

In the Blue Pike — Volume 03 eBook

In the Blue Pike — Volume 03 by Georg Ebers

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CHAPTER VIII.

As Kuni's troubled soul had derived so much benefit from the short pilgrimage to Altotting, she hoped to obtain far more from a visit to Santiago di Compostella, famed throughout Christendom.

True, her old master, Loni, whom she had met at Regensburg, permitted her to join his band, but when she perceived that he was far less prosperous than before, and that she could not be useful to him in any way, she left him at Cologne because a kindhearted captain offered to take her to Vlissingen without pay. Thence she really did set out upon the pilgrimage to Santiago di Compostella; but St. James, the patron saint of the Spaniards, whose untiring mercy so many praised, did not prove specially favourable to her. The voyage to Compostella, the principal place where he was revered, which annually attracted thousands of pilgrims, cost her her last penny, and the cold nights which she was obliged to spend on deck increased her cough until it became almost unendurably violent.

In Santiago di Compostella both her means and her strength were exhausted. After vainly expecting for a long time some token of the saint's helpful kindness, only two courses were left: either she must remain in Compostella and join the beggars in the crowded road to the place of pilgrimage, or she must accept the proposal made by tongueless Cyriax and go back with him to Germany. At first she had been afraid of the brutal fellow, who feigned insanity and was led about by his wife with a chain; but once, when red-haired Gitta was seized by the Inquisition, and spent two days and two nights in jail, and Kuni nursed her child in her place, she had found him more friendly. Besides, in Compostella, the swearer had been in his most cheerful mood. Every day had filled his purse, because there was no lack of people and he understood how to extort money by the terror which horrible outbreaks of his feigned malady inspired among the densely crowded pilgrims. His wife possessed a remedy which would instantly calm his ravings, but it was expensive, and she had not the money to buy it. Not only in Compostella, but also on the long journey from Bavaria through the Swiss mountains, France, Navarre, and the whole of northern Spain, there were always kind-hearted or timid people from whom the money for the "dear prescription" could be obtained.

A cart drawn by a donkey conveyed the child of this worthy couple. When Kuni met her at Compostella she was a sickly little girl about two years old, with an unnaturally large head and thin, withered legs, who seemed to be mute because she used her mouth only to eat and to make a movement of the lips which sounded like "Baba." This sound, Cyriax explained, was a call that meant "papa." That was the name aristocratic children gave their fathers, and it meant him alone, because the little girl resembled him and loved him better than she did any one else. He really believed this, and the stammering of the fragile child's livid lips won the rough fellow's tender love.

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The man who, when drunk, beat his wife till the blood came, and committed plenty of cruel deeds, trembled, wept, and could even pray with fervent piety, when—which often happened—the frail little creature, shaken by convulsions, seemed at the point of death. He had undertaken the long journey to the “world’s end,” not only because the pilgrimage to Compostella promised large profits, but also to urge St. James to cure his child. For his “sweet little Juli’s” sake, and to obtain for her a cheap nurse who would be entirely dependent upon him, he burdened himself with the lame ropedancer. But he had no reason to repent this; Gitta had enough to do to lead him by the chain and answer the questions of the people, while Kuni nursed her charge with rare fidelity, mended the clothing of the father, mother, and child, as well or as badly as she could, and also helped Gitta with the cooking. The sickly, obstinate little girl certainly did not deserve the name of a “sweet” child, yet Kuni devoted herself to it with warm, almost passionate affection.

The vagabond couple did not fail to notice this, and, on the whole, it pleased them. If Cyriax was vexed when little Juli began to show plainly enough that she preferred her nurse even to him, he submitted because the lame girl watched the child through severe attacks of convulsions and fever as if it were her own, and willingly sacrificed her night’s rest for its sake. True, he often talked loudly enough in Kuni’s presence of the witch potion which the lame girl mixed in the porridge of his child, who loved him better than anything in the world, to estrange it from him and win it to herself.

Kuni paid little heed to these offensive words; she knew that she had gained the child’s love by very different means from the “black art.” With far more reason, she dimly felt, the sick child might have been reproached for exerting a secret spell upon her. Her name, “Julie,” which she owed to her patron saint, Kuni supposed was the same as “Juliane.” Besides, the daughter of the vagabond with the mutilated tongue was born a few days after the death of little Fraulein Peutingen, and this circumstance, when Kuni knew it, seemed significant. Soon after meeting the vagrant pair she had listened to a conversation between two travelling scholars, and learned some strange things. One believed that the old sages were right when they taught that the soul of a dead person continued its existence in other living creatures; for instance, the great Pythagoras had known positively, and proved that his own had dwelt, in former ages, in the breast of the hero Palamedes.

The ropedancer remembered this statement, questioned other Bacchantes about these things, and heard the doctrine of the transmigration of the soul confirmed. Hence, during many a solitary ride, while the cart rolled slowly along, she pondered over the thought that Juliane’s soul had lived again in foolish Julie. How? Why? She did not rack her brains on those points. What had been a fancy, slowly became a fixed belief in the mind thus constantly dwelling upon one idea. At last she imagined that whatever she did for Cyriax’s child benefited the soul of the little Augsburg girl, whose life had been shortened by her wicked prayer on the rope.

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Yet she had not bought the indulgence in vain. But for that, she believed that Juliane's soul would still be burning in the flames of purgatory. The indulgence of the "Inquisitor" Tetzl had proved its power, and rescued her from the fire. To demonstrate this fact she devised many a proof. For instance, one day the idea entered her mind that foolish Juli's brain was so weak because Juliane, during her brief existence, had used more of hers than was fair.

At first this had been a mere fancy; but, true to her nature, she reverted to it again and again, while in the cart which she alone shared with the child, until it had matured to an immovable conviction. During her changeful, wandering life, she had had no fixed religious principles. But, since the notion had entered her mind that Lienhard would reward her for her love by giving her a share, even though a very small one, of his heart, she had clung tenaciously to it, in spite of all rebuffs and the offensive indifference with which he had treated her. On her sick bed and during her convalescence, she had dwelt upon the fear that her sinful prayer had killed the little wearer of the laurel wreath, until she could say to herself that events had proved it. With the same firmness she now held to the belief that she had found the right idea concerning little Juli's soul.

With the passionate desire to atone to the patrician's daughter for the wrong which she had inflicted upon her, she clasped the vagabond's child to her heart with the love of the most faithful mother, and her affectionate care seemed to benefit herself as well as the ailing little one. Juli was as devoted to her Kuni as a faithful dog. The kindness which the lame ropedancer showed to the fragile child was lavishly returned to her by a thousand proofs of the warmest attachment.

So Kuni had found one heart which kept its whole treasure of love for her alone, one creature who could not do without her, one fragile human plant to which she could be useful and helpful day and night.

Under the care of a faithful nurse little Juli gradually grew stronger, both physically and mentally. The little girl's wan cheeks began to be rosy, the convulsions and fever attacked her less frequently. Besides the faint "Baba," she learned to babble "Duni," (instead of Kuni) and afterward "Mother," and many other words. At last she talked nearly as well as other children of her age. All this afforded the lame girl a wealth of sweet joys wholly new to her, which afforded her heart such warmth and solace that, in spite of the cough which tormented her during many an hour of the day and night, she felt happier during her homeward journey with the fierce blasphemer Cyriax, from whom she expected the worst things, than in the brilliant days of her fame as an artist. Doubtless, as they approached Germany, she often wondered what Lienhard would think of her, if he should meet her amid such surroundings, as the companion of so worthless a couple; but the terror that overpowered her was transformed into pleasant satisfaction at the thought that he would approve, nay, praise her conduct, when she could show him the child, and tell him what she had done for it.

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This state of affairs had continued until two months before. Then, at Schaffhausen, her darling had suddenly been attacked with violent convulsions, and the feeble intellect, which her love had so toilsomely and faithfully waked from its slumber, only too soon attained eternal peace. In all Kuni's sorrowful life she had scarcely experienced any grief so bitter. When she closed the little eyes which had gazed into her pale face so often and so tenderly, it seemed as if the sun, moon, and stars had lost their light, and henceforth she was condemned to live in dreary gloom.

What terrible days had followed the child's death! Cyriax raved as if he had really been seized with the lunacy whose pretence helped him to beg his bread. Besides, he gave himself up to unbridled indulgence in brandy, and, when drunk, he was capable of the most brutal acts. The dead Juli's mother, who, spite of an evil youth and a lenient conscience, was by no means one of the worst of women, had to endure the harshest treatment from her profligate companion.

The blow which had fallen upon him filled him with savage rage, and he longed to inflict some pain upon all who came in his way that they, too, might feel what it was to suffer.

The death of his "sweet little Juli" appeared to have hardened the last tender spot in his brutal soul.

Kuni was the only person toward whom at first he imposed some restraint upon himself. True, without any consideration for the girl's presence, he sometimes asked Gitta why they still burdened themselves with the useless hobbler and did not sell the cart and the donkey. But though there was no lack of good offers for the excellent Spanish beast of burden, he allowed matters to remain as before. If the rage seething in his heart led him, in his drunken frenzy, to make Kuni feel its effects, too, the pleading glance of the blue eyes, still large and expressive, with which she had so often hushed the wailing child, sufficed to soothe him.

Yesterday, for the first time, he had seriously threatened to drive the ropedancer away, and she knew that Cyriax was capable of anything. True, his wife was attached to Kuni, but she had little influence over her vicious husband. So the sick cripple might only too easily find herself left on the highway.

Still, she had given Cyriax cause for the threat. All day and during the night she had been busy with the unfortunate mother and her twins, and therefore had frequently neglected to fill his brandy bottle. But this could not be helped, and she was not accustomed to think of the future. Whatever her heart urged she did, no matter what might happen. If Cyriax left her in the lurch, she must beg or starve unless chance, which so often mingled in her existence, willed otherwise.

With the child's life the modest happiness which Kuni had enjoyed during the last few months had vanished, not only because the tongueless blasphemer had become a

different person, and she sorely missed the delicate little creature who had filled and cheered her heart, but she had also lost the peace of mind which she enjoyed during the existence of her charge.

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The young Augsburg maiden, whom she thought she had bought out of the flames of purgatory, did not appear to her again, but the vagrant's child came all the more frequently, and whenever she showed herself she wailed and wept bitterly. Sweet little Juli's soul must now—whether it had been Juliane's or not—endure the tortures of purgatory, and this pierced Kuni's heart the more deeply the more affectionately she remembered the sickly-child.

Ever since she had used a black plaster, given to her at Singen by a quack, the stump of her foot had become sore again, and sharp pain tortured her so cruelly that, especially when the cough racked her emaciated body and she was jolted to and fro in the springless cart over stony roads, she was afraid that she should lose her reason.

At Pforzheim a barber had examined the wound and, shaking his head, pronounced the black plaster a malignant blood poisoner, and when she refused to have the leg amputated, applied a yellow one, which proved no better. When Cyriax counted up his receipts in the evening, called to red-haired Gitta his favourite maxim, "Fools never die," and handed to her—Kuni—the larger brandy bottle to fill, she had often summoned up her courage and begged him to buy an indulgence for his sweet little Juli. The result was certain—she knew it from her own experience.

Shortly after the child's death he had thrust his hand into his purse more than once at such an appeal and given money for a few candles, but it had not been possible to persuade him to purchase the paper.

This refusal was by no means due to mere parsimony. Kuni knew what induced him to maintain his resistance so obstinately, for in her presence he had told pock-marked Ratz that he would not take the indulgence gratis. Wherever he might be, his family ought to go, and he did not wish to be anywhere that he would not find Juli.

He did not doubt the continued life of the soul after death, but precisely because he was sure that the gates of paradise would remain closed to him throughout eternity he would not help to open them for the dead child. When his imagination tortured him with fancies that mice and beetles were leaping and running out of his pockets and the breast of his doublet, he thought that his end was drawing near. If the devil then had power over his soul, his imps might drag him wherever they pleased, if only he might see little Juli there and hear her call "Baba" and "Father." It would lessen the tortures of hell, however severe they might be. Was it possible for him to conceive of any greater folly than to rob himself of this consolation by transporting the child, through the indulgence, to the kingdom of heaven, where he could never see her again. He had accumulated a goodly sum by begging, it is true, but, strangely enough, he did not think of purchasing salvation for himself in order to meet his child again in heaven, instead of amid the flames of purgatory. Though he had become as rich as the Fuggers, paradise, he knew, would still be closed to him. He was not fit for it.

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He hated everybody who was rich and respectable. He would rather be with his child in the mire of hell than to go with her to a magnificent garden of paradise where swearing was forbidden, where there was no brandy and no highroad, and which offered only pleasures which were none to him.

So Kuni was forced to see the child remain in the fires of purgatory, which hurt her little less than her aching limb.

At her entrance into The Blue Pike pain and mental suffering had driven her to the verge of despair. But the day which began so sorrowfully was followed by an evening of delight—she owed to it her new meeting with Lienhard.

From childhood she had been homeless, and every quarter of the globe to which a highroad led was her native land. Yet in Spain and during the journey back she had felt a gnawing longing for Germany, nay, nothing had troubled her more than the thought of dying and being buried outside of its frontier. Her mother, a native of the Rhine country, had given her birth during the fair at Cologne on the Spree; but, whenever homesickness assailed her, it was always the steeples of St. Sebald and St. Ulrich which beckoned to her, and she had longed for the Frank country, the Main, or the richly wooded banks of the Pegnitz. Was this because, in Nuremberg, for the only time in her life, she had been a member of a decorous household, or had the love which, wherever Cyriax's cart and donkey carried her, always drew her heart back to the same ancient city, made it so dear to her?

Probably the latter, for yesterday she had yearned ardently to reach Nuremberg; but since she had seen Lienhard again, she rejoiced that she was in Miltenberg and at The Blue Pike.

Never had he seemed to her so handsome, so manly. Besides, he had spoken to her, listened to her reply, and even given her money with lavish generosity. It was like him! No one else would have been capable of it.

She could live a long time on his three gold florins, if Cyriax abandoned her; yet the unexpected wealth burned in her hand and perplexed her. Did Lienhard no longer know that she would not accept money from him? Had she robbed herself of the certainty that beautified existence; had she failed to show him her superiority to other vagrant girls? Yet no! What he gave her was more, far more, than even a prince bestowed upon an ordinary mendicant. He must measure her by a special standard. If he had only given her the gold with a kind word, not flung it silently into her lap. This half destroyed her pleasure in the present, and the ample supply of money clouded her already disturbed peace of mind still more. Had it been possible, she would have returned the gift as she did the alms at Augsburg. But how was this to be accomplished in the over-crowded inn?

Yet, if she kept the florins, the sacrifice at the convent would lose a large portion of its value, and the good opinion which her act at Augsburg must have inspired might be shadowed.

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For some time before leaving the room in the tavern she had turned the coins restlessly over and over under her kerchief, and meanwhile, as if in a dream, made but evasive answers to the questions and demands of Cyriax and Gitta.

Then she glided nearer to the gentlemen at the table, intending to return Lienhard's gift; but the landlord of The Pike followed her suspiciously, and drove her back to her companions.

Thence she had been called to the sick woman and went out of doors. She found the mother of the twins in the meadow by the Main and eagerly devoted herself to them.

The widow's burning head and gasping breath were no favourable symptoms. She herself felt that her end was approaching. Her tongue was parched. The water in the jug was warm and flat, yet she longed for a cool drink. During the day Kuni had noticed a well in the kitchen garden, and, in spite of her aching foot, hastened to it at once to draw the cool water. While doing so, the red and white pinks which she had noticed at noon again caught her eye in the starlight night. The sick woman could enjoy their fragrance now, and to-morrow, feast her eyes upon their bright colours.

From childhood she had always been fond of flowers. Stealing was prohibited by her father as wicked and dangerous, and she had never transgressed his commands. When she picked up the costly rosary in Nuremberg, she had intended to return it to the owner. But to pluck the flowers and fruit which the Lord caused to grow and ripen for every one was a different thing, and had never troubled her conscience. So she carelessly gathered a few pinks. Three should go to the sick woman, but Lienhard Groland would have the largest and finest. She would try to slip the flowers into his hand, with the money, as a token of her gratitude. But even while saying to herself that these blossoms should be her last greeting to him, she felt the red spots burning more hotly on her cheeks. Ah, if only he would accept the pinks! Then the most cruel things might happen, she could bear them.

While kneeling before the bed, the waiter, Dietel, noticed her. As she saw him also, she hurried back to the suffering mother as fast as her lame limb would carry her, and raised the jug of fresh water to her parched lips.

This had been a delicious refreshment to the sick woman, and when Kuni saw how much comfort her little service afforded the invalid, her heart grew lighter. Had it been possible she, who was of no importance to any one, would willingly have lain down on the heap of straw in the place of the mother upon whom two young lives depended.

How delightful it was to bring aid! And she possessed the means of being helpful.

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So, with sparkling eyes, she pressed the three gold coins into the sufferer's burning hand, and told her that the village authorities would rear the twins for such a sum. Then the parched lips of the fevered woman lauded the merciful kindness bestowed by the lame ropedancer—who at that moment seemed to her as powerful as a queen—so warmly and tenderly that Kuni felt the blood again mount into her cheeks—this time with shame at the praise which she deserved so little, yet which rendered her so happy. Finally, the sufferer expressed a desire for a priest, that she might not pass from earth without a sacrament. Her sins oppressed her sorely. She, and she alone, was to blame for Nickel's being hanged. Never in all her life had she been a glutton; but before the birth of the twins the devil had tormented her with a strange longing for roast fowl, which she had been unable to repress and keep to herself. Solely for her gratification, Nickel stole the goose and the hens. In spite of many a bad business in which his reckless nature had involved him, he was a good fellow, with a loving heart.

For her sake he would have tried to steal the ring from the executioner's finger. Now he had gone into the other world unshriven, with the rope about his neck, for though the benefit of the sacrament was usually granted even to the worst criminals, the peasants strung Nickel up to the nearest tree as soon as they caught him, without heeding his entreaties. This made death even harder for her than the thought of the poor little creatures yonder in the bundle of rags. Kuni's charity had provided for the orphans, but her Nickel would find no mercy from the heavenly Judge throughout eternity.

She had sobbed aloud as she spoke, and then writhed in such violent convulsions that Kuni with difficulty prevented her from throwing herself out of the hot straw in the cart upon the damp meadow.

When she grew somewhat calmer, she repeated Nickel's name again and again till it was heartrending to hear her.

CHAPTER IX.

As soon as the sufferer's condition would permit, Kuni left her, went to the window of the taproom in The Blue Pike, and surveyed its inmates.

Most of them were already asleep on heaps of straw, which were raised at the head by chairs turned upside down. The richer guests had gone to the bedrooms, which, however, they were obliged to share with several others. Some of the strollers were lying on the floor with their knapsacks under their heads. A few of the musicians were still lingering over the wine which the travelling merchants and artisans had ordered for them. Others had gone with some of the vagrants into the little wood beyond the meadow, where they danced, fiddled, and sang.

Their loud shouts were borne by the cool night breeze to the sufferer in the cart. The gentlemen from Cologne, without troubling themselves about the boisterous merriment of the burghers or the transformation of the room into a sleeping apartment, were still sitting at the table talking together eagerly.

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The dealer in the indulgences, too, had not yet gone to rest. A tall, broad-shouldered sergeant belonging to the escort had just purchased—for the larger part of the zecchins won as his share of the booty in the Italian war—the indulgence which he thought would secure him from the tortures of the fire of purgatory. Before opening the door, he struck his broad breast as though relieved of a heavy burden.

The ropedancer looked after him thoughtfully. The paper had now lightened the sergeant's heart as it had formerly done her own. Would she not have been wiser to give her money for the redemption of Nickel's lost soul than for the orphans, whom the charity of the people would perhaps have succoured without her? Probably, too, it would have afforded still greater consolation to the poor dying woman, whom nothing troubled so sorely as her guilt for the doom of her unfortunate husband.

Yet, even thus she had succeeded in making the dying mother's departure easier, and what she had commenced she intended to complete at once.

With a tender smile that lent strange beauty to her pallid, grief-worn face she continued her survey.

She had previously noticed an old priest, whose countenance bore the impress of genuine kindness of heart. She soon found him again among the travellers sleeping on the straw; but the old man's slumber was so sound that she felt reluctant to wake him. Among the Dominicans from Cologne, most of whom were also asleep, there were none she would have trusted, nay, she even thought that one was the very person who, shortly before her fall from the rope, had pursued her with persistent importunity. But the Abbot of St. Aegidius in Nuremberg, who had dined with the ambassadors from his native city, was also a man of benevolent, winning expression. His cheeks were flushed, either by the heat or the wine which he had drunk, but there was a look of attractive kindness upon his well-formed features. When he went through the room a short time before, Kuni had seen him pass his hand caressingly over the fair hair of the pretty little son of a potter's wife from Reren on the Rhine, whose cart was standing outside in the meadow by the Main. He was scarcely of the same mind as the gentleman from Cologne, for he had just waved his plump hand in protest.

Perhaps she might even do him a favour by summoning him. But dared she, a poor vagabond, disturb so distinguished a gentleman at his wine?

Yet there was danger in delay. So she resolved to ask the assistance of the landlady of The Pike, coughed with her handkerchief pressed over her lips, in order not to disturb the sleepers, and turned to leave the room.

But Gitta had just been to see the sick mother, and told Cyriax that Kuni, silly, softhearted thing, had wasted her gold coins on the dying woman.

The blasphemer flew into a great rage, muttered a few words to pock-marked Ratz, and then staggered toward their lame travelling companion to bar her passage across the threshold, and ask, in angry, guttural tones, how much of the Groland gold she had flung into the dying woman's grave.

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"Is it any business of yours?" was the reply, uttered with difficulty amid her coughing.

"Mine, mine—is it any business of mine?" gasped the tongueless man. Then he raised his heavy fist threateningly and stammered jeeringly: "Not—not a red heller more nor less than my cart—in the name of all the fiends—than my cart is of yours. Four heller pounds, Ratz, and the donkey and cart are yours."

"Done!" cried the vagrant, who already had his money ready; but the tongueless blasphemer chuckled with malicious pleasure:

"Now you have it, fool! Whoever doesn't share with me—you know that— doesn't ride with me."

Then he staggered back to Gitta.

The girl watched him silently for a while. At last she passed her hand quickly across her brow, as if to dispel some unpleasant thought, and shook her burning head, half sadly, half disapprovingly.

She had done a good deed—and this, this—But she had not performed it for the sake of reward, she had only desired to aid the sufferer.

Straightening herself proudly, she limped toward the kitchen.

Here, frequently interrupted by fits of coughing, she told the landlady of The Pike in touching words that the sick mother, whom she had so kindly strengthened with nice broth, desired the sacrament, as her life would soon be over. The Lord Abbot of St. Aegidius in Nuremberg was still sitting over his wine.

She went no further. The landlady, who, while Kuni was talking, had wiped her pretty flushed face with her apron, pulled the rolled up white linen sleeves farther down over her plump arms, and gazed with mingled surprise and approval into the girl's emaciated face, interrupted her with the promise to do what she could for the poor woman.

"If it were any one else," she continued, significantly, "I would not venture to try it. But the Abbot of St. Aegidius, in his charity, scarcely asks, when help is needed, whence did you come, who are you, or what do you possess? I know him. Wait here a little while. If he condescends to do it, you can take him to the poor creature at once."

While speaking she smoothed, with two swift motions of her hands, the brown hair which had become a little disordered while bustling to and fro to attend to the business, dipped her hands into the water pail, dried them quickly on her apron, untied it, and tossed it to the maid. Then she cleared her throat vigorously and left the kitchen.

In reply to the anxious question of her husband, whom she met on the threshold of the room, as to what she was seeking there, she answered firmly, "What is right and pious"; then modestly whispered her request to the abbot.

Her wish was fulfilled without delay, nay, it might really have been supposed that the interruption was very opportune to the distinguished prelate; for, with the brief exclamation, "Imperative official duty!" he rose from the table, and went first with the landlady to Kuni and afterward with the latter to the cart beside the laden potter's wain, whose white tilt gleamed in the darkness.

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The landlady had undertaken to send to the sexton, whose house was near, that he might immediately obtain everything the abbot needed for the dying woman's viaticum.

Kuni told the sufferer what an exalted servant of the Church was ready to receive her confession and give her the sacrament.

Then she whispered that she might mention Nickel's burdened soul to the abbot. Whatever happened, she could now depart from earth in peace.

Reserving for herself half of the flowers she had gathered in the garden she glided away, in order not to disturb the dying woman's confession.

CHAPTER X.

At the edge of the meadow Kuni paused to reflect. She would gladly have flung herself down on the dewy grass to rest, stretched at full length on the cool turf. She was worn out, and her foot ached and burned painfully after her long walk in the warm August night; but something else exerted a still stronger attraction over her poor longing heart; the desire to see Lienhard again and give him the pinks as a token of gratitude for so much kindness.

He was still sitting with the other gentlemen at the table in front of the tavern. One of the torches threw its light full on his manly face. Kuni knew that he could not see her in the darkness surrounding her figure, yet it seemed as though she was meeting the gaze of his sparkling dark eyes. Now he was speaking. How she longed to know what he said. Summoning up her courage, she glided along in the shadow of the wall and sat down behind the oleander bush on the sharp edge of the tub. No one noticed her, but she was afraid that a fit of coughing might betray her presence, so she pressed her apron firmly over her lips and sat straining her ears to listen. In spite of the violent aching of her foot and the loud rattling in her chest, she thought it a specially favourable dispensation of Providence that she had found her way here just at this moment; for Lienhard was still speaking. The others had asked him to tell them connectedly how the beautiful Katharina Harsdtirffer had become his wife, in spite of the opposition of her stern father and though the Honourable Council had punished him for such insubordination with imprisonment and exile.

He had already related this in detail when Kuni came to listen. Now, pointing to Wilibald Pirckheimer, who sat opposite, he went on with his story, describing how, thanks to the mediation of the latter and of the great artist, Albrecht Durer, he had obtained an audience at Innsbruck with the Emperor Maximilian, how the sovereign had interceded personally in behalf of himself and his betrothal, and how, in consequence of this royal intervention, he had attained the goal of his wishes.



“Our Honourables,” he concluded, “now willingly permitted me to return home, and Hans Harsdtirffer, Katharina’s father—Heaven rest his soul— relinquished his opposition to our marriage. Perhaps he would have done so earlier, but for the keen antagonism which, owing to their totally different natures, had arisen between the stern man and my lighthearted father, and displayed itself in the Council as well as in all the affairs of life. Not until his old opponent, to whom I owed my existence, was on his death-bed, did Herr Hans clasp hands with him in reconciliation, and consent to our betrothal.”

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"And I know," Wilibald Pirckheimer interrupted, that among the many obstacles which his foes placed in his path, and which clouded his active life, you two, and your loyal love, gave him more light and greater consolation than anything else. I have often heard him gladly acknowledge this, and as for you, friend Lienhard."

"I know," replied the young Honourable modestly, checking him, "that he was right in deeming the immature youth, which I was at the time of my first wooing, unworthy of his daughter."

"Though you had been the peer in strength and beauty of the valiant Achilles, and in wisdom of the subtle Ulysses, son of Laertes, I would not contradict you," interrupted Pirckheimer; "for, gentlemen, this gallant husband's wife is a jewel of a peculiar kind. Nuremberg is proud of calling Frau Katharina her daughter. Far as the German language is spoken, her equal would be sought in vain."

"You are an enviable man," said little Dr. Eberbach, turning to Lienhard. "But probably you will permit me one question. Even when a boy,—as we heard, you loved the child Katharina. As a youth, you took this love across the Alps to Padua and Bologna. But when, like the noble Virgil, I perceive that 'Nowhere is there aught to trust-nowhere,'—[Virg. AEn. iv, 373.]—and find that the esteemed Catullus's words, 'No man passes through life without error,'—[Catull. Dist. I, 5.]— are verified, I would fain learn whether in Italy also you held fast, in small things as well as great ones, to the—among us men—rare bird of the fidelity sworn to the woman whom we love. I, who compared to you, am like a faun with pointed ears beside the handsome Ares, nevertheless know by experience how easily the glowing eyes of that country kindle conflagrations. Was the armour of a former love really strong enough to guard your heart from every flame, even before any vow bound you to the child whom you chose so early for the companion of your life"?

"It was the same before the priest's consecration as afterward," replied the young Councillor, gravely and firmly.

Then, changing his manner, he held out his brimming glass toward the Thuringian and gaily continued:

"It ought not to seem so amazing to a man of your learning, my incredulous Herr Doctor. Surely your far-famed Propertius says, 'Love is benefited by many things, a faithful nature and resolute persistence.' Believe me, doctor, even without the counsel of your experienced Roman, I should have kept faith with the lovely child at home. From my boyhood, Katharina was to me the woman, the one above all others, the worthy Tryphon, my teacher of Greek in Bologna, would have said. My heart's darling has always been my light, as Helios was that of the Greeks, though there were the moon and so many planets and stars besides."



“And the vagrant we saw just now, on whom you bestowed a golden shower of remembrance as Father Zeus endowed the fair Danae?” asked Doctor Peutinger of Augsburg, shaking his finger mischievously at his young friend. “We humanists follow the saying of Tibullus: ‘Whoever confesses let him be forgiven,’ and know the world sufficiently to be aware that within the walls of Ilium and without enormities are committed.”— [Horace, Epist. 1, 2, 16.]

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“A true statement,” replied Lienhard. “It probably applies to me as much as to the young girl, but there was really nothing between us which bore the most distant resemblance to a love intrigue. As a magistrate, I acquitted her of a trivial misdemeanour which she committed while my wedding procession was on its way to the altar. I did this because I was unwilling to have that happy hour become a source of pain to any one. In return, she grew deeply attached to me, who can tell whether from mere gratitude, or because a warmer feeling stirred her strange heart? At that time she was certainly a pretty, dainty creature, and yet, as truly as I hope to enjoy the love of my darling wife for many a year, there was nothing, absolutely nothing, between me and the blue-eyed, dark-haired wanderer which the confessor might not have witnessed. I myself wonder at this, because I by no means failed to see the ropedancer’s peculiar changeful charms, and the tempter pointed them out to me zealously enough. Besides, she has no ordinary nature. She had accomplished really marvellous feats in her art, until at Augsburg, during the Reichstag, when in the Emperor’s presence, she risked the most daring ventures—”

“Could it be the same person who, before our poor Juliane’s eyes, had the awful fall which frightened the child so terribly?” asked Doctor Peutinger earnestly.

“The very same,” replied Lienhard in a tone of sincere pity; but the Augsburg doctor continued, sighing:

“With that sudden fright, which thrilled her sensitive nature to its inmost depths, began the illness of the angel whose rich, loving heart throbbed so tenderly for you also, Herr Lienhard.”

“As mine did for the peerless child,” replied the young Councillor with eager warmth. “While Juliane, who sickened at the sight of the girl dancing on the edge of the grave, was pointing out to me some pages in the manuscript of Lucian, which I was to take from you to Herr Wilibald yonder, the unfortunate performer met with the terrible accident. We thought that she was killed, but, as if by a miracle, she lived. Ropedancing, of course, was over forever, as she had lost a foot. This, we supposed, would tend to her welfare and induce her to lead a regular, decorous life; but we were mistaken. In spite of her lameness, Kuni’s restless nature drove her back to the highroad. Yet she would have been at liberty to remain in the convent as a lay sister without taking the vows.”

“My wife, too, had opened our house to her for Juliane’s sake,” added Doctor Peutinger. “The sick child could not get the fall which had frightened her so terribly out of her head. Her compassionate heart was constantly occupied with the poor girl, and when she urged her mother to provide for her, she willingly gratified her wish and often inquired about the sufferer’s health. How Juliane rejoiced when she heard that the bold and skilful dancer’s life would be saved! But when, through the abbess, my wife offered

her a situation in our home, the vagabond disdained what the mother and daughter had planned for her, Heaven knows how kindly.”

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"She treated the gift which we—my wife and I—left in the convent for her in the same way," added Lienhard. "Why did she refuse the aid I offered no less willingly? Probably because she was too proud to accept alms from a man from whom her ardent heart vainly desired something better."

Here Lienhard Groland hesitated, and it sounded like a confession as he eagerly continued:

"And, gentleman, she often seemed to me well worthy of a man's desire. Why should I deny it? Within and without the walls of Troy—we have just heard it—sin is committed, and had not the image of another woman stood between us, as the Alps rise between Germany and Italy—perhaps—But of what avail are conjectures? Will you believe that there were hours when I felt as though I ought to make some atonement to the poor girl?"

"In your place I should have done it long ago, for the benefit of both," protested little Doctor Eberbach merrily. "The commands of conscience should be obeyed, even when, by way of exception, it requires something pleasant. But how grave you look, sir. No offence! You are one of the rare specimens of featherless birds endowed with reason, who unite to the austerity of Cato the amiability of Titus."

"All due honour to Cato," added Wilibald Pirckheimer with a slight bend of his stately head; "but in my young days we had a better understanding of the art of reconciling stern duty with indulgent compassion, when dealing with a beautiful Calypso whom our sternness threatened to wound. But everything in the good old days was not better than at the present time, and that you, whom I honour as the most faithful of husbands, may not misunderstand me, Lienhard: To bend and to succumb are two different things."

"Succumb!" Sir Hans von Obernitz, the Nuremberg magistrate, here interposed indignantly. "A Groland, who, moreover, is blessed with a loyal, lovely wife, succumb to the sparkling eyes of a vagabond wanton! The Pegnitz would flow up the castle cliff first. I should think we might have less vulgar subjects to discuss."

"The daring, skilful ropedancer certainly does not belong to the latter," Doctor Peutinger eagerly retorted. "Besides, who would not desire to know how the free, hot-blooded daughter of the highway settled the account with you, friend Lienhard? Love disdained is said to be the mother of hatred, and from the days of Potiphar's wife has often caused cruel vengeance. Had this girl whom Sir Hans holds in such light esteem really possessed an evil nature, like others of her class—"

"That she does not," Lienhard Groland here warmly interrupted the Augsburg guest.

"Whatever Kuni may lack, and whatever errors she may have committed, she is, and will remain a rare creature, even among the few whose lofty spirit can not be bowed or



broken by the deepest calamity. When I met her here again at The Blue Pike, among the most corrupt vagabonds, ill and poor, perhaps already the victim of death, I thought it a fitting time to renew the gift which she had refused. I would gladly do more for the poor girl, and my wife at home certainly would not be vexed; she, too, is fond of Kuni, and—I repeat it—this girl has a good, nay, the best nature. If, instead of among vagabonds, she had been born in a respectable household—”

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Here the young envoy was suddenly interrupted. His table companions also raised their heads in surprise—a strange noise echoed through the night air.

Little Doctor Eberbach started up in affright, Hans von Obernitz, the Nuremberg magistrate, grasped the hilt of his sword, but Doctor Schedel instantly perceived that the sound which reached his aged ears was nothing but a violent, long-repressed fit of coughing. He and the other gentlemen were gazing at the oleander tree whence, before any one approached it, a groan of pain was heard.

The experienced physician shook his white locks gravely and said:

“Whoever uttered that is near the end of his sufferings.”

He made a movement to rise as he spoke; he felt that his help was needed.

But another incident diverted the attention of his companions and himself.

CHAPTER XI.

Dietel, the waiter, had at last been released from his confinement in the cellar, and instantly began the search for the thief in the garden with twofold zeal.

Without considering how long a time had passed since he first tried to bring the culprit into the clutches of the law, he had resumed the pursuit where it was interrupted. As a thoughtless child whose bird has flown from the cage looks into the water jug to find it, he had turned the light of his lantern upon places where a kitten could not have hidden itself, and had even been to the meadow on the bank of the Main to seek Kuni with the widow of the thief Nickel; but here the sacrament was just being given to the sufferer, and to interrupt such a ceremony would have been a great crime. His eyes were keen, and the red pinks had gleamed from the straw on which the dying woman lay in the light of the lantern, whose long pole the sexton had thrust into the soft earth of the meadow. Those flowers must have come from the garden of the landlady of The Pike, and she valued her pinks more than anything else. The ropedancer had gathered them for the sick woman, and certainly had not stopped at that one act of theft. How far these vagabonds' impudence went! But he, whose duty it was to look after the property of The Blue Pike, would spoil their pleasure in thieving.

The dog Phylax had soon put him on the trail, and before any of the gentlemen could reach the groaning person Dietel's triumphant shout rang from behind the oleander:

“Now we've caught the pilferer, and we'll make an example of her!”

His first glance had fallen on the little bunch of pinks in the girl's hand, and the vein on his forehead swelled with wrath at this damage to his mistress's favourite flowers.



But when he shook the culprit by the shoulder and, to his surprise, met with no resistance, he threw the light of the lantern upon her face, and what he saw there suddenly troubled him, for the girl's lips, chin, and dress were covered with bright blood, and her head drooped on one side as if it had lost its support.

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This frightened him, and instead of continuing to boast of his success, he called for help.

The Nuremberg gentlemen soon surrounded Kuni, and Doctor Hartmann Schedel told the waiter to carry her, with the aid of his assistants, summoned by his shout, into the house and provide her with a comfortable bed.

Dietel obeyed the command without delay—nay, when he heard the famous leech whisper to the other gentlemen that the sufferer's life was but a failing lamp, his feelings were completely transformed. All the charity in his nature began to stir and grew more zealous as he gazed at Kuni's face, distorted by pain. The idea of giving up to her his own neat little room behind the kitchen seemed like a revelation from St. Eoban, his patron. She should rest in his bed. The wanderer who, a few years ago, had scattered her gold so readily and joyously for the pleasure of others certainly would not poison it. Her misery seemed to him a touching proof of the transitory nature of all earthly things. Poor sufferer! Yet she ought to find recovery on his couch, if anywhere; for he had surrounded it with images of the saints, pious maxims, and little relics, bought chiefly from the venders who frequented the tavern. Among them was a leather strap from St. Elizabeth's shoe, whose healing power he had himself tested during an attack of bilious fever.

The burden which he shared with his assistants was a light one, but he was not to reach his destination without delay—the little bunch of pinks fell from the hand of the unconscious girl, and Dietel silently picked up the stolen property which had just roused his wrath to such a degree, and placed it carefully on the senseless sufferer's bosom.

The second hinderance was more serious. Cyriax had heard that Kuni was dying, and fearing that he might be obliged to pay the funeral expenses he stuttered to the bystanders, with passionate gestures, that an hour ago he had discharged the cripple whom he had dragged about with him, out of sheer sympathy, long enough. She was nothing more to him now than the cock in the courtyard, which was crowing to greet the approach of dawn.

But the landlord of The Pike and others soon forced Cyriax out of the way. Kuni was laid on Dietel's bed, and the gray-haired leech examined her with the utmost care.

The landlady of The Pike helped to undress her, and when the good woman, holding her apron to her eyes from which tears were streaming, opened the door again and the Abbot of St. Aegidius approached the couch, to render aid to the dying for the second time that night, he saw by Hartmann Schedel's face that he had not come too soon.

The ropedancer had recovered consciousness, and the kind prelate's presence was a solace to her. The confession lasted a long time, and the story which she had to confide to the priest must have been as strange as it was interesting, for the abbot

listened eagerly and with evident emotion. When he had performed the duties of his office he remained alone for a time; he could not immediately regain a mood in which he cared to rejoin the others. He did not ask for the gentlemen from Cologne; those from Nuremberg, whom he sought, had returned to the table in front of the tavern long before.

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The waves of the Main were now reflecting the golden light of the morning sun. Dewdrops glittered on the grass and flowers in the meadow with the cart, and in the landlady's little garden. Carriers' men were harnessing the freshly groomed bays to the pole. The brass rings on the high collars of the stallions jingled loudly and merrily, and long whiplashes cracked over the four and six-horse teams which were beginning the day's journey along the highroad.

But even the rattling of the carts and the trampling of the horses' hoofs could not rouse the Cologne professors, who, with their clerical companions, had gone to rest, and slept in darkened rooms until late into the morning. Most of the humbler guests had already left their straw beds.

Cyriax was one of the first who followed the road. He had sold his cart and donkey, and wanted to burden his red-haired wife with his possessions, but as she resolutely refused he had taken the bundle on his own lazy shoulders. Now he dragged himself and his new load onward, swearing vehemently, for Ratz had remained with the cart in Miltenberg, where the sham lunatic no longer found it safe to stay. This time it was he who was obliged to pull his wife along by the chain, for she had long refused, as if fairly frantic, to desert the dying girl who had nursed her child so faithfully. Again and again the doubly desolate woman looked back toward the companion whom she had abandoned in her suffering until they reached Frankfort. There Gitta left Cyriax and accompanied Ratz. The cart in which her child had lived and died, not its repulsive owner, induced her to sever the bond which, for nine years, had bound her to the blasphemer.

The travelling scholars set off singing merrily; but the strolling musicians waited for the ship to sail down the Main, on whose voyage they could earn money and have plenty to drink.

The vagrants tramped along the highway, one after another, without troubling themselves about the dying ropedancer.

"Everybody finds it hard enough to bear his own cross," said Jungel, seizing his long crutches. Only "Dancing Gundel" lingered in Miltenberg through sympathy in the fate of the companion who had reached the height of fame, while she, the former "Phyllis," had gone swiftly downhill. It was a Christian duty, she said to the blind boy who begged their bread, not to let Kuni, who had once held so lofty a position, take the last journey without a suitable escort. When she heard that her former companion had received the sacrament, she exclaimed to her blind son, while slicing garlic into the barley porridge: "She will now be at rest. We shall earn a pretty penny at the mass in Frankfort if you can only manage to look as sorrowful when you hold out your hand as you do now!"

The monks, the dealer in indulgences, the burghers and artisans who were just preparing to embark for the voyage down the Main, gazed in bewilderment at the



distinguished gentlemen who, incredible as it seemed, had actually—for Dietel said so—foregone their morning nap for the sake of a vagabond girl. The feather-curler shook his head as if something marvellous had happened when he heard the ambassador of the Honourable Council of his own native city, the distinguished Herr Lienhard Groland, say to old Doctor Schedel:

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"I will wait here with you, my venerable friend. Since the poor girl can live only a few hours longer, I can join the others, if I hurry, before they leave Frankfort."

"That's right, Lienhard," cried Wilibald Pirckheimer, and the Abbot of St. AEgidius added approvingly:

"You will thereby do something which is pleasing in the sight of Heaven. Yes, gentlemen, I repeat it: there are few deathbeds beside which I have found so little reason to be ashamed of the fate of being a mortal as by the humble couch of this vagabond girl. If, before the judgment seat above, intention and faith are weighed with the same scales as works, few who close their eyes behind silken curtains will be so sure of a favourable sentence as this poorest of the poor."

"Did the girl really keep no portion of Herr Lienhard's rich gift for herself?" asked the Nuremberg imperial magistrate.

"Nothing," replied the abbot. "She gave the whole, down to her last copper, to the stranger, though she herself must remain here, poor, lame, and deserted—and she had only met the sick woman by accident upon the highway. My duty forbids me to repeat the details, and how she bore herself even while at Augsburg, but, thanks to the confession which I have just received, I shall count this morning among those never to be forgotten. O gentlemen, death is a serious matter, and intercourse with the dying is the best school for the priest. Then the inmost depths of the soul are opened to him."

"And," observed Wilibald Pirckheimer, "I think the psychologist would then learn that, the deeper we penetrate the human breast, the darker is the spectacle."

"Yes, my learned friend," the abbot answered, "but we also perceive that the deepest and darkest shafts contain the purest specimens of gold and silver ore."

"And were you really permitted to find such in this neglected vagabond, reverend sir?" asked Doctor Eberbach, with an incredulous smile.

"As certainly," answered the prelate with repellent dignity, "as that the Saviour was right when he called those who were pure in heart blessed above those who were wise and overflowing with knowledge!"

Then, without waiting for the Thuringian's answer, he hastily turned to the young ambassador and begged him to grant the dying girl, who clung to him with tender devotion, a brief farewell.

"Willingly," replied Lienhard, requesting the physician to accompany him.

The latter had just beckoned Doctor Peutinger to his side, to examine with him the indulgence which he had found under the kerchief crossed over the sick girl's bosom. It

did not secure redemption from the flames of purgatory for the ropedancer's soul, as the gentlemen expected, but for another, and that other—the learned humanist and Imperial Councillor would not believe his own eyes—was his beloved, prematurely lost child. There, in large letters, was “Juliane Peutinger of Augsburg.”

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Astonished, almost bewildered, the usually quiet statesman expressed his amazement.

The other gentlemen were preparing to examine the paper with him, when the abbot, without betraying the secret of Kuni's heart, which she had confided to him in her confession, told Juliane's father that the ropedancer had scarcely left the convent ere she gave up both the Emperor's gift and the viaticum—in short, her whole property, which would have been large enough to support her a long time—in order to do what she could for the salvation of the child for whom her soul was more concerned than for her own welfare.

The astonished father's eyes filled with tears of grateful emotion, and when Lienhard went with the gray-haired leech to the dying girl Doctor Peutinger begged permission to accompany them. The physician, however, requested him to remain away from the sufferer, who would be disturbed by the sight of a strange face. Then Peutinger charged his young friend to give Kuni his kind greetings and thank her for the love with which she had remembered his dear child.

The young Councillor silently followed the physician to the sick bed, at whose head leaned a Gray Sister, who was one of the guests of The Blue Pike and had volunteered to nurse the patient.

The nun shook her head sorrowfully as the two men crossed the threshold. She knew how the dying look, and that the hand of death already touched this sufferer. Yet her kind, colourless face, framed by the white sides of her cap, quickly regained its usual quiet, placid expression.

The regular features, now slightly flushed with the fever, of the patient in her charge, on the contrary, were constantly varying in expression. She had noticed the entrance of the visitors, and when she opened her sparkling blue eyes and saw the person to whom her poor heart clung with insatiable yearning they were filled with a sunny radiance, and a smile hovered round her lips.

She had known that he would come, that he would not let her die without granting her one more glance.

Now she would fain have nodded to him and expressed in very, very appropriate words the delight, the embarrassment, the gratitude which filled her soul, but her panting chest could give no breath for utterance. Nay, extreme exhaustion even prevented the movement of her lips. But her heart and brain were by no means inactive. A wealth of internal and external experiences, long since forgotten, rose before her mind. First she fancied that she saw Lienhard, as at their first meeting, approaching the garlanded door of St. Sebald's with his beautiful bride, arrayed in her wedding robes. Then she was transported to the court room and felt his hand stroke her hair. The hours at Frau Schurstab's when she had awaited his visits with an anxious heart came back to her

memory. Then she again saw herself upon the rope. Lienhard was toying with the little elf below. But what she beheld this time was

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far from awakening new wicked wishes, for Juliane once more wore her laurel crown and beckoned kindly to her like a dear, familiar friend. Finally, pale little Juli appeared, as if shrouded in mists. Last of all, she saw herself filling the jug for the sick woman and gathering the red pinks for her and Lienhard in the landlady's little garden by the shimmering starlight. The flowers, whose fragrance was too strong, yet which she had not the strength to remove, lay on the coverlet before her. They were intended for Lienhard, and as she stretched her slender fingers toward them and tried to clasp them she succeeded. She even found strength to hold out her right hand to him with a beseeching glance. And lo! ere her arm fell again the proud man had seized the flowers. Then she saw him fasten the pinks on the breast of his dark doublet, and heard the thrill of deep emotion in his voice, as he said:

"I thank you, dear Kuni, for the beautiful flowers. I will keep them. Your life was a hard one, but you have borne the burden bravely. I saw this clearly, and not I alone. I am also to thank you and give you very friendly remembrances in the name of Doctor Peutinger, of Augsburg, little Juliane's father. He will think of you as a mistress of your art, a noble, high-minded girl, and I—I shall certainly do so."

He clasped her burning hand as he spoke; but at these words she felt as she had probably done a few hours before, when, hidden behind the oleander, she listened to the conversation in which he mentioned her kindly. Again a warm wave of joy seemed to surge upward in her breast, and she fancied that her heart was much too small for such a wealth of rapture, and it was already overflowing in hot waves, washing all grief far, far away.

Her gift had been accepted.

The red pinks looked at her from his doublet, and she imagined that everything around was steeped in rosy light, and that a musical tinkling and singing echoed in her ears.

Never had she experienced such a feeling of happiness.

Now she even succeeded in moving her lips, and the man, who still held her little burning hand clasped in his first heard his own name very faintly uttered; then her parched lips almost inaudibly repeated the exclamation: "Too late!" and again, "Too late!"

The next instant she pressed her left hand upon her panting breast. The rosy hue around her blended with the red tint of the pinks, and another haemorrhage bore the restless wanderer to that goal where every mortal journey ends.

ETEXT EDITOR'S BOOKMARKS:

Repeated the exclamation: "Too late!" and again, "Too late!"

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