

When he drew near the house his agitation had increased to such a pitch that he was forced to sit down on a stone seat at the end of the house, in order to recover himself. A voice from within attracted his attention; it was the strong voice of Maurice Wagner, to which his wife replied in accents almost of supplication. He heard his own name pronounced, and unable to resist his anxiety, he raised himself up till he could see, through the lattice, Farmer Wagner pacing the apartment with rapid strides, whilst his wife, Marguerite, seated in an old wooden arm-chair, besought him with clasped hands to moderate his passion.

"No!" said Maurice, "no! I will never give my Clara, my only child, to a young man almost without patrimony, and who would have earned his bread by menial service on my farm."

"Ah, Maurice!" replied the dame, "your anger blinds you, or you would not thus interpret the devoted affection of poor Ulric."

"Devoted affection, quotha! To seek a poor girl for his wife, in order to render her miserable! To dream only of his own passion, without caring for the future life he is preparing for the person he pretends to love! Ah! it was not thus I sought thee, Marguerite; and I would never have asked thee of thy father, if I had not been able to make thee, at least, as happy and comfortable as thou hadst been in the home of thine infancy."

"I know it, dear Maurice!" replied she affectionately. "And my life has been rendered happy by our mutual love."

"I was accepted as thy husband, at thy father's instance. Let my daughter imitate thine example and obey my wishes!"

"But she loves Ulric."

"Dah! girls of her age do not know what love means. She is only sixteen, and at that time of life, impressions are as quickly effaced from the heart as made. Absence is generally sufficient to destroy them; an eternal separation is a remedy that can never fail, and that must be tried in this case. If Ulric again dares to show himself here, I will pitch him out of doors without ceremony or compassion."

These cruel words seemed to freeze the blood of poor Müller, and he was about to rush from the spot in despair, when he heard Dame Marguerite make another effort in his favour.

"Listen to me, Maurice!" she said. "To assure a happy marriage for Clara, I will add to her little dowry, my savings for the last seventeen years, and all the jewels I received at my mother's death."

"Thy savings! thy jewels! they amount to about three thousand florins, do they not? I was just about to ask thee for them, Marguerite!"

"What canst thou want with them, Maurice?"

"I also have my savings, which amount to some thousands of florins; but this sum, added to Clara's dowry, will still be insufficient for the husband for whom I have destined her."

"Another!" exclaimed Dame Wagner.

"Another!" repeated poor Ulric to himself, in fear and trembling. Anxious to learn the name of his rival, he listened eagerly at the window; but in vain. That name, pronounced in a low tone by Farmer Wagner, did not reach his ear, and he could only distinguish the reply of Dame Marguerite.

"He! a rich man like him!"

"My daughter pleases him, he has told me. But still we must present with her a proper dowry, and I reckoned on thine assistance."

"Thou wert wrong then, Maurice! The little that belongs to me shall never be employed for that purpose; never will I contribute to the unhappiness of my child."

Surprise and anger kept Maurice silent; but he knew his wife's firmness of mind, and had no hope of bending her purpose. For some time he paced through the room with an inquiet step; then, suddenly rousing himself, he seized his hat and prepared to quit the house, while Ulric hastily retreated from his post of observation.

Quite disheartened by the conversation he had just overheard, he wandered at hazard, without knowing or caring where his path led him. All at once his arm was seized by an old woman who met him, and in whom Ulric recognised a neighbour of Farmer Wagner's, one of the greatest tattlers and busy-bodies throughout the country. Catherine Keller had refused,—take her own word for it,—all the young men in the village for two generations; but her enemies asserted that she never had a single offer to refuse, and that for this slight she revenged herself with specious hypocrisy, on all the world, and at every opportunity. Her greatest satisfaction was in hearing and retailing any unfortunate occurrence; the calamities of her neighbours rejoiced her heart, while their prosperity made her sad and downcast.

"Ah! is it you, my poor lad?" was her address to Ulric. "How agitated you seem! But I am not at all astonished at it; I know what is the effect of ardent love—by hearsay only—and yours has been so cruelly thwarted."

The young man, without replying, saluted Catherine and wished to pass on, but she was not disposed to leave her victim so easily.

"I do not know how you have displeased old Wagner, but certain it is that he will not even hear your name mentioned. It is true that his future son-in-law has some worldly advantages."