

## HANS AND MARGUERITE.

It was in the dusk of the evening, and night's shadows were quickly gathering in the little German village through whose outskirts the lovers strolled.

They had left behind them the cottages, and had wandered off among the green fields and under the shade of the trees, behind which the sun had almost gone to rest.

It was an old story, the story of their loving. They had been betrothed since the girl was fourteen. It was well-nigh five years now, and on her nineteenth birthday they were to be married.

She was an orphan, and her snug dowry, lying so safely nestled away in the village bank, she had accumulated by the labour of her own hands. But a shade was on her lover's face to-night, and even in the shadow her quick eye discerned it.

"Sing to me Hans," she whispered, knowing that in song Hans Werter forgot all else.

After a moment's silence he obeyed her, and the sleepy birds woke in their nests and almost indignantly drew their heads from beneath the soft shelter of their wing, to listen to this strange, wonderful rival to the sweetness of their notes. The air was filled with the exquisite melody. It rang full, and clear and sweet. It sank down to the violets, as they stirred in the listening wind, then soared to the stars.

Poor little Marguerite! Hans' music always brought the moisture to her blue eyes, but to-night it seemed filled with something she had never heard before, and her little hands were tightly interlaced, and her red lips parted in a sort of painful ecstasy.

But at the close, she was all unprepared to see him and the last note in a dry sob, then fling himself down on the sward and bury his face in his hands.

"Hans, what is it?" she cried, sinking down beside him, and trying to raise his head upon her breast.

Was he weeping? She had never in all these years seen him thus moved. His powerful frame seemed shaken to its inmost centre by the torrent of emotion which swept over it.

Almost rudely, in his unconsciousness to all but his own suffering, he repulsed her, only the next moment to be filled with remorse.

Conquering himself by a mighty effort, he drew her to him with gentle force.

"Forgive me, dear," he said softly, "but never ask me to sing again, Marguerite. It only teaches me what I might have been and what I am. Think what it would be if I had the money to reach Italy! I could have the world at my feet, Marguerite—I could be great and famous! I know it—I feel it. But I am chained here, tending my herds and feeding my cattle, powerless to break the chains; I need so much money—so much, and I have so little. Though I sold all I have in the world, it would not bring me to my journey's end. No, no! I must give it all up; but never—never ask me to sing again?"

The girl answered him nothing as she stroked the hot brow with the little, cool hand, which, all browned and hardened as it was, fell very softly, very lovingly.

In her eyes he was a king, this shepherd-lad. Instinctively she knew that silence is oftentimes more healing than speech; and, besides, a wonderful, dazzling thought had crept into her own busy brain, and driven all lighter thought away.

Still silently they rose, and walked silently home. At the door of her little cottage, he stopped and kissed her on the brow, as they stood beneath the stars.

In two more months he was to share her cottage—the home left her by her dead parents—so they both had thought scarce an hour ago. To-night, Marguerite knew differently.

How much would it bring, the sale of this humble little shelter?

It was this problem which banished slumber through the long night hours. It was solved three days later, when the sum for its possession by strangers lay in her hands, and added to it the nest-egg from the bank, made in the child's eyes a fortune.

What mattered it that she was beggared? It was for Hans' sake! It was now her turn to be silent, as hand-in-hand they walked beneath the golden-studded sky.

She felt for the first time timid, almost afraid, in his presence. That she had performed an act of almost heroism she never dreamed. He was a hero; she but a little humble maiden, whose proudest duty was to serve him.

"Hans," she said at last, very softly, "I have been thinking, dear, since the other night, and—Hans, we won't be married yet awhile. A wife would only pull you down, instead of helping you soar to the birds, where you belong. I don't want you to think of me. I want you to go away and study to be a great singer."

In the gloom the man could see the pallor on the speaker's face, as it grew reflected on his own.

"Are you mad, Marguerite?" he questioned at last. "I've crushed the dream, child. Don't float it again before my fancy."

"You can't crush it, Hans; for it is no dream, but a very part of yourself, and that the highest, noblest part! Nor is it madness, Hans. See here!" and she unloosed the string of a little bag she held tightly clutched in her trembling hands, and showed to his dazzling eyes the glittering gold-pieces lying on a snug little pile of notes. "It's enough, Hans," she said, in answer to his gaze of utter bewilderment. "It's more than what I heard you once say would let you be taught for a whole year. And it's yours, Hans—all yours!"

And, as she spoke, she strove to thrust the bag within his grasp.

"Marguerite!"—she shrank from the sternness of his tone—"how did you get the gold?"

"Honestly!" she answered proudly. "The gold was to have been my dowry; the notes—I—I sold the cottage for these."

"You did this for me, and you think so meanly of me as that I would accept such sacrifice?"

His voice quivered as he spoke.

"Hans, I was to have been your wife," she whispered. "Who had the right if not I? Oh, I shall be so proud—so proud, some day, when you come back for your little Marguerite, and I shall be the wife of the great singer! They will point at me and say, 'Yes, he married this little nobody, this little Marguerite, but they say he loves her;' and they will think it strange that you should love me from your great height. But you won't forget to do that, Hans—ever, ever—will you, my love?"

"Never, until my voice forgets its music! I would pray to God to still it forever could my heart prove so false. Something within me, Marguerite, conquers myself. It is hope springing within my breast. I will take your money, little one, a sacred debt. Wait for me two years, fraulein. Then I will return to give you richest payment. I swear it, and I seal it with this kiss!"

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Hans had gone, and Marguerite was left alone. She lived now in one little room, high up many stairs—up which she toiled wearily in the evening's gloom. There were no more restful walks under the stars now. She might have had lovers like other girls; but no, Hans must find her without reproach on his return. All day she had to labour from early dawn, even for the humble shelter now hers. Sometimes she was hungry, sometimes cold, but all mattered not to her. It was for Hans' sake.

The winter's icy breath but hastened the spring's blossoms, and their first fragrance would herald the incoming summer, which would make the year complete since Hans left, and there would only be another year to wait.

At long distances apart letters came. Oh, how eagerly Marguerite spelled them out! She slept with them under her pillow by night, and they sank and fell with every pulsation of her heart by day. Labour grew light, she even forgot her loneliness, for they told her that step by step Hans was nearing his goal.

Then there were weeks, aye months, when she heard nothing, and the child's figure grew thin and her cheek pale, while every night she would run breathlessly up to her room, only to find the table vacant, and that the postman had had no errand for her.

But one evening, when she had almost given up hope—when the great dread lest Hans should be ill, dying or dead, remorselessly shadowed her pathway—the silent messenger smiled her welcome. She burst into a passion of tears ere she broke the seal. I seemed as though the joy must kill her.

But at last she unfolded the sheet when something white and fluttering fell to the ground. She stopped to pick it up.

What did it mean? It was a little slip, with some figures in the corner. They represented the exact amount she had given Hans. Bewildered, she turned to the letter. Its first words explained:

"I pay you my debt. Think, my little dove, what it cost *us*, yet I *earned* it—*earned* it, Marguerite, on the very night of my *debut*. I have sung, and the people have listened. I looked about among all the faces—on all the young and beautiful women, with their eyes fixed upon me—but nothing inspired me. Then I thought of you, and looking into space I forgot them all, darling. There was your sweet pale face floating in the air; your blue eyes looking, not as theirs looked, but down into my soul, and I sang to you, darling—to you. The flowers rained at my feet. Great ladies tore the roses from their breasts, but I would have given them all, dearest, for one little wild blossom your hand had plucked. They say I will be rich and famous. I cannot tell—the world is fickle. The village banker will cash your order. But you need not buy back the little home. I am coming for you soon, to bring you to a cage better worthy my mountain-bird."

Again and again Marguerite read and re-read the spacious words. What cared she for the money? It had made Hans great.

"Going back to your native village—you, who have the world at your feet!" sighed one of Florence's most famous beauties as she looked into the young singer's eyes.

Six months had passed since he had paid his debt to Marguerite, and still he lingered. He had spent thrice that amount, since then, on a trinket to clasp some fair lady's arm. Did he, in holding it so lightly, forget that once it had