

Farjeon Benjamin Leopold

Self-Doomed. A Novel



Benjamin Farjeon
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CHAPTER I

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

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

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

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

* * * * *

She has gone, and will not trouble us again tonight. You are thoughtful-you observed something strange in her. Her dead-white face, her long silvery hair, her great fixed eyes have impressed you. Why, yes-she never seems to see anything that is before her, but to be forever gazing into a world invisible to all other human beings. What she beholds there, Heaven only knows, though I sometimes fancy I can see with my mind's eye the terrible scene which shall abide with her to the last hour of her life, and the figures who played their parts therein. On rare occasions I have heard her addressing them, but in a tone so low that her words have not reached my ears. To me she never speaks except upon the duties of the house, or in reply to a question I ask her. You will scarcely believe that she was beautiful once-very, very beautiful-and that she might have picked and chosen. No, she was never

married. What a pitiful look in her eyes? Yes, yes; it is enough to move one to sadness. What is it you desire to know? Is she in her right mind? No, she is mad!

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Proceed, Gideon."

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

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

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

"Until you further enlighten me I cannot say."

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

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

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

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

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

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

CHAPTER II

A LOVE-CHAPTER IN THE LIFE OF MASTER FINK

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

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

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

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

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

and repeated my prayers, I pressed Louisa's boots to my heart. Upon the soling and heeling of those boots I would have liked to challenge the world. Surely such excellent workmanship could not have been produced by other hands than mine. Louisa Wagner thought so, and said so, as she took them from me and examined them.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Why?" she asked.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

He sent a shout of mocking laughter after me.

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

I suffered terribly, and for some time my mind was plunged into such darkness that I could see no gleam of goodness in all the wide world. That is the selfish view we take of things when sorrow comes to our door. "Why," I asked myself, "does Louisa Wagner marry that brute and gambler instead of an honest, hard-working youngster who not only loves but respects her? For what reason does she prefer him to me?" If I could have answered those questions I might be able to tell you more than I know of the workings of a woman's heart. It is beyond me, and beyond you, and therefore I have kept myself free from woman's power from that day to this. I recovered my peace of mind, and so that it might not again be disturbed by the sight of the woman I loved, I left my native village with my knapsack on my shoulders, and came here, where I set up in business for myself as a watch-maker, and have jogged on ever since, with a fair share of happiness and content. There is no condition of

life in which a man has not good reason to be grateful. I have grown to know this, and it has been of value to me in my reflections upon life's trials and disappointments. I have my work, I have my connection, I owe no one a florin, I am at peace with the world. That is happiness enough.

CHAPTER III

RELATES HOW GIDEON WOLF BECAME MASTER FINK'S APPRENTICE

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

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

"Master Fink?" she said.

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

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

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

"Yes," she sighed.

"Where from?"

"From our native village."

"You have ridden here?" I said.

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

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

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

I divined that it was no light errand that had brought her to me, and it was evident that her strength was spent. It was as much as she could do to prevent herself from sinking to the ground. I hastily summoned Anna from her kitchen, and bade her attend to my visitor. A heart of quick sympathy beat in my old Anna's breast, and without asking who the woman was she administered to her wants. It was not without difficulty that this was accomplished, for Louisa was so eager to disclose her errand that, had she been allowed to have her way, she would not have tasted food until she had acquainted me with her mission. But Anna insisted, and so did I, and she had not the strength to reject the kindly offices which were forced upon her. When she had drunk a basin of nourishing soup which Anna prepared-I never really knew what soup was till Anna made it for me; what a treasure that woman was! – I told her I was ready to listen to her.

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

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

She bent her head humbly and gratefully.

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

"I grieve, to see it."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"I acknowledge it gratefully," I said.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

CHAPTER IV

MASTER FINK HAS A SINGULAR DREAM

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

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

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

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

"Let me out-let me out!"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Bang! Bang! Bang! I jumped out of bed in a fright, and ran to the bedroom door and threw it open; and there I beheld old Anna sitting in the passage outside, crying in her loudest voice that every bone in her body was broken, while a lot of my best plates and dishes, all in little pieces, lay around her. She was coming down-stairs with a trayful of crockery in her arms when she tripped, and

fell all the way down. That was the end of my dream. I could not help laughing heartily at it, which made old Anna cross-tempered the whole of the day.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

CHAPTER V

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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