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Self-Doomed

A Novel

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Cover Titlepage Text

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.

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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 oncevery, 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, be 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 / a carriage? Why should / 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," be 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 be would rob me. I was a sharp blade at my business, and my property was safe from his itching fingers. Let a spring, a pair of hands, the smallest of wheels be missing, and I was sure to find it out. He was aware of this; I had taken some pains to make him understand it. Besides, if he had robbed me of all I possessed it would not have contented him. That is one of the curses of such natures as his--never to be satisfied, never to be even grateful.

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Proceed, Gideon."

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

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

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

"Until you further enlighten me I cannot say."

"You shall hear all. In the woods I met this poor unfortunate woman. She had no shoes to her feet, and only a thin torn dress upon her body; and oh, Master Fink, she had a baby in her arms who was sobbing for want of food. The wretched creature told me her sad story, and begged me, if I had a mother of my own, to save her child from starvation. What could I do? I am poor--yes, I am poor, and the money in my pocket really belonged to Muller, but could I resist so heart-rending an appeal? Could *you* have resisted

it? No, you are too humane, and because I am not rich, am I to be deprived of the pleasure of doing a good action? I did as you would have done. Without considering how I should replace the three florins I gave them to the poor woman, who crawled away, calling down blessings on my head."

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

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

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

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

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

CHAPTER II.

A LOVE-CHAPTER IN THE LIFE OF MASTER FINK.

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

I have spoken of the beauty of Katrine Loebeg. Louisa Wagner was even more beautiful. Do not think I say so because I loved her; it was universally acknowledged; and just in the way Katrine was sought after here so was Louisa