mother's concession had been made known to her in some way, and that the disclosure had disagreeably surprised her. However, there was no want of gaiety at the table--thanks to my aunt, and to her faithful attendant.

Jack Straw followed us into the room, without waiting to be invited, and placed himself, to Joseph's disgust, behind Mrs. Wagner's chair.

"Nobody waits on Mistress at table," he explained, "but me. Sometimes she gives me a bit or a drink over her shoulder. Very little drink--just a sip, and no more. I quite approve of only a sip myself. Oh, I know how to behave. None of your wine-merchant's fire in my head; no Bedlam breaking loose again. Make your minds easy. There are no cooler brains among you than mine." At this, Fritz burst into one of his explosions of laughter. Jack appealed to Fritz's father, with unruffled gravity. "Your son, I believe, sir? Ha! what a blessing it is there's plenty of room for improvement in that young man. I only throw out a remark. If I was afflicted with a son myself, I think I should prefer David."

This specimen of Jack's method of asserting himself, and other similar

outbreaks which Fritz and I mischievously encouraged, failed apparently to afford any amusement to Madame Fontaine. Once she roused herself to ask Mr. Keller if his sister had written to him from Munich. Hearing that no reply had been received, she relapsed into silence. The old excuse of a nervous headache was repeated, when Mr. Keller and my aunt politely inquired if anything was amiss.

When the letters were delivered the next morning, two among them were not connected with the customary business of the office. One (with the postmark of Bingen) was for me. And one (with the postmark of Wurzburg) was for Madame Fontaine. I sent it upstairs to her immediately.

When I opened my own letter, I found sad news of poor Mr. Engelman. Time and change had failed to improve his spirits. He complained of a feeling of fullness and oppression in his head, and of hissing noises in his ears, which were an almost constant annoyance to him. On two occasions he had been cupped, and had derived no more than a temporary benefit from the employment of that remedy. His doctor recommended strict attention to diet, and regular exercise. He submitted willingly to the severest rules at table--but there was no rousing him to exert himself in any way. For hours together, he would sit silent in one place, half sleeping, half waking; noticing no one, and caring for nothing but to get to his bed as soon as possible.

This statement of the case seemed to me to suggest very grave considerations. I could no longer hesitate to inform Mr. Keller that I had received intelligence of his absent partner, and to place my letter in his hands.

Whatever little disagreements there had been between them were instantly forgotten. I had never before seen Mr. Keller so distressed and so little master of himself.

"I must go to Engelman directly," he said.

I ventured to submit that there were two serious objections to his doing this: In the first place, his presence in the office was absolutely necessary. In the second place, his sudden appearance at Bingen would prove to be a serious, perhaps a fatal, shock to his old friend.

"What is to be done, then?" he exclaimed.

"I think my aunt may be of some use, sir, in this emergency."

"Your aunt? How can she help us?"

I informed him of my aunt's project; and I added that Madame Fontaine had not positively said No. He listened without conviction, frowning and shaking his head.

"Mrs. Wagner is a very impetuous person," he said. "She doesn't understand a complex nature like Madame Fontaine's."

"At least I may show my aunt the letter from Bingen, sir?"

"Yes. It can do no harm, if it does no good."

On my way to my aunt's room, I encountered Minna on the stairs. She was crying. I naturally asked what was the matter.

"Don't stop me!" was the only answer I received.

"But where are you going, Minna?"

"I am going to Fritz, to be comforted."

"Has anybody behaved harshly to you?"

"Yes, mamma has behaved harshly to me. For the first time in my life," said the spoilt child, with a strong sense of injury, "she has locked the door of her room, and refused to let me in."

"But why?"

"How can I tell? I believe it has something to do with that horrid man I told you of. You sent a letter upstairs this morning. I met Joseph on the landing, and took the letter to her myself. Why shouldn't I look at the postmark? Where was the harm in saying to her, 'A letter, mamma, from Wurzburg'? She looked at me as if I had mortally offended her--and pointed to the door, and locked herself in. I have knocked twice, and asked her to forgive me. Not a word of answer either time! I consider myself insulted. Let me go to Fritz."

I made no attempt to detain her. She had set those every-ready suspicions of mine at work again.

Was the letter which I had sent upstairs a reply to the letter which Minna had seen her mother writing? Was the widow now informed that the senile

old admirer who had advanced the money to pay her creditors had been found dead in his bed? and that her promissory note had passed into the possession of the heir-at-law? If this was the right reading of the riddle, no wonder she had sent her daughter out of the room--no wonder she had locked her door!

My aunt wasted no time in expressions of grief and surprise, when she was informed of Mr. Engelman's state of health. "Send the widow here directly," she said. "If there is anything like a true heart under that splendid silk dress of hers, I shall write and relieve poor Engelman by to-night's post."

To confide my private surmises, even to my aunt, would have been an act of inexcusable imprudence, to say the least of it. I could only reply that Madame Fontaine was not very well, and was (as I had heard from Minna) shut up in the retirement of her own room.

The resolute little woman got on her feet instantly. "Show me where she is, David--and leave the rest to me."

I led her to the door, and was dismissed with these words--"Go and wait in my room till I come back to you." As I retired, I heard a smart knock, and my aunt's voice announcing herself outside--"Mrs. Wagner, ma'am, with something serious to say to you." The reply was inaudible. Not so my aunt's rejoinder: "Oh, very well! Just read that letter, will you? I'll push it under the door, and wait for an answer." I lingered for a minute longer--and heard the door opened and closed again.

In little more than half an hour, my aunt returned. She looked serious and thoughtful. I at once anticipated that she had failed. Her first words informed me that I was wrong.

"I've done it," she said. "I am to write to Engelman to-night; and I have the widow's permission to tell him that she regrets her hasty decision. Her own words, mind, when I asked her how I should put it!"

"So there is a true heart under that splendid silk dress of hers?" I said.

My aunt walked up and down the room, silent and frowning--discontented with me, or discontented with herself; it was impossible to tell which. On a sudden, she sat down by me, and hit me a smart slap on the shoulder.

"David!" she said, "I have found out something about myself which I never suspected before. If you want to see a cold-blooded wretch, look at me!"

It was so gravely said, and so perfectly absurd, that I burst out laughing. She was far too seriously perplexed about herself to take the smallest notice of my merriment.

"Do you know," she resumed, "that I actually hesitate to write to Engelman? David! I ought to be whipped at the cart's tail. I don't believe in Madame Fontaine."

She little knew how that abrupt confession interested me. "Tell me why!" I said eagerly.

"That's the disgraceful part of it," she answered. "I can't tell you why. Madame Fontaine spoke charmingly--with perfect taste and feeling. And all the time some devilish spirit of distrust kept whispering to me, "Don't believe her; she has her motive!" Are you sure, David, it is only a little illness that makes her shut herself up in her room, and look so frightfully pale and haggard? Do you know anything about her affairs? Engelman is rich; Engelman has a position. Has she got into some difficulty since she refused him? and could he, by the barest possibility, be of any use in helping her out of it?"

I declare solemnly that the idea suggested by my aunt never occurred to me until she asked those questions. As a rejected suitor, Mr. Engelman could be of no possible use to the widow. But suppose he was her accepted husband? and suppose the note fell due before Minna was married? In that case, Mr. Engelman might unquestionably be of use--he might lend the money.

My aunt's sharp eyes were on me. "Out with it, David!" she cried. "You don't believe in her, either--and you know why."

"I know absolutely nothing," I rejoined; "I am guessing in the dark; and the event may prove that I am completely at fault. Don't ask me to degrade Madame Fontaine's character in your estimation, without an atom of proof to justify what I say. I have something to propose which I think will meet the difficulty."

With a strong exercise of self-restraint, my aunt resigned herself to listen. "Let's hear your proposal," she said. "Have you any Scotch blood in your veins, David? You are wonderfully prudent and cautious for so young a man."

I went straight on with what I had to say.

"Send the widow's message to Mr. Engelman, by all means," I proceeded; "but not by post. I was with him immediately after his offer of marriage had been refused; and it is my belief that he is far too deeply wounded by the manner in which Madame Fontaine expressed herself when she rejected him, to be either able, or willing, to renew his proposal. I even doubt if he will believe in her expression of regret. This view of mine may turn out, of course, to be quite wrong; but let us at least put it to the test. I can easily get leave of absence for a few days. Let me take your letter to Bingen tomorrow, and see with my own eyes how it is received."

At last I was fortunate enough to deserve my aunt's approval. "An excellent suggestion," she said. "But--I believe I have caught the infection of your prudence, David--don't let us tell Madame Fontaine. Let her suppose that you have gone to Bingen in consequence of the unfavorable news of Engelman's health." She paused, and considered a little. "Or, better still, Bingen is on the way to England. There will be nothing extraordinary in your stopping to visit Engelman, on your journey to London."

This took me completely, and far from agreeably, by surprise. I said piteously, "Must I really leave Frankfort?"

"My good fellow, I have other interests to consider besides Engelman's interests," my aunt explained. "Mr. Hartrey is waiting to hear from me. There is no hope that Engelman will be able to travel to London, in his present state of health, and no possibility of Mr. Keller taking his place until something is settled at Frankfort. I want you to explain all this to Mr. Hartrey, and to help him in the management of the business. There is nobody else here, David, whom I can trust, as I trust you. I see no alternative but to ask you to go to London."

On my side, I had no alternative but to submit--and, what is more (remembering all that I owed to my aunt), to submit with my best grace. We consulted Mr. Keller; and he entirely agreed that I was the fittest person who could be found to reconcile Mr. Hartrey to the commercial responsibilities that burdened him. After a day's delay at Bingen, to study the condition of Mr. Engelman's health and to write the fullest report to Frankfort, the faster I could travel afterwards, and the sooner I could reach London, the better.

So hard necessity compelled me to leave the stage, before the curtain rose on the final acts of the drama. The mail-post started at six in the morning. I packed up, and took leave of everybody, overnight--excepting Madame

Fontaine, who still kept her room, and who was not well enough to see me. The dear kind-hearted Minna offered me her cheek to kiss, and made me promise to return for her marriage. She was strangely depressed at my departure. "You first consoled me," she said; "you have brought me happiness. I don't like your leaving us. Oh, David, I do wish you were not going away!" "Come! come!" my aunt interposed; "no crying, young lady! Always keep a man's spirits up when he leaves you. Give me a good hug, David--and think of the time when you will be a partner in the business." Ah! what a woman she was! Look as you may, my young friends, you will not find the like of her now.

Jack Straw was the one person up and stirring when the coach stopped the next morning at the door. I expected to be amused--but there was no reckoning with Jack. His farewell words literally frightened me.

"I say!" he whispered, as I hurried into the hall, "there's one thing I want to ask you before you go."

"Be quick about it, Jack."

"All right, David. I had a talk with Minna yesterday, about Mr. Keller's illness. Is it true that he was cured out of the blue-glass bottle?"

"Perfectly true.

"Look here, David! I have been thinking of it all night. I was cured out of the blue-glass bottle."

I suddenly stood still, with my eyes riveted on his face. He stepped close up to me, and lowered his voice suddenly.

"And I was poisoned," he said. "What I want to know is--Who poisoned Mr. Keller?"

BETWEEN THE PARTS

MR. DAVID GLENNEY PRODUCES HIS CORRESPONDENCE, AND THROWS SOME NEW LIGHTS ON THE STORY

I

Be pleased to read the following letter from Mr. Lawyer's-Clerk-Schmuckle to Mr. Town-Councilor-Hof:

"My honored Sir,--I beg to report that you may make your mind easy on the subject of Madame Fontaine. If she leaves Frankfort, she will not slip away privately as she did at Wurzburg. Wherever she may go now, we need not apply again to her relations in this place to help us to find her. Henceforth I undertake to keep her in view until the promissory note falls due.

"The lady is at present established as housekeeper in the employment of the firm of Wagner, Keller, and Engelman; and there (barring accidents, which I shall carefully look after) she is likely to remain.

"I have made a memorandum of the date at which her promissory note falls due--viz., the 31st December in the present year. The note being made payable at Wurzburg, you must take care (in the event of its not being honored) to have the document protested in that town, and to communicate with me by the same day's post. I will myself see that the law takes its regular course.

"Permit me most gratefully to thank you for the advance on my regular fees which you have so graciously transmitted, and believe me your obedient humble servant to command."

II

I next submit a copy of a letter addressed by the late Chemistry-Professor Fontaine to an honored friend and colleague. This gentleman is still living; and he makes it a condition of supplying the copy that his name shall not appear:--

"Illustrious Friend and Colleague,--You will be surprised at so soon hearing from me again. The truth is, that I have some interesting news for you. An alarming accident has enabled me to test the value of one of my preparations on a living human subject--that subject being a man.

"My last letter informed you that I had resolved on making no further use of the Formula for recomposing some of the Borgia Poisons (erroneously supposed to be destroyed) left to me on the death of my lamented Hungarian friend--my master in chemical science.

"The motives which have led me to this decision are, I hope, beyond the reach of blame.

"You will remember agreeing with me, that the two specimens of these resuscitated poisons which I have succeeded in producing are capable--like the poisons already known to modern medical practice--of rendering the utmost benefit in certain cases of disease, if they are administered in carefully regulated doses. Should I live to devote them to this good purpose, there will still be the danger (common to all poisonous preparations employed in medicine) of their doing fatal mischief, when misused by ignorance or crime.

"Bearing this in mind, I conceive it to be my duty to provide against dangerous results, by devoting myself to the discovery of efficient antidotes, before I adapt the preparations themselves to the capacities of the healing art. I have had some previous experience in this branch of what I call preservative chemistry, and I have already in some degree succeeded in attaining my object.

"The Formula in cipher which I now send to you, on the slip of paper enclosed, is an antidote to that one of the two poisons known to you and to me by the fanciful name which you suggested for it--'Alexander's Wine.'

"With regard to the second of the poisons, which (if you remember) I have entitled--in anticipation of its employment as medicine--'The Looking-Glass Drops,' I regret to say that I have not yet succeeded in discovering the antidote in this case.

"Having now sufficiently explained my present position, I may tell you of the extraordinary accident to which I have alluded at the beginning of my letter.

"About a fortnight since, I was sent for, just as I had finished my lecture to the students, to see one of my servants. He had been suffering from illness for one or two days. I had of course offered him my medical services. He refused, however, to trouble me; sending word that he only wanted rest. Fortunately one of my assistants happened to see him, and at once felt the necessity of calling in my help.

"The man was a poor half-witted friendless creature, whom I had employed out of pure pity to keep my laboratory clean, and to wash and dry my bottles. He had sense enough to perform such small services as these, and no more. Judge of my horror when I went to his bedside, and instantly recognized the symptoms of poisoning by "Alexander's Wine!"

"I ran back to my laboratory, and unlocked the medicine-chest which held the antidote. In the next compartment, the poison itself was always placed. Looking into the compartment now, I found it empty.

"I at once instituted a search, and discovered the bottle left out on a shelf. For the first time in my life, I had been guilty of inexcusable carelessness. I had not looked round me to see that I had left everything safe before quitting the room. The poor imbecile wretch had been attracted by the color of "Alexander's Wine," and had tasted it (in his own phrase) "to see if it was nice." My inquiries informed me that this had happened at least thirty-six hours since! I had but one hope of saving him--derived from experiments on animals, which had shown me the very gradual progress of the deadly action of the poison.

"What I felt when I returned to the suffering man, I shall not attempt to describe. You will understand how completely I was overwhelmed, when I tell you that I meanly concealed my own disgraceful thoughtlessness from my brethren in the University. I was afraid that my experiments might be prohibited as dangerous, and my want of common prudence be made the subject of public reprimand by the authorities. The medical professors were permitted by me to conclude that it was a case of illness entirely new in their experience.

"In administering the antidote, I had no previous experiments to guide me, except my experiments with rabbits and dogs. Whether I miscalculated or whether I was deluded by my anxiety to save the man's life, I cannot say. This at least is certain, I gave the doses too copiously and at too short intervals.

"The patient recovered--but it was after sustaining some incomprehensibly deteriorating change in the blood, which destroyed his complexion, and turned his hair gray. I have since modified the doses; and in dread of losing the memorandum, I have attached a piece of notched paper to the bottle, so as to render any future error of judgment impossible. At the same time, I have facilitated the future administration of the antidote by adding a label to the bottle, stating the exact quantity of the poison taken by my servant, as calculated by myself.

"I ought, by the way, to have mentioned in the cipher that experience has shown me the necessity, if the antidote is to be preserved for any length of time, of protecting it in blue glass from the influence of light.

"Let me also tell you that I found a vegetable diet of use in perfecting the effect of the treatment. That mean dread of discovery, which I have already acknowledged, induced me to avail myself of my wife's help in nursing the man. When he began to talk of what had happened to him, I could trust Madame Fontaine to keep the secret. When he was well enough to get up, the poor harmless creature disappeared. He was probably terrified at the prospect of entering the laboratory again. In any case, I have never seen him or heard of him since.

"If you have had patience to read as far as this, you will understand that I am not sure enough yet of my own discoveries to risk communicating them to any other person than yourself. Favor me with any chemical suggestions which may strike you--and then, in case of accidents, destroy the cipher. For the present farewell."

Note to Doctor Fontaine's Letter

"Alexander's Wine" refers to the infamous Roderic Borgia, historically celebrated as Pope Alexander the Sixth. He was accidentally, and most deservedly, killed by drinking one of the Borgia poisons, in a bowl of wine which he had prepared for another person.

The formula for "The Looking-Glass Drops" is supposed to have been found hidden on removing the wooden lining at the back of a looking-glass, which had been used by Lucrezia Borgia. Hence the name.

III

The third and last letter which I present is written by me, and was addressed to Mrs. Wagner during her stay at Frankfort:--

"I exaggerate nothing, my dear aunt, when I say that I write in great distress. Let me beg you to prepare yourself for very sad news.

"It was late yesterday evening before I arrived at Bingen. A servant was waiting to take my portmanteau, when I got out of the coach. After first asking my name, he communicated to me the melancholy tidings of dear Mr. Engelman's death. He had sunk under a fit of apoplexy, at an early hour

that morning.

"Medical help was close at hand, and was (so far as I can hear) carefully and intelligently exercised. But he never rallied in the least. The fit appears to have killed him, as a bullet might have killed him.

"He had been very dull and heavy on the previous day. In the few words that he spoke before retiring to rest, my name was on his lips. He said, "If I get better I should like to have David here, and to go on with him to our house of business in London." He was very much flushed, and complained of feeling giddy; but he would not allow the doctor to be sent for. His brother assisted him to ascend the stairs to his room, and asked him some questions about his affairs. He replied impatiently, 'Keller knows all about it--leave it to Keller.'

"When I think of the good old man's benevolent and happy life, and when I remember that it was accidentally through me that he first met Madame Fontaine, I feel a bitterness of spirit which makes my sense of the loss of him more painful than I can describe. I call to mind a hundred little instances of his kindness to me--and (don't be offended) I wish you had sent some other person than myself to represent you at Frankfort.

"He is to be buried here, in two days' time. I hope you will not consider me negligent of your interest in accepting his brother's invitation to follow him to the grave. I think it will put me in a better frame of mind, if I can pay the last tribute of affection and respect to my old friend. When all is over, I will continue the journey to London, without stopping on the road night or day.

"Write to me at London, dear aunt; and give my love to Minna and Fritz--and ask them to write to me also. I beg my best respects to Mr. Keller. Please assure him of my true sympathy; I know, poor man, how deeply he will be grieved."