Six Weeks at Heppenheim

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After I left Oxford, I determined to spend some months in travel before settling down in life. My father had left me a few thousands, the income arising from which would be enough to provide for all the necessary requirements of a lawyer's education; such as lodgings in a quiet part of London, fees and payment to the distinguished barrister with whom I was to read; but there would be small surplus left over for luxuries or amusements; and as I was rather in debt on leaving college, since I had forestalled my income, and the expenses of my travelling would have to be defrayed out of my capital, I determined that they should not exceed fifty pounds. As long as that sum would last me I would remain abroad; when it was spent my holiday should be over, and I would return and settle down somewhere in the neighbourhood of Russell Square, in order to be near Mr ——'s chambers in Lincoln's Inn. I had to wait in London for one day while my passport was being made out, and I went to examine the streets in which I purposed to live; I had picked them out, from studying a map, as desirable; and so they were, if judged entirely by my reason; but their aspect was very depressing to one country−bred, and just fresh from the beautiful street−architecture of Oxford. The thought of living in such a monotonous grey district for years made me all the more anxious to prolong my holiday by all the economy which could eke out my fifty pounds. I thought could make it last for one hundred days at least. I was a good walker, and had no very luxurious tastes in the matter of accommodation or food; I had as fair a knowledge of German and French as any untravelled Englishman can have; and I resolved to avoid expensive hotels such as my own countrymen frequented.

I have stated this much about myself to explain how I fell in with the little story that I am going to record, but with which I had not much to do,—my part in it being little more than that of a sympathizing spectator. I had been through France into Switzerland, where I had gone beyond my strength in the way of walking, and I was on my way home, when one evening I came to the village of Heppenheim, on the Berg−Strasse. I had strolled about the dirty town of Worms all morning, and dined in a filthy hotel; and after that I had crossed the Rhine, and walked through Lorsch to Heppenheim. I was unnaturally tired and languid as I dragged myself up the rough−paved and irregular village street to the inn recommended to me. It was a large building, with a green court before it. A cross−looking but scrupulously clean hostess received me, and showed me into a large room with a dinner−table in it, which, though it might have accommodated thirty or forty guests, only stretched down half the length of the eating−room. There were windows at each end of the room; two looked to the front of the house, on which the evening shadows had already fallen; the opposite two were partly doors, opening into a large garden full of trained fruit−trees and beds of vegetables, amongst which rose−bushes and other flowers seemed to grow by permission, not by original intention. There was a stove at each end of the room, which, I suspect, had originally been divided into two. The door by which I had entered was exactly in the middle, and opposite to it was another, leading to a great bedchamber, which my hostess showed me as my sleeping quarters for the night.

If the place had been much less clean and inviting, I should have remained there; I was almost surprised myself at my vis inertiae; once seated in the last warm rays of the slanting sun by the garden window, I was disinclined to move, or even to speak. My hostess had taken my orders as to my evening meal, and had left me. The sun went down, and I grew shivery. The vast room looked cold and bare; the darkness brought out shadows that perplexed me, because I could not fully make out the objects that produced them after dazzling my eyes by gazing out into the crimson light.

Someone came in; it was the maiden to prepare for my supper. She began to lay the cloth at one end of the large table. There was a smaller one close by me. I mustered up my voice, which seemed a little as if it was getting beyond my control, and called to her,—

'Will you let me have my supper here on this table?'

She came near; the light fell on her while I was in shadow. She was a tall young woman, with a fine strong

figure, a pleasant face, expressive of goodness and sense, and with a good deal of comeliness about it, too, although the fair complexion was bronzed and reddened by weather, so as to have lost much of its delicacy, and the features, as I had afterwards opportunity enough of observing, were anything but regular. She had white teeth, however, and well−opened blue eyes—grave−looking eyes which had shed tears for past sorrow—plenty of light−brown hair, rather elaborately plaited, and fastened up by two great silver pins. That was all—perhaps more than all—I noticed that first night. She began to lay the cloth where I had directed. A shiver passed over me: she looked at me, and then said,—

'The gentleman is cold: shall I light the stove?'

Something vexed me—I am not usually so impatient: it was the coming−on of serious illness—I did not like to be noticed so closely; I believed that food would restore me, and I did not want to have my meal delayed, as I feared it might be by the lighting of the stove; and most of all I was feverishly annoyed by movement. I answered sharply and abruptly,—

'No; bring supper quickly; that is all I want.'

Her quiet, sad eyes met mine for a moment; but I saw no change in their expression, as if I had vexed her by my rudeness: her countenance did not for an instant lose its look of patient sense, and that is pretty nearly all I can remember of Thekla that first evening at Heppenheim.

I suppose I ate my supper, or tried to do so, at any rate; and I must have gone to bed, for days after I became conscious of lying there, weak as a new−born babe, and with a sense of past pain in all my weary limbs. As is the case in recovering from fever, one does not care to connect facts, much less to reason upon them; so how I came to be lying in that strange bed, in that large, half−furnished room; in what house that room was; in what town, in what country, I did not take the trouble to recall. It was of much more consequence to me then to discover what was the well−known herb that gave the scent to the clean, coarse sheets in which I lay. Gradually I extended my observations, always confining myself to the present. I must have been well cared−for by someone, and that lately, too, for the window was shaded, so as to prevent the morning sun from coming in upon the bed; there was the crackling of fresh wood in the great white china stove, which must have been newly replenished within a short time.

By−and−by the door opened slowly. I cannot tell why, but my impulse was to shut my eyes as if I were still asleep. But I could see through my apparently closed eyelids. In came, walking on tip−toe, with a slow care that defeated its object, two men. The first was aged from thirty to forty, in the dress of a Black Forest peasant,—old−fashioned coat and knee−breeches of strong blue cloth, but of a thoroughly good quality; he was followed by an older man, whose dress, of more pretension as to cut and colour (it was all black), was, nevertheless, as I had often the opportunity of observing afterwards, worn threadbare.

Their first sentences, in whispered German, told me who they were: the landlord of the inn where I was lying a helpless log, and the village doctor who had been called in. The latter felt my pulse, and nodded his head repeatedly in approbation. I had instinctively known that I was getting better, and hardly cared for this confirmation; but it seemed to give the truest pleasure to the landlord, who shook the hand of the doctor, in a pantomime expressive of as much thankfulness as if I had been his brother. Some low−spoken remarks were made, and then some question was asked, to which, apparently, my host was unable to reply. He left the room, and in a minute or two returned, followed by Thekla, who was questioned by the doctor, and replied with a quiet clearness, showing how carefully the details of my illness had been observed by her. Then she left the room, and, as if every minute had served to restore to my brain its power of combining facts, I was suddenly prompted to open my eyes, and ask in the best German I could muster what day of the month it was; not that I clearly remembered the date of my arrival at Heppenheim, but I knew it was about the beginning of September.

Again the doctor conveyed his sense of extreme satisfaction in a series of rapid pantomimic nods, and then replied in deliberate but tolerable English, to my great surprise,—

'It is the 29th of September, my dear sir. You must thank the dear God. Your fever has made its course of twenty−one days. Now patience and care must be practised. The good host and his household will have the care; you must have the patience. If you have relations in England, I will do my endeavours to tell them the state of your health.

'I have no near relations,' said I, beginning in my weakness to cry, as I remembered, as if it had been a dream, the days when I had father, mother, sister.

'Chut, chut!' said he; then, turning to the landlord, he told him in German to make Thekla bring me one of her good bouillons; after which I was to have certain medicines, and to sleep as undisturbedly as possible. For days, he went on, I should require constant watching and careful feeding; every twenty minutes I was to have something, either wine or soup, in small quantities.

A dim notion came into my hazy mind that my previous husbandry of my fifty pounds, by taking long walks and scanty diet, would prove in the end very bad economy; but I sank into dozing unconsciousness before I could quite follow out my idea. I was roused by the touch of a spoon on my lips; it was Thekla feeding me. Her sweet, grave face had something approaching to a mother's look of tenderness upon it, as she gave me spoonful after spoonful with gentle patience and dainty care: and then I fell asleep once more. When next I wakened it was night; the stove was lighted, and the burning wood made a pleasant crackle, though I could only see the outlines and edges of red flame through the crevices of the small iron door. The uncurtained window on my left looked into the purple, solemn night. Turning a little, I saw Thekla sitting near a table, sewing diligently at some great white piece of household work. Every now and then she stopped to snuff the candle; sometimes she began to ply her needle again immediately; but once or twice she let her busy hands lie idly in her lap, and looked into the darkness, and thought deeply for a moment or two; these pauses always ended in a kind of sobbing sigh, the sound of which seemed to restore her to self−consciousness, and she took to her sewing even more diligently than before. Watching her had a sort of dreamy interest for me; this diligence of hers was a pleasant contrast to my repose; it seemed to enhance the flavour of my rest. I was too much of an animal just then to have my sympathy, or even my curiosity, strongly excited by her look of sad remembrance, or by her sighs.

After a while she gave a little start, looked at a watch lying by her on the table, and came, shading the candle by her hand, softly to my bedside. When she saw my open eyes she went to a porringer placed at the top of the stove, and fed me with soup. She did not speak while doing this. I was half aware that she had done it many times since the doctor's visit, although this seemed to be the first time that I was fully awake. She passed her arm under the pillow on which my head rested, and raised me a very little; her support was as firm as a man's could have been. Again back to her work, and I to my slumbers, without a word being exchanged.

It was broad daylight when I wakened again; I could see the sunny atmosphere of the garden outside stealing in through the nicks at the side of the shawl hung up to darken the room—a shawl which I was sure had not been there when I had observed the window in the night. How gently my nurse must have moved about while doing her thoughtful act!

My breakfast was brought me by the hostess; she who had received me on my first arrival at this hospitable inn. She meant to do everything kindly, I am sure; but a sickroom was not her place; by a thousand little maladroitnesses she fidgeted me past bearing; her shoes creaked, her dress rustled; she asked me questions about myself which it irritated me to answer; she congratulated me on being so much better, while I was faint for want of the food which she delayed giving me in order to talk. My host had more sense in him when he came in, although his shoes creaked as well as hers. By this time I was somewhat revived, and could talk a little; besides, it seemed churlish to be longer without acknowledging so much kindness received.

'I am afraid I have been a great trouble,' said I. 'I can only say that I am truly grateful.'

His good broad face reddened, and he moved a little uneasily.

'I don't see how I could have done otherwise than I—than we, did,' replied he, in the soft German of the district. 'We were all glad enough to do what we could; I don't say it was a pleasure, because it is our busiest time of year,—but then,' said he, laughing a little awkwardly, as if he feared his expression might have been misunderstood, 'I don't suppose it has been a pleasure to you either, sir, to be laid up so far from home.'

'No, indeed.'

'I may as well tell you now, sir, that we had to look over your papers and clothes. In the first place, when you were so ill I would fain have let your kinsfolk know, if I could have found a clue; and besides, you needed linen.'

'I am wearing a shirt of yours though,' said I, touching my sleeve.

'Yes, sir!' said he again, reddening a little. 'I told Thekla to take the finest out of the chest; but I am afraid you find it coarser than your own.'

For all answer I could only lay my weak hand on the great brown paw resting on the bedside. He gave me a sudden squeeze in return that I thought would have crushed my bones.

'I beg your pardon, sir,' said he, misinterpreting the sudden look of pain which I could not repress; 'but

watching a man come out of the shadow of death into life makes one feel very friendly towards him.'

'No old or true friend that I have had could have done more for me than you, and your wife, and Thekla, and the good doctor.'

'I am a widower,' said he, turning round the great wedding−ring that decked his third finger. 'My sister keeps house for me, and takes care of the children,—that is to say, she does it with the help of Thekla, the house−maiden. But I have other servants,' he continued. 'I am well to do; the good God be thanked! I have land, and cattle, and vineyards. It will soon be our vintage−time, and then you must go and see my grapes as they come into the village. I have a chasse, too, in the Odenwald; perhaps one day you will be strong enough to go and shoot the chevreuil with me.'

His good, true heart was trying to make me feel like a welcome guest. Some time afterwards I learnt from the doctor that—my poor fifty pounds being nearly all expended—my host and he had been brought to believe in my poverty, as the necessary examination of my clothes and papers showed so little evidence of wealth. But I myself have but little to do with my story; I only name these things, and repeat these conversations, to show what a true, kind, honest man my host was. By the way, I may as well call him by his name henceforward, Fritz Muller. The doctor's name, Wiedermann.

I was tired enough with this interview with Fritz Muller; but when Dr Wiedermann came he pronounced me to be much better; and through the day much the same course was pursued as on the previous one: being fed, lying still, and sleeping, were my passive and active occupations. It was a hot, sunshiny day, and I craved for air. Fresh air does not enter into the pharmacopoeia of a German doctor; but somehow I obtained my wish. During the morning hours the window through which the sun streamed—the window looking on to the front court—was opened a little; and through it I heard the sounds of active life, which gave me pleasure and interest enough. The hen's cackle, the cock's exultant call when he had found the treasure of a grain of corn,—the movements of a tethered donkey, and the cooing and whirring of the pigeons which lighted on the window−sill, gave me just subjects enough for interest. Now and then a cart or carriage drove up,—I could hear them ascending the rough village street long before they stopped at the Halbmond, the village inn. Then there came a sound of running and haste in the house; and Thekla was always called for in sharp, imperative tones. I heard little children's footsteps, too, from time to time; and once there must have been some childish accident or hurt, for a shrill, plaintive little voice kept calling out, Thekla, Thekla, liebe Thekla.' Yet, after the first early morning hours, when my hostess attended on my wants, it was always Thekla who came to give me my food or my medicine; who redded up my room; who arranged the degree of light, shifting the temporary curtain with the shifting sun; and always as quietly and deliberately as though her attendance upon me were her sole work. Once or twice my hostess came into the large eating−room (out of which my room opened), and called Thekla away from whatever was her occupation in my room at the time, in a sharp, injured, imperative whisper. Once I remember it was to say that sheets were wanted for some stranger's bed, and to ask where she, the speaker, could have put the keys, in a tone of irritation, as though Thekla were responsible for Fraulein Muller's own forgetfulness.

Night came on; the sounds of daily life died away into silence; the children's voices were no more heard; the poultry were all gone to roost; the beasts of burden to their stables; and travellers were housed. Then Thekla came in softly and quietly, and took up her appointed place, after she had done all in her power for my comfort. I felt that I was in no state to be left all those weary hours which intervened between sunset and sunrise; but I did feel ashamed that this young woman, who had watched by me all the previous night, and for aught I knew, for many before, and had worked hard, been run off her legs, as English servants would say, all day long, should come and take up her care of me again; and it was with a feeling of relief that I saw her head bend forwards, and finally rest on her arms, which had fallen on the white piece of sewing spread before her on the table. She slept; and I slept. When I wakened dawn was stealing into the room, and making pale the lamplight. Thekla was standing by the stove, where she had been preparing the bouillon I should require on wakening. But she did not notice my halfopen eyes, although her face was turned towards the bed. She was reading a letter slowly, as if its words were familiar to her, yet as though she were trying afresh to extract some fuller or some different meaning from their construction. She folded it up softly and slowly, and replaced it in her pocket with the quiet movement habitual to her. Then she looked before her, not at me, but at vacancy filled up by memories; and as the enchanter brought up the scenes and people which she saw, but I could not, her eyes filled with tears—tears that gathered almost imperceptibly to herself as it would seem—for when one large drop fell on her hands (held slightly together

before her as she stood) she started a little, and brushed her eyes with the back of her hand, and then came towards the bed to see if I was awake. If I had not witnessed her previous emotion, I could never have guessed that she had any hidden sorrow or pain from her manner; tranquil, self−restrained as usual. The thought of this letter haunted me, especially as more than once I, wakeful or watchful during the ensuing nights, either saw it in her hands, or suspected that she had been recurring to it from noticing the same sorrowful, dreamy look upon her face when she thought herself unobserved. Most likely everyone has noticed how inconsistently out of proportion some ideas become when one is shut up in any place without change of scene or thought. I really grew quite irritated about this letter. If I did not see it, I suspected it lay perdu in her pocket. What was in it? Of course it was a love−letter; but if so, what was going wrong in the course of her love? I became like a spoilt child in my recovery; everyone whom I saw for the time being was thinking only of me, so it was perhaps no wonder that I became my sole object of thought; and at last the gratification of my curiosity about this letter seemed to me a duty that I owed to myself. As long as my fidgety inquisitiveness remained ungratified, I felt as if I could not get well. But to do myself justice, it was more than inquisitiveness. Thekla had tended me with the gentle, thoughtful care of a sister, in the midst of her busy life. I could often hear the Fraulein's sharp voice outside blaming her for something that had gone wrong; but I never heard much from Thekla in reply. Her name was called in various tones by different people, more frequently than I could count, as if her services were in perpetual requisition, yet I was never neglected, or even long uncared−for. The doctor was kind and attentive; my host friendly and really generous; his sister subdued her acerbity of manner when in my room, but Thekla was the one of all to whom I owed my comforts, if not my life. If I could do anything to smooth her path (and a little money goes a great way in these primitive parts of Germany), how willingly would I give it? So one night I began—she was no longer needed to watch by my bedside, but she was arranging my room before leaving me for the night——

'Thekla,' said I, 'you don't belong to Heppenheim, do you?'

She looked at me, and reddened a little.

'No. Why do you ask?'

'You have been so good to me that I cannot help wanting to know more about you. I must needs feel interested in one who has been by my side through my illness as you have. Where do your friends live? Are your parents alive?'

All this time I was driving at the letter.

'I was borne at Altenahr. My father is an innkeeper there. He owns the Golden Stag. My mother is dead, and he has married again, and has many children.'

'And your stepmother is unkind to you,' said I, jumping to a conclusion.

'Who said so?' asked she, with a shade of indignation in her tone. 'She is a right good woman, and makes my father a good wife.'

'Then why are you here living so far from home?'

Now the look came back to her face which I had seen upon it during the night hours when I had watched her by stealth; a dimming of the grave frankness of her eyes, a light quiver at the corners of her mouth. But all she said was, 'It was better.'

Somehow, I persisted with the wilfulness of an invalid. I am half ashamed of it now.

'But why better, Thekla? Was there ——' How should I put it? I stopped a little, and then rushed blindfold at my object: 'Has not that letter which you read so often something to do with your being here?'

She fixed me with her serious eyes till I believe I reddened far more than she; and I hastened to pour out, incoherently enough, my conviction that she had some secret care, and my desire to help her if she was in any trouble.

'You cannot help me,' said she, a little softened by my explanation, though some shade of resentment at having been thus surreptitiously watched yet lingered in her manner. 'It is an old story; a sorrow gone by, past, at least it ought to be, only sometimes I am foolish'—her tones were softening now—'and it is punishment enough that you have seen my folly.'

'If you had a brother here, Thekla, you would let him give you his sympathy if he could not give you his help, and you would not blame yourself if you had shown him your sorrow, should you? I tell you again, let me be as a brother to you.'

'In the first place, sir'—this 'sir' was to mark the distinction between me and the imaginary brother—'I should

have been ashamed to have shown even a brother my sorrow, which is also my reproach and my disgrace.' These were strong words; and I suppose my face showed that I attributed to them a still stronger meaning than they warranted; but honi soit qui mal y pense—for she went on dropping her eyes and speaking hurriedly.

'My shame and my reproach is this: I have loved a man who has not loved me'—she grasped her hands together till the fingers made deep white dents in the rosy flesh—'and I can't make out whether he ever did, or whether he did once and is changed now; if only he did once love me, I could forgive myself.'

With hasty, trembling hands she began to rearrange the tisane and medicines for the night on the little table at my bedside. But, having got thus far, I was determined to persevere.

'Thekla,' said I, 'tell me all about it, as you would to your mother, if she were alive. There are often misunderstandings which, never set to rights, make the misery and desolation of a lifetime.'

She did not speak at first. Then she pulled out the letter, and said, in a quiet, hopeless tone of voice:—

'You can read German writing? Read that, and see if I have any reason for misunderstanding.'

The letter was signed 'Franz Weber,' and dated from some small town in Switzerland—I forget what—about a month previous to the time when I read it. It began with acknowledging the receipt of some money which had evidently been requested by the writer, and for which the thanks were almost fulsome; and then, by the quietest transition in the world, he went on to consult her as to the desirability of his marrying some girl in the place from which he wrote, saying that this Anna Somebody was only eighteen and very pretty, and her father a well−to−do shopkeeper, and adding, with coarse coxcombry, his belief that he was not indifferent to the maiden herself. He wound up by saying that, if this marriage did take place, he should certainly repay the various sums of money which Thekla had lent him at different times.

I was some time in making out all this. Thekla held the candle for me to read it; held it patiently and steadily, not speaking a word till I had folded up the letter again, and given it back to her. Then our eyes met.

'There is no misunderstanding possible, is there, sir?' asked she, with a faint smile.

'No,' I replied; 'but you are well rid of such a fellow.'

She shook her head a little. 'It shows his bad side, sir. We have all our bad sides. You must not judge him harshly; at least, I cannot. But then we were brought up together.

'At Altenahr?'

'Yes; his father kept the other inn, and our parents, instead of being rivals, were great friends. Franz is a little younger than I, and was a delicate child. I had to take him to school, and I used to be so proud of it and of my charge. Then he grew strong, and was the handsomest lad in the village. Our fathers used to Sit and smoke together, and talk of our marriage, and Franz must have heard as much as I. Whenever he was in trouble, he would come to me for what advice I could give him; and he danced twice as often with me as with any other girl at all the dances, and always brought his nosegay to me. Then his father wished him to travel, and learn the ways at the great hotels on the Rhine before he settled down in Altenahr. You know that is the custom in Germany, sir. They go from town to town as journeymen, learning something fresh everywhere, they say.'

'I knew that was done in trades,' I replied.

'Oh, yes; and among innkeepers, too,' she said. 'Most of the waiters at the great hotels in Frankfurt, and Heidelberg, and Mainz, and, I daresay, at all the other places, are the sons of innkeepers in small towns, who go out into the world to learn new ways, and perhaps to pick up a little English and French; otherwise, they say, they should never get on. Franz went off from Altenahr on his journeyings four years ago next May Day; and before he went, he brought me back a ring from Bonn, where he bought his new clothes. I don't wear it now; but I have got it upstairs, and it comforts me to see something that shows me it was not all my silly fancy. I suppose he fell among bad people, for he soon began to play for money,—and then he lost more than he could always pay—and sometimes I could help him a little, for we wrote to each other from time to time, as we knew each other's addresses; for the little ones grew around my father's hearth, and I thought that I, too, would go forth into the world and earn my own living, so that——well, I will tell the truth—I thought that by going into service, I could lay by enough for buying a handsome stock of household linen, and plenty of pans and kettles against—against what will never come to pass now.'

'Do the German women buy the pots and kettles, as you call them, when they are married?' asked I, awkwardly, laying hold of a trivial question to conceal the indignant sympathy with her wrongs which I did not like to express.

'Oh, yes; the bride furnishes all that is wanted in the kitchen, and all the store of house−linen. If my mother had lived, it would have been laid by for me, as she could have afforded to buy it, but my stepmother will have hard enough work to provide for her own four little girls. However,' she continued, brightening up, 'I can help her, for now I shall never marry; and my master here is just and liberal, and pays me sixty florins a year, which is high wages.' (Sixty florins are about five pounds sterling.) 'And now, good−night, sir. This cup to the left holds the tisane, that to the right the acorn−tea. ' She shaded the candle, and was leaving the room. I raised myself on my elbow, and called her back.

'Don't go on thinking about this man,' said I. 'He was not good enough for you. You are much better unmarried.'

'Perhaps so,' she answered gravely. 'But you cannot do him justice; you do not know him.'

A few minutes after, I heard her soft and cautious return; she had taken her shoes off, and came in her stockinged feet up to my bedside, shading the light with her hand. When she saw that my eyes were open, she laid down two letters on the table, close by my night−lamp.

'Perhaps, some time, sir, you would take the trouble to read these letters; you would then see how noble and clever Franz really is. It is I who ought to be blamed, not he.'

No more was said that night.

Some time the next morning I read the letters. They were filled with vague, inflated, sentimental descriptions of his inner life and feelings; entirely egotistical, and intermixed with quotations from second−rate philosophers and poets. There was, it must be said, nothing in them offensive to good principle or good feeling, however much they might be opposed to good taste. I was to go into the next room that afternoon for the first time of leaving my sick chamber. All morning I lay and ruminated. From time to time I thought of Thekla and Franz Weber. She was the strong, good, helpful character, he the weak and vain; how strange it seemed that she should have cared for one so dissimilar; and then I remembered the various happy marriages when to an outsider it seemed as if one was so inferior to the other that their union would have appeared a subject for despair if it had been looked at prospectively. My host came in, in the midst of these meditations, bringing a great flowered dressing−gown, lined with flannel, and the embroidered smoking−cap which he evidently considered as belonging to this Indian−looking robe. They had been his father's, he told me; and as he helped me to dress, he went on with his communications on small family matters. His inn was flourishing; the numbers increased every year of those who came to see the church at Heppenheim: the church which was the pride of the place, but which I had never yet seen. It was built by the great Kaiser Karl. And there was the Castle of Starkenburg, too, which the Abbots of Lorsch had often defended, stalwart churchmen as they were, against the temporal power of the emperors. And Melibocus was not beyond a walk either. In fact, it was the work of one person to superintend the inn alone; but he had his farm and his vineyards beyond, which of themselves gave him enough to do. And his sister was oppressed with the perpetual calls made upon her patience and her nerves in an inn; and would rather go back and live at Worms. And his children wanted so much looking after. By the time he had placed himself in a condition for requiring my full sympathy, I had finished my slow toilette; and I had to interrupt his confidences, and accept the help of his good strong arm to lead me into the great eating−room, out of which my chamber opened. I had a dreamy recollection of the vast apartment. But how pleasantly it was changed! There was the bare half of the room, it is true, looking as it had done on that first afternoon, sunless and cheerless, with the long, unoccupied table, and the necessary chairs for the possible visitors; but round the windows that opened on the garden a part of the room was enclosed by the household clothes'−horses hung with great pieces of the blue homespun cloth of which the dress of the Black Forest peasant is made. This shut−in space was warmed by the lighted stove, as well as by the lowering rays of the October sun. There was a little round walnut table with some flowers upon it, and a great cushioned armchair placed so as to look out upon the garden and the hills beyond. I felt sure that this was all Thekla's arrangement; I had rather wondered that I had seen so little of her this day. She had come once or twice on necessary errands into my room in the morning, but had appeared to be in great haste, and had avoided meeting my eye. Even when I had returned the letters, which she had entrusted to me with so evident a purpose of placing the writer in my good opinion, she had never inquired as to how far they had answered her design; she had merely taken them with some low word of thanks, and put them hurriedly into her pocket. I suppose she shrank from remembering how fully she had given me her confidence the night before, now that daylight and actual life pressed close around her. Besides, there surely never was anyone in such constant request as Thekla. I

did not like this estrangement, though it was the natural consequence of my improved health, which would daily make me less and less require services which seemed so urgently claimed by others. And, moreover, after my host left me—I fear I had cut him a little short in the recapitulation of his domestic difficulties, but he was too thorough and goodhearted a man to bear malice—I wanted to be amused or interested. So I rang my little hand−bell, hoping that Thekla would answer it, when I could have fallen into conversation with her, without specifying any decided want. Instead of Thekla the Fraulein came, and I had to invent a wish; for I could not act as a baby, and say that I wanted my nurse. However, the Fraulein was better than no one, so I asked her if I could have some grapes, which had been provided for me on every day but this, and which were especially grateful to my feverish palate. She was a good, kind woman, although, perhaps, her temper was not the best in the world; and she expressed the sincerest regret as she told me that there were no more in the house. Like an invalid I fretted at my wish not being granted, and spoke out.

'But Thekla told me the vintage was not till the fourteenth; and you have a vineyard close beyond the garden on the slope of the hill out there, have you not?'

'Yes; and grapes for the gathering. But perhaps the gentleman does not know our laws. Until the vintage—(the day of beginning the vintage is fixed by the Grand Duke, and advertised in the public papers)—until the vintage, all owners of vineyards may only go on two appointed days in every week to gather their grapes; on those two days (Tuesdays and Fridays this year) they must gather enough for the wants of their families; and if they do not reckon rightly, and gather short measure, why they have to go without. And these two last days the Half−Moon has been besieged with visitors, all of whom have asked for grapes. But tomorrow the gentleman can have as many as he will; it is the day for gathering them.'

'What a strange kind of paternal law,' I grumbled out. 'Why is it so ordained? Is it to secure the owners against pilfering from their unfenced vineyards?'

'I am sure I cannot tell,' she replied. 'Country people in these villages have strange customs in many ways, as I daresay the English gentleman has perceived. If he would come to Worms he would see a different kind of life.'

'But not a view like this,' I replied, caught by a sudden change of light—some cloud passing away from the sun, or something. Right outside of the windows was, as I have so often said, the garden. Trained plum−trees with golden leaves, great bushes of purple Michaelmas daisy, late flowering roses, appletrees partly stripped of their rosy fruit, but still with enough left on their boughs to require the props set to support the luxuriant burden; to the left an arbour covered over with honeysuckle and other sweet−smelling creepers—all bounded by a low grey stone wall which opened out upon the steep vineyard, that stretched up the hill beyond, one hill of a series rising higher and higher into the purple distance. 'Why is there a rope with a bunch of straw tied in it stretched across the opening of the garden into the vineyard?' I inquired, as my eye suddenly caught upon the object.

'It is the country way of showing that no one must pass along that path. Tomorrow the gentleman will see it removed; and then he shall have the grapes. Now I will go and prepare his coffee.' With a curtsey, after the fashion of Worms gentility, she withdrew. But an under−servant brought me my coffee; and with her I could not exchange a word: she spoke in such an execrable patois. I went to bed early, weary, and depressed. I must have fallen asleep immediately, for I never heard anyone come to arrange my bedside table; yet in the morning I found that every usual want or wish of mine had been attended to.

I was wakened by a tap at my door, and a pretty piping child's voice asking, in broken German, to come in. On giving the usual permission, Thekla entered, carrying a great lovely boy of two years old, or thereabouts, who had only his little night−shirt on, and was all flushed with sleep. He held tight in his hands a great cluster of muscatel and noble grapes. He seemed like a little Bacchus, as she carried him towards me with an express−ion of pretty loving pride upon her face as she looked at him. But when he came close to me—the grim, wasted, unshorn—he turned quick away, and hid his face in her neck, still grasping tight his bunch of grapes. She spoke to him rapidly and softly, coaxing him as I could tell full well, although I could not follow her words; and in a minute or two the little fellow obeyed her, and turned and stretched himself almost to overbalancing out of her arms, and half−dropped the fruit on the bed by me. Then he clutched at her again, burying his face in her kerchief, and fastening his little fists in her luxuriant hair.

'It is my master's only boy,' said she, disentangling his fingers with quiet patience, only to have them grasp her braids afresh. 'He is my little Max, my heart's delight, only he must not pull so hard. Say his "to−meet−again," and kiss his hand lovingly, and we will go.' The promise of a speedy departure from my dusky room proved

irresistible; he babbled out his Aufwiedersehen, and kissing his chubby hand, he was borne away joyful and chattering fast in his infantile half−language. I did not see Thekla again until late afternoon, when she brought me in my coffee. She was not like the same creature as the blooming, cheerful maiden whom I had seen in the morning; she looked wan and careworn, older by several years.

'What is the matter, Thekla?' said I, with true anxiety as to what might have befallen my good, faithful nurse.

She looked round before answering. 'I have seen him,' she said. 'He has been here, and the Fraulein has been so angry! She says she will tell my master. Oh, it has been such a day!' The poor young woman, who was usually so composed and self−restrained, was on the point of bursting into tears; but by a strong effort she checked herself, and tried to busy herself with rearranging the white china cup, so as to place it more conveniently to my hand.

'Come, Thekla,' said I, 'tell me all about it. I have heard loud voices talking, and I fancied something had put the Fraulein out; and Lottchen looked flurried when she brought me my dinner. Is Franz here? How has he found you out?'

'He is here. Yes, I am sure it is he; but four years makes such a difference in a man; his whole look and manner seemed so strange to me; but he knew me at once, and called me all the old names which we used to call each other when we were children; and he must needs tell me how it had come to pass that he had not married that Swiss Anna. He said he had never loved her; and that now he was going home to settle, and he hoped that I would come too, and ——' There she stopped short.

'And marry him, and live at the inn at Altenahr,' said I, smiling, to reassure her, though I felt rather disappointed about the whole affair.

'No,' she replied. 'Old Weber, his father, is dead; he died in debt, and Franz will have no money. And he was always one that needed money. Some are, you know; and while I was thinking, and he was standing near me, the Fraulein came in; and—and—I don't wonder—for poor Franz is not a pleasant−looking man nowadays—she was very angry, and called me a bold, bad girl, and said she could have no such goings on at the Halbmond, but would tell my master when he came home from the forest.'

'But you could have told her that you were old friends.' I hesitated, before saying the word lovers, but, after a pause, out it came.

'Franz might have said so,' she replied, a little stiffly. 'I could not; but he went off as soon as she bade him. He went to the Adler over the way, only saying he would come for my answer tomorrow morning. I think it was he that should have told her what we were—neighbours' children and early friends—not have left it all to me. Oh,' said she, clasping her hands tight together, 'she will make such a story of it to my master.

'Never mind,' said I, 'tell the master I want to see him, as soon as he comes in from the forest, and trust me to set him right before the Fraulein has the chance to set him wrong.'

She looked up at me gratefully, and went away without any more words. Presently the fine burly figure of my host stood at the opening to my enclosed sitting−room. He was there, three−cornered hat in hand, looking tired and heated as a man does after a hard day's work, but as kindly and genial as ever, which is not what every man is who is called to business after such a day, before he has had the necessary food and rest.

I had been reflecting a good deal on Thekla's story; I could not quite interpret her manner today to my full satisfaction; but yet the love which had grown with her growth, must assuredly have been called forth by her lover's sudden reappearance; and I was inclined to give him some credit for having broken off an engagement to Swiss Anna, which had promised so many worldly advantages; and, again, I had considered that if he was a little weak and sentimental, it was Thekla, who would marry him by her own free will, and perhaps she had sense and quiet resolution enough for both. So I gave the heads of the little history I have told you to my good friend and host, adding that I should like to have a man's opinion of this man; but that if he were not an absolute good−for−nothing, and if Thekla still loved him, as I believed, I would try and advance them the requisite money towards establishing themselves in the hereditary inn at Altenahr.

Such was the romantic ending to Thekla's sorrows I had been planning and brooding over for the last hour. As I narrated my tale, and hinted at the possible happy conclusion that might be in store, my host's face changed. The ruddy colour faded, and his look became almost stern—certainly very grave in expression. It was so unsympathetic, that I instinctively cut my words short. When I had done, he paused a little, and then said: 'You would wish me to learn all I can respecting this stranger now at the Adler, and give you the impression I receive

of the fellow.'

'Exactly so,' said I; 'I want to learn all I can about him for Thekla's sake.'

'For Thekla's sake I will do it,' he gravely repeated.

'And come to me tonight, even ifl am gone to bed?'

'Not so,' he replied. 'You must give me all the time you can in a matter like this.'

'But he will come for Thekla's answer in the morning.'

'Before he comes you shall know all I can learn.'

I was resting during the fatigues of dressing the next day, when my host tapped at my door. He looked graver and sterner than I had ever seen him do before; he sat down almost before I had begged him to do so.

'He is not worthy of her,' he said. 'He drinks brandy right hard; he boasts of his success at play, and'—here he set his teeth hard—'he boasts of the women who have loved him. In a village like this, sir, there are always those who spend their evenings in the gardens of the inns; and this man, after he had drank his fill, made no secrets; it needed no spying to find out what he was, else I should not have been the one to do it.'

'Thekla must be told of this,' said I. 'She is not the woman to love anyone whom she cannot respect.'

Herr Muller laughed a low bitter laugh, quite unlike himself. Then he replied,—

'As for that matter, sir, you are young; you have had no great experience of women. From what my sister tells me there can be little doubt of Thekla's feeling towards him. She found them standing together by the window; his arm round Thekla's waist, and whispering in her ear—and to do the maiden justice she is not the one to suffer such familiarities from everyone. No'—continued he, still in the same contemptuous tone—'you'll find she will make excuses for his faults and vices; or else, which is perhaps more likely, she will not believe your story, though I who tell it you can vouch for the truth of every word I say.' He turned short away and left the room. Presently I saw his stalwart figure in the hillside vineyard, before my windows, scaling the steep ascent with long regular steps, going to the forest beyond. I was otherwise occupied than in watching his progress during the next hour; at the end of that time he re−entered my room, looking heated and slightly tired, as if he had been walking fast, or labouring hard; but with the cloud off his brows, and the kindly light shining once again out of his honest eyes.

'I ask your pardon, sir,' he began, 'for troubling you afresh. I believe I was possessed by the devil this morning. I have been thinking it over. One has perhaps no right to rule for another person's happiness. To have such a'—here the honest fellow choked a little—'such a woman as Thekla to love him ought to raise any man. Besides, I am no judge for him or for her. I have found out this morning that I love her myself, and so the end of it is, that if you, sir, who are so kind as to interest yourself in the matter, and if you think it is really her heart's desire to marry this man—which ought to be his salvation both for earth and heaven—I shall be very glad to go halves with you in any place for setting them up in the inn at Altenahr; only allow me to see that whatever money we advance is well and legally tied up, so that it is secured to her. And be so kind as to take no notice of what I have said about my having found out that I have loved her; I named it as a kind of apology for my hard words this morning, and as a reason why I was not a fit judge of what was best.' He had hurried on, so that I could not have stopped his eager speaking even had I wished to do so; but I was too much interested in the revelation of what was passing in his brave tender heart to desire to stop him. Now, however, his rapid words tripped each other up, and his speech ended in an unconscious sigh.

'But,' I said, 'since you were here Thekla has come to me, and we have had a long talk. She speaks now as openly to me as she would if I were her brother; with sensible frankness, where frankness is wise, with modest reticence, where confidence would be unbecoming. She came to ask me if I thought it her duty to marry this fellow, whose very appearance, changed for the worse, as she says it is, since she last saw him four years ago, seemed to have repelled her.'

'She could let him put his arm round her waist yesterday,' said Herr Muller, with a return of his morning's surliness.

'And she would marry him now if she could believe it to be her duty. For some reason of his own, this Franz Weber has tried to work upon this feeling of hers. He says it would be the saving of him.'

'As if a man had not strength enough in him—a man who is good for aught—to save himself, but needed a woman to pull him through life!'

'Nay,' I replied, hardly able to keep from smiling. 'You yourself said, not five minutes ago, that her marrying

him might be his salvation both for earth and heaven.'

'That was when I thought she loved the fellow,' he answered quick. 'Now—but what did you say to her, sir?'

'I told her, what I believe to be as true as gospel, that as she owned she did not love him any longer now his real self had come to displace his remembrance, that she would be sinning in marrying him; doing evil that possible good might come. I was clear myself on this point, though I should have been perplexed how to advise, if her love had still continued.'

'And what answer did she make?'

'She went over the history of their lives; she was pleading against her wishes to satisfy her conscience. She said that all along through their childhood she had been his strength; that while under her personal influence he had been negatively good; away from her, he had fallen into mischief ——'

'Not to say vice,' put in Herr Muller.

'And now he came to her penitent, in sorrow, desirous of amendment, asking her for the love she seems to have considered as tacitly plighted to him in years gone by ——'

'And which he has slighted and insulted. I hope you told her of his words and conduct last night in the Adler gardens?'

'No. I kept myself to the general principle, which, I am sure, is a true one. I repeated it in different forms; for the idea of the duty of self−sacrifice had taken strong possession of her fancy. Perhaps, if I had failed in setting her notion of her duty in the right aspect, I might have had recourse to the statement of facts, which would have pained her severely, but would have proved to her how little his words of penitence and promises of amendment were to be trusted to.'

'And it ended?'

'Ended by her being quite convinced that she would be doing wrong instead of right if she married a man whom she had entirely ceased to love, and that no real good could come from a course of action based on wrong−doing.'

'That is right and true,' he replied, his face broadening into happiness again.

'But she says she must leave your service, and go elsewhere.

'Leave my service she shall; go elsewhere she shall not.'

'I cannot tell what you may have the power of inducing her to do; but she seems to me very resolute.'

'Why?' said he, firing round at me, as if I had made her resolute.

'She says your sister spoke to her before the maids of the household, and before some of the townspeople, in a way that she could not stand; and that you yourself by your manner to her last night showed how she had lost your respect. She added, with her face of pure maidenly truth, that he had come into such close contact with her only the instant before your sister had entered the room.'

'With your leave, sir,' said Herr Muller, turning towards the door, 'I will go and set all that right at once.'

It was easier said than done. When I next saw Thekla, her eyes were swollen up with crying, but she was silent, almost defiant towards me. A look of resolute determination had settled down upon her face. I learnt afterwards that parts of my conversation with Herr Muller had been injudiciously quoted by him in the talk he had had with her. I thought I would leave her to herself, and wait till she unburdened herself of the feeling of unjust resentment towards me. But it was days before she spoke to me with anything like her former frankness. I had heard all about it from my host long before.

He had gone to her straight on leaving me; and like a foolish, impetuous lover, had spoken out his mind and his wishes to her in the presence of his sister, who, it must be remembered, had heard no explanation of the conduct which had given her propriety so great a shock the day before. Herr Muller thought to reinstate Thekla in his sister's good opinion by giving her in the Fraulein's very presence the highest possible mark of his own love and esteem. And there in the kitchen, where the Fraulein was deeply engaged in the hot work of making some delicate preserve on the stove, and ordering Thekla about with short, sharp displeasure in her tones, the master had come in, and possessing himself of the maiden's hand, had, to her infinite surprise—to his sister's infinite indignation—made her the offer of his heart, his wealth, his life; had begged of her to marry him. I could gather from his account that she had been in a state of trembling discomfiture at first; she had not spoken, but had twisted her hand out of his, and had covered her face with her apron. And then the Fraulein had burst forth—'accursed words' he called her speech. Thekla uncovered her face to listen; to listen to the end; to listen to

the passionate recrimination between the brother and the sister. And then she went up, close up to the angry Fraulein, and had said quite quietly, but with a manner of final determination which had evidently sunk deep into her suitor's heart, and depressed him into hopelessness, that the Fraulein had no need to disturb herself; that on this very day she had been thinking of marrying another man, and that her heart was not like a room to let, into which as one tenant went out another might enter. Nevertheless, she felt the master's goodness. He had always treated her well from the time when she had entered the house as his servant.' And she should be sorry to leave him; sorry to leave the children; very sorry to leave little Max: yes, she should even be sorry to leave the Fraulein, who was a good woman, only a little too apt to be hard on other women. But she had already been that very day and deposited her warning at the police office; the busy time would be soon over, and she should be glad to leave their service on All Saints' Day. Then (he thought) she had felt inclined to cry, for she suddenly braced herself up, and said, yes, she should be very glad; for somehow, though they had been kind to her, she had been very unhappy at Heppenheim; and she would go back to her home for a time, and see her old father and kind stepmother, and her nursling half−sister Ida, and be among her own people again.

I could see it was this last part that most of all rankled in Herr Muller's mind. In all probability Franz Weber was making his way back to Altenahr too; and the bad suspicion would keep welling up that some lingering feeling for her old lover and disgraced playmate was making her so resolute to leave and return to Altenahr.

For some days after this I was the confidant of the whole household, excepting Thekla. She, poor creature, looked miserable enough; but the hardy, defiant expression was always on her face. Lottchen spoke out freely enough; the place would not be worth having if Thekla left it; it was she who had the head for everything, the patience for everything; who stood between all the under−servants and the Fraulein's tempers. As for the children, poor motherless children! Lottchen was sure that the master did not know what he was doing when he allowed his sister to turn Thekla away—and all for what? for having a lover, as every girl had who could get one. Why, the little boy Max slept in the room which Lottchen shared with Thekla; and she heard him in the night as quickly as if she was his mother; when she had been sitting up with me, when I was so ill, Lottchen had had to attend to him; and it was weary work after a hard day to have to get up and soothe a teething child; she knew she had been cross enough sometimes; but Thekla was always good and gentle with him, however tired she was. And as Lottchen left the room I could hear her repeating that she thought she should leave when Thekla went, for that her place would not be worth having.

Even the Fraulein had her word of regret—regret mingled with self−justification. She thought she had been quite right in speaking to Thekla for allowing such familiarities; how was she to know that the man was an old friend and playmate? He looked like a right profligate good−for−nothing. And to have a servant take up her scolding as an unpardonable offence, and persist in quitting her place, just when she had learnt all her work, and was so useful in the household—so useful that the Fraulein could never put up with any fresh, stupid housemaiden, but, sooner than take the trouble of teaching the new servant where everything was, and how to give out the stores if she was busy, she would go back to Worms. For, after all, housekeeping for a brother was thankless work; there was no satisfying men; and Heppenheim was but a poor ignorant village compared to Worms.

She must have spoken to her brother about her intention of leaving him, and returning to her former home; indeed a feeling of coolness had evidently grown up between the brother and sister during these latter days. When one evening Herr Muller brought in his pipe, and, as his custom had sometimes been, sat down by my stove to smoke, he looked gloomy and annoyed. I let him puff away, and take his own time. At length he began,—

'I have rid the village of him at last. I could not bear to have him here disgracing Thekla with speaking to her whenever she went to the vineyard or the fountain. I don't believe she likes him a bit.'

'No more do I,' I said. He turned on me.

'Then why did she speak to him at all?' Why cannot she like an honest man who likes her? Why is she so bent on going' home to Altenahr?'

'She speaks to him because she has known him from a child, and has a faithful pity for one whom she has known so innocent, and who is now so lost in all good men's regard. As for not liking an honest man—(though I may have my own opinion about that)—liking goes by fancy, as we say in English; and Altenahr is her home; her father's house is at Altenahr, as you know.'

'I wonder if he will go there,' quoth Herr Muller, after two or three more puffs. 'He was fast at the Adler; he

could not pay his score, so he kept on staying here, saying that he should receive a letter from a friend with money in a day or two; lying in wait, too, for Thekla, who is well−known and respected all through Heppenheim: so his being an old friend of hers made him have a kind of standing. I went in this morning and paid his score, on condition that he left the place this day; and he left the village as merrily as a cricket, caring no more for Thekla than for the Kaiser who built our church: for he never looked back at the Halbmond, but went whistling down the road.'

'That is a good riddance,' said I.

'Yes. But my sister says she must return to Worms. And Lottchen has given notice; she says the place will not be worth having when Thekla leaves. I wish I could give notice too.'

'Try Thekla again.'

'Not I,' said he, reddening. 'It would seem now as if I only wanted her for a housekeeper. Besides, she avoids me at every turn, and will not even look at me. I am sure she bears me some ill−will about that ne'er−do−well.'

There was silence between us for some time, which he at length broke.

'The pastor has a good and comely daughter. Her mother is a famous housewife. They often have asked me to come to the parsonage and smoke a pipe. When the vintage is over, and I am less busy, I think I will go there, and look about me.

'When is the vintage?' asked I. 'I hope it will take place soon, for I am growing so well and strong I fear I must leave you shortly; but I should like to see the vintage first.'

'Oh, never fear! you must not travel yet awhile; and Government has fixed the grape−gathering to begin on the fourteenth.'

'What a paternal Government! How does it know when the grapes will be ripe? Why cannot every man fix his own time for gathering his own grapes?'

'That has never been our way in Germany. There are people employed by the Government to examine the vines, and report when the grapes are ripe. It is necessary to make laws about it; for, as you must have seen, there is nothing but the fear of−the law to protect our vineyards and fruit−trees; there are no enclosures along the Berg−Strasse, as you tell me you have in England; but, as people are only allowed to go into the vineyards on stated days, no one, under pretence of gathering his own produce, can stray into his neighbour's grounds and help himself, without some of the Duke's foresters seeing him.'

'Well,' said I, 'to each country its own laws.'

I think it was on that very evening that Thekla came in for something. She stopped arranging the tablecloth and the flowers, as if she had something to say, yet did not know how to begin. At length I found that her sore, hot heart wanted some sympathy; her hand was against everyone's, and she fancied everyone had turned against her. She looked up at me, and said, a little abruptly,—

'Does the gentleman know that I go on the fifteenth?'

'So soon?' said I, with surprise. 'I thought you were to remain here till All Saints' Day.'

'So I should have done—so I must have done—if the Fraulein had not kindly given me leave to accept of a place—a very good place too—of housekeeper to a widow lady at Frankfurt. It is just the sort of situation I have always wished for. I expect I shall be so happy and comfortable there.'

'Methinks the lady doth profess too much,' came into my mind. I saw she expected me to doubt the probability of her happiness, and was in a defiant mood.

'Of course,' said I, 'you would hardly have wished to leave Heppenheim if you had been happy here; and every new place always promises fair, whatever its performance may be. But wherever you go, remember you have always a friend in me.'

'Yes,' she replied, 'I think you are to be trusted. Though, from my experience, I should say that of very few men.'

'You have been unfortunate,' I answered; 'many men would say the same of women.'

She thought a moment, and then said, in a changed tone of voice, 'The Fraulein here has been much more friendly and helpful of these late days than her brother; yet I have served him faithfully, and have cared for his little Max as though he were my own brother. But this morning he spoke to me for the first time for many days,—he met me in the passage, and, suddenly stopping, he said he was glad I had met with so comfortable a place, and that I was at full liberty to go whenever I liked: and then he went quickly on, never waiting for my

answer.'

'And what was wrong in that? It seems to me he was trying to make you feel entirely at your ease, to do as you thought best, without regard to his own interests.'

'Perhaps so. It is silly, I know,' she continued, turning full on me her grave, innocent eyes; 'but one's vanity suffers a little when everyone is so willing to part with one.'

'Thekla! I owe you a great debt—let me speak to you openly. I know that your master wanted to marry you, and that you refused him. Do not deceive yourself. You are sorry for that refusal now?'

She kept her serious look fixed upon me; but her face and throat reddened all over.

'No,' said she, at length; 'I am not sorry. What can you think I am made of; having loved one man ever since I was a little child until a fortnight ago, and now just as ready to love another? I know you do not rightly consider what you say, or I should take it as an insult.'

'You loved an ideal man; he disappointed you, and you clung to your remembrance of him. He came, and the reality dispelled all illusions.'

'I do not understand philosophy,' said she. 'I only know that I think that Herr Muller had lost all respect for me from what his sister had told him; and I know that I am going away; and I trust I shall be happier in Frankfurt than I have been here of late days.' So saying, she left the room.

I was wakened up on the morning of the fourteenth by the merry ringing of church bells, and the perpetual firing and popping off of guns and pistols. But all this was over by the time I was up and dressed, and seated at breakfast in my partitioned room. It was a perfect October day; the dew not yet off the blades of grass, glistening on the delicate gossamer webs, which stretched from flower to flower in the garden, lying in the morning shadow of the house. But beyond the garden, on the sunny hillside, men, women, and children were clambering up the vineyards like ants,—busy, irregular in movement, clustering together, spreading wide apart,—I could hear the shrill merry voices as I sat,—and all along the valley, as far as I could see, it was much the same; for everyone filled his house for the day of the vintage, that great annual festival. Lottchen, who had brought in my breakfast, was all in her Sunday best, having risen early to get her work done and go abroad to gather grapes. Bright colours seemed to abound; I could see dots of scarlet, and crimson, and orange through the fading leaves; it was not a day to languish in the house; and I was on the point of going out by myself, when Herr Muller came in to offer me his sturdy arm, and help me in walking to the vineyard. We crept through the garden scented with late flowers and sunny fruit,—we passed through the gate I had so often gazed at from the easy−chair, and were in the busy vineyard; great baskets lay on the grass already piled nearly full of purple and yellow grapes. The wine made from these was far from pleasant to my taste; for the best Rhine wine is made from a smaller grape, growing in closer, harder clusters; but the larger and less profitable grape is by far the most picturesque in its mode of growth, and far the best to eat into the bargain. Wherever we trod, it was on fragrant, crushed vine−leaves; everyone we saw had his hands and face stained with the purple juice. Presently I sat down on a sunny bit of grass, and my host left me to go farther afield, to look after the more distant vineyards. I watched his progress. After he left me, he took off coat and waistcoat, displaying his snowy shirt and gaily−worked braces; 'and presently he was as busy as anyone. I looked down on the village; the grey and orange and crimson roofs lay glowing in the noonday sun. I could see down into the streets; but they were all empty—even the old people came toiling up the hillside to share in the general festivity. Lottchen had brought up cold dinners for a regiment of men; everyone came and helped himself. Thekla was there, leading the little Karoline, and helping the toddling steps of Max; but she kept aloof from me; for I knew, or suspected, or had probed too much. She alone looked sad and grave, and spoke so little, even to her friends, that it was evident to see that she was trying to wean herself finally from the place. But I could see that she had lost her short, defiant manner. What she did say was kindly and gently spoken. The Fraulein came out late in the morning, dressed, I suppose, in the latest Worms fashion—quite different to anything I had ever seen before. She came up to me, and talked very graciously to me for some time.

'Here comes the proprietor (squire) and his lady, and their dear children. See, the vintagers have tied bunches of the finest grapes on to a stick, heavier than the children or even the lady can carry. Look! look! how he bows!—one can tell he has been an attache at Vienna. That is the court way of bowing there—holding the hat right down before them, and bending the back at right angles. How graceful! And here is the doctor! I thought he would spare time to come up here. Well, doctor, you will go all the more cheerfully to your next patient for

having been up into the vineyards. Nonsense, about grapes making other patients for you. Ah, here is the pastor and his wife, and the Fraulein Anna. Now, where is my brother, I wonder? Up in the far vineyard, I make no doubt. Mr Pastor, the view up above is far finer than what it is here, and the best grapes grow there; shall I accompany you and madame, and the dear Fraulein? The gentleman will excuse me.

I was left alone. Presently I thought I would walk a little farther, or at any rate change my position. I rounded a corner in the pathway, and there I found Thekla, watching by little sleeping Max. He lay on her shawl; and over his head she had made an arching canopy of broken vine−branches, so that the great leaves threw their cool, flickering shadows on his face. He was smeared all over with grape−juice, his sturdy fingers grasped a half−eaten bunch even in his sleep. Thekla was keeping Lina quiet by teaching her how to weave a garland for her head out of field−flowers and autumn−tinted leaves. The maiden sat on the ground, with her back to the valley beyond, the child kneeling by her, watching the busy fingers with eager intentness. Both looked up as I drew near, and we exchanged a few words.

'Where is the master?' I asked. 'I promised to await his return; he wished to give me his arm down the wooden steps; but I do not see him.'

'He is in the higher vineyard,' said Thekla, quietly, but not looking round in that direction. He will be some time there, I should think. He went with the pastor and his wife; he will have to speak to his labourers and his friends. My arm is strong, and I can leave Max in Lina's care for five minutes. If you are tired, and want to go back, let me help you down the steps; they are steep and slippery.'

I had turned to look up the valley. Three or four hundred yards off, in the higher vineyard, walked the dignified pastor, and his homely, decorous wife. Behind came the Fraulein Anna, in her short−sleeved Sunday gown, daintily holding a parasol over her luxuriant brown hair. Close behind her came Herr Muller, stopping now to speak to his men,—again, to cull out a bunch of grapes to tie on to the Fraulein's stick; and by my feet sat the proud serving−maid in her country dress, waiting for my answer, with serious, upturned eyes, and sad, composed face.

'No, I am much obliged to you, Thekla; and if I did not feel so strong I would have thankfully taken your arm. But I only wanted to leave a message for the master, just to say that I have gone home.'

'Lina will give it to the father when he comes down,' said Thekla.

I went slowly down into the garden. The great labour of the day was over, and the younger part of the population had returned to the village, and were preparing the fireworks and pistol−shootings for the evening. Already one or two of those well−known German carts (in the shape of a V) were standing near the vineyard gates, the patient oxen meekly waiting while basketful after basketful of grapes were being emptied into the leaf−lined receptacle.

As I sat down in my easy−chair close to the open window through which I had entered, I could see the men and women on the hillside drawing to a centre, and all stand round the pastor, bareheaded, for a minute or so. I guessed that some words of holy thanksgiving were being said, and I wished that I had stayed to hear them, and mark my especial gratitude for having been spared to see that day. Then I heard the distant voices, the deep tones of the men, the shriller pipes of women and children, join in the German harvest−hymn, which is generally sung on such occasions; then silence, while I concluded that a blessing was spoken by the pastor, with outstretched arms; and then they once more dispersed, some to the village, some to finish their labours for the day among the vines. I saw Thekla coming through the garden with Max in her arms, and Lina clinging to her woollen skirts. Thekla made for my open window; it was rather a shorter passage into the house than round by the door. 'I may come through, may I not?' she asked, softly. 'I fear Max is not well; I cannot understand his look, and he wakened up so strange!' She paused to let me see the child's face; it was flushed almost to a crimson look of heat, and his breathing was laboured and uneasy, his eyes half−open and filmy.

'Something is wrong, I am sure,' said I. 'I don't know anything about children, but he is not in the least like himself.'

She bent down and kissed the cheek so tenderly that she would not have bruised the petal of a rose. 'Heart's darling,' she murmured. He quivered all over at her touch, working his fingers in an unnatural kind of way, and ending with a convulsive twitching all over his body. Lina began to cry at the grave, anxious look on our faces.

'You had better call the Fraulein to look at him,' said I. 'I feel sure he ought to have a doctor; I should say he was going to have a fit.'

'The Fraulein and the master are gone to the pastor's for coffee, and Lottchen is in the higher vineyard, taking the men their bread and beer. Could you find the kitchen girl, or old Karl? he will be in the stables, I think. I must lose no time. Almost without waiting for my reply, she had passed through the room, and in the empty house I could hear her firm, careful footsteps going up the stair; Lina's pattering beside her; and the one voice wailing, the other speaking low comfort.

I was tired enough, but this good family had treated me too much like one of their own for me not to do what I could in such a case as this. I made my way out into the street, for the first time since I had come to the house on that memorable evening six weeks ago. I bribed the first person I met to guide me to the doctor's, and sent him straight down to the Halbmond, not staying to listen to the thorough scolding he fell to giving me; then on to the parsonage, to tell the master and the Fraulein of the state of things at home.

I was sorry to be the bearer of bad news into such a festive chamber as the pastor's. There they sat, resting after heat and fatigue, each in their best gala dress, the table spread with Dicker−milch, potato−salad, cakes of various shapes and kinds—all the dainty cates dear to the German palate. The pastor was talking to Herr Muller, who stood near the pretty young Fraulein Anna, in her fresh white chemisette, with her round white arms, and her youthful coquettish airs, as she prepared to pour out the coffee; our Fraulein was talking busily to the Frau Mama; the younger boys and girls of the family filling up the room. A ghost would have startled the assembled party less than I did, and would probably have been more welcome, considering the news I brought. As he listened, the master caught up his hat and went forth, without apology or farewell. Our Fraulein made up for both, and questioned me fully; but now she, I could see, was in haste to go, although restrained by her manners, and the kindhearted Frau Pastorin soon set her at liberty to follow her inclination. As for me I was dead−beat, and only too glad to avail myself of the hospitable couple's pressing request that I would stop and share their meal. Other magnates of the village came in presently, and relieved me of the strain of keeping up a German conversation about nothing at all with entire strangers. The pretty Fraulein's face had clouded over a little at Herr Muller's sudden departure; but she was soon as bright as could be, giving private chase and sudden little scoldings to her brothers, as they made raids upon the dainties under her charge. After I was duly rested and refreshed, I took my leave; for I, too, had my quieter anxieties about the sorrow in the Muller family.

The only person I could see at the Halbmond was Lottchen; everyone else was busy about the poor little Max, who was passing from one fit into another. I told Lottchen to ask the doctor to come in and see me before he took his leave for the night, and tired as I was, I kept up till after his visit, though it was very late before he came; I could see from his face how anxious he was. He would give me no opinion as to the child's chances of recovery, from which I guessed that he had not much hope. But when I expressed my fear he cut me very short.

'The truth is, you know nothing about it; no more do I, for that matter. It is enough to try any man, much less a father, to hear his perpetual moans—not that he is conscious of pain, poor little worm; but if she stops for a moment in her perpetual carrying him backwards and forwards, he plains so piteously it is enough to—enough to make a man bless the Lord who never led him into the pit of matrimony. To see the father up there, following her as she walks up and down the room, the child's head over her shoulder, and Muller trying to make the heavy eyes recognize the old familiar ways of play, and the chirruping sounds which he can scarce make for crying—I shall be here tomorrow early, though before that either life or death will have come without the old doctor's help.'

All night long I dreamt my feverish dream—of the vineyard—the carts, which held little coffins instead of baskets of grapes—of the pastor's daughter, who would pull the dying child out of Thekla's arms; it was a bad, weary night! I slept long into the morning; the broad daylight filled my room, and yet no one had been near to waken me! Did that mean life or death? I got up and dressed as fast as I could; for I was aching all over with the fatigue of the day before. Out into the sitting−room; the table was laid for breakfast, but no one was there. I passed into the house beyond, up the stairs, blindly seeking for the room where I might know whether it was life or death. At the door of a room I found Lottchen crying; at the sight of me in that unwonted place she started, and began some kind of apology, broken both by tears and smiles, as she told me that the doctor said the danger was over—past, and that Max was sleeping a gentle peaceful slumber in Thekla's arms—arms that had held him all through the livelong night.

'Look at him, sir; only go in softly; it is a pleasure to see the child today; tread softly, sir.'

She opened the chamber−door. I could see Thekla sitting, propped up by cushions and stools, holding her heavy burden, and bending over him with a look of tenderest love. Not far off stood the Fraulein, all disordered

and tearful, stirring or seasoning some hot soup, while the master stood by her impatient. As soon as it was cooled or seasoned enough he took the basin and went to Thekla, and said something very low; she lifted up her head, and I could see her face; pale, weary with watching, but with a soft peaceful look upon it, which it had not worn for weeks. Fritz Muller began to feed her, for her hands were occupied in holding his child; I could not help remembering Mrs Inchbald's pretty description of Dorriforth's anxiety in feeding Miss Milner; she compares it, if I remember rightly, to that of a tender−hearted boy, caring for his darling bird, the loss of which would embitter all the joys of his holidays. We closed the door without noise, so as not to waken the sleeping child. Lottchen brought me my coffee and bread; she was ready either to laugh or to weep on the slightest occasion. I could not tell if it was in innocence or mischief. She asked me the following question,—

'Do you think Thekla will leave today, sir?'

In the afternoon I heard Thekla's step behind my extemporary screen. I knew it quite well. She stopped for a moment before emerging into my view.

She was trying to look as composed as usual, but, perhaps because her steady nerves had been shaken by her night's watching, she could not help faint touches of dimples at the corners of her mouth, and her eyes were veiled from any inquisitive look by their drooping lids.

'I thought you would like to know that the doctor says Max is quite out of danger now. He will only require care.'

'Thank you, Thekla; Doctor —— has been in already this afternoon to tell me so, and I am truly glad.'

She went to the window, and looked out for a moment. Many people were in the vineyards again today; although we, in our household anxiety, had paid them but little heed. Suddenly she turned round into the room, and I saw that her face was crimson with blushes. In another instant Herr Muller entered by the window.

'Has she told you, sir?' said he, possessing himself of her hand, and looking all aglow with happiness. 'Hast thou told our good friend?' addressing her.

'No. I was going to tell him, but I did. not know how to begin.'

'Then I will prompt thee. Say after me—"I have been a wilful, foolish woman ——"'

She wrenched her hand out of his, half−laughing—'I am a foolish woman, for I have promised to marry him. But he is a still more foolish man, for he wishes to marry me. That is what I say.'

'And I have sent Babette to Frankfurt with the pastor. He is going there, and will explain all to Frau v. Schmidt; and Babette will serve her for a time. When Max is well enough to have the change of air the doctor prescribes for him, thou shalt take him to Altenahr, and thither will I also go; and become known to thy people and thy father. And before Christmas the gentleman here shall dance at our wedding.'

'I must go home to England, dear friends, before many days are over. Perhaps we may travel together as far as Remagen. Another year I will come back to Heppenheim and see you.'

As I planned it, so it was. We left Heppenheim all together on a lovely All Saints' Day. The day before—the day of All Souls—I had watched Fritz and Thekla lead little Lina up to the Acre of God, the Field of Rest, to hang the wreath of immortelles on her mother's grave. Peace be with the dead and the living.