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OUR CHRISTMAS STORY.

Master Fink's Apprentice.

Written for the "Record-Union" by B. L. Farjeon,

AUTHOR OF "BLADE-O'-GRASS," "GRIF," "JOSHUA MARVEL," "BRAD AND CHEESE AND KISSES," ETC,

I.

MASTER FINK RELATES SOME INTERESTING PARTICULARS CONCERNING HIS APPRENTICE, NICOLAS BRAND.

I am truly glad to meet you. This meeting has warmed my heart. It is one of life's pleasantest experiences to shake an old friend by the hand, and to learn from his own lips that he has not forgotten you in his wanderings, though he and you have been long parted. I am sorely grieved to hear that you have lost your faithful mate—the dear woman who was your companion for so many years—but we must bow our heads and submit to the Divine will. This life is not the end of all things. There is a Hereafter, thank God. The beloved ones whose fond eyes we no longer see, whose tender voices we no longer hear, are waiting for us in the better land. It is but a question of a little time. Resignation friend, resignation. It is a lesson we all have to learn. Happy the man who beholds, shining in his heart, the bright crystal Hope, immutable, imperishable, and who derives consolation from it. That is a solace that is born of Faith, the comforter.

You are anxious to know what has become of my people? Name them, friend. Nicolas Brand, 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 fourteen. A beautiful maiden, true, but love had found no place in her heart. Its buds begin to blossom first in the spring of womanhood, and Katrine at that time was a mere child. Twelve years ago! Ah me! ah me! how time flies! Spring, summer, autumn 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 thankful for, although I stand alone in the world, without wife or child.

Nicolas Brand and Katrine Loebeg! Gracious heavens! the contrast! 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 these two when you were here twelve years ago as you are at this present moment. Old Anna was my housekeeper then. You remember Anna; you had more than one good joke with her, and she liked you; she said you were a proper man. Where is she now? Dead. She served me faithfully, and lived to 73. Ah, she was a treasure—you don't often see 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 shall I taste the like again. I have now another housekeeper—hush! She is here. * * *

She is gone, and will not trouble us again tonight. You are thoughtful—you have observed something strange in her. Her dead-white face, her long silvery hair, her great fixed eyes have surprised you. Why, yes—she seems never to see anything that is before her, but to be forever gazing into a world invisible to us. What she beholds there heaven only knows, though sometimes I believe I can see with my mind's eye the shapes she gazes upon. On rare occasions I have detected her speaking to them, but have been unable to catch the sense of her words. To me she never speaks unless I first address her. You will scarcely believe that she was beautiful once—very, very beautiful—and 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? Don't be afraid to ask. 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 cooks well, too, but not as well as old Anna. There never was a cook like Anna. My mouth waters when I think of her. This one is not old. You will scarcely credit it—she is only six and twenty. Ah, you may well open your eyes But if you will think a little you will not be able to recall any old woman who ever wore her white hair loose, as this young one does, almost to her knees. It is the wonder of every stranger who sees her. Not so many years ago her hair was golden brown, and we used to gaze upon it and upon her with delight, 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 blows! There are angry spirits abroad, and I will tell you the story of Nicolas Brand, who worked for me till he was 24 years of age, and who was not satisfied with the fruits of honest labor because they did not enable him to grow rich in a month. That was his one idea of happiness—riches, nothing but riches. The flowers of the fields, the singing of the birds, the perfume of the hedges, the beauty of the skies—they were naught to him. He set up an idol for himself, and he worshiped it with all his might. Did a carriage roll past the door he would look up from his work with discontent in his eyes and an expression on his face which said, as plain as if he had uttered it, "Why haven't *I* a carriage? Why should *I* walk while others ride?" Did a gentleman in a fine coat enter my shop to leave his watch to be cleaned, there on Nicolas' face was always the same miserable expression.

"Master Fink," he said, "the poor are much to be pitied."

"So are the rich, Nicolas," 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, Nicolas," I said; "every back to its burden. Go on with your work, my lad, and make the best of things."

But to do that was not in his nature. Did he drink beer, he made it sour by grumbling, because it wasn't wine. He envied everybody who had finer things than he could buy, and the jingling of silver in other people's pockets sent the blood rushing angrily through his veins. I knew that he hungered after money, but I was not frightened that he would rob me. My property was safe, for I was a sharp blade at my business. 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—not in a direct manner, but in a way he could not mistake. Besides, if he had robbed me of all I possessed, it would not have contented him.

When his apprenticeship was out I still employed him, paying him piece by piece for the work he performed. 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, or at the most two, for him to receive. His clothes cost him something, more than they should have done, for he aped the fashions of his betters. It was money thrown away; the finest clothes in the world could not make Nicolas Brand look like a gentleman. Then he indulged into a terrible vice which eats into the soul of a man—he was a gambler, which he had no idea was known to me. Small cunning generally overreaches itself. Then, again, he had a poor mother, fifty miles away, who, he would say 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 old mother is very sick—very, very sick! I beg of you to lend me five florins to send to her." It will be an act of true charity, Master Fink. 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 for all that; 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 he wanted money from me.

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

"What is the matter now, Nicolas?" I would ask, examining his face with interest, and preparing for the shock.

"O, 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."

"Yes, Nicolas; you spend far too much money in clothes, but proceed."

"On the outskirts of the town I met with a poor, unfortunate woman—"

"On the outskirts of the town, Nicolas! But that is not the way to get to Muller's shop. He lives but a stone's throw from this spot."

"Muller was not in when I first went to his shop, so, the day being fine, I took a walk towards the woods. Was it good or bad fortune, Master Fink, that put the idea into my head."

"Until you further enlighten me, Nicolas, I cannot say."

"You shall hear all. On the outskirts of the town I met this poor, unfortunate woman. She had no shoes to her feet, and only one thin, torn dress upon her body—and O, Master Fink, she had a baby in her arms, who was sobbing for want of food, which her mother could not give her, having no money to purchase it! The wretched creature told me her dreadful story, and begged me, if I had a mother of my own, to save her child from starvation. What could I do, Master Fink? 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? No; your nature is too humane. You would have done as I did, 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."

"And you want me to lend you the three florins to pay Muller?"

"Yes, Master Fink—to lend it, not to give it, to me. I will not let you rob me of an act of charity."

To these and numberless other stories I would listen, without troubling myself to contradict them. What would have been the use? As long as I kept Nicolas Brand with me it was best not to excite his suspicions, and I bore with many things of which I disapproved. Sometimes, not always, I lent him a portion of what he asked for, taking care that he did not get too deeply in my debt, and I thought 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 Nicolas Brand, 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 reason, a strong, humane reason, and I may speak of it now because it will hurt none. It was not for the sake of Nicolas Brand, but for the sake of his mother, that I kept him with me.

Friend, I am going to show you a chapter in my life which very few have seen.

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 some odd nook and corner 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 whose great-great-great-grandfathers lived there in the self-same cottages, grown 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 manner Katrine was sought after here, so was Louisa Wagner sought after in the village in which I was born. I may say, without running the risk of being thought vain, that I was a well-looking lad. It is a fact that I was industrious and not given to tippling. From my father I learnt the mysteries of the art of watch making. Our family had been the village watch and clock menders for generations. There was not enough business in that line to be picked up among the scanty and poor population to support us, so my grandfather, and my father after him, took to cobbling boots and shoes to eke out a living. I learnt, also, to cobble, and was no mean hand at it; we were therefore the village watchmakers and cobblers, and managed to live chiefly it must be owned by the patching of leather, which is a degree lower in the scale of life than regulating the delicate works of a watch.

Louisa Wagner was the only child of a laborer on the private estate of the owner of the village land, and in falling in love with her I fell in love with a girl in my own station in life.

Heavens, how beautiful she was! Her cheeks were handsomer than the handsomest peach; her eyes were as bright as the brightest stars; her skin as soft as the softest velvet. To me what a vision of brightness! Where on earth was to be found her equal?

In my estimation, nowhere above or upon the habitable globe. That is the way of lovers for a time. No feeling so potent as that which agitates the heart of a lover as he contemplates the being upon whom he sets his affections. Gradually the change comes, as we all live to learn. The heavenly light fades slowly away, and life's hard lessons, no less than the strange workings of the human heart, recall us to a sterner reality. Happy those who find themselves cast upon a peaceful shore, where they can taste and enjoy the calmer and more enduring affection which sometimes follows the subsidence of love's delirium and fever.

For weeks and weeks I nursed my passion, fed on it, was made happy by it. For Louisa Wagner did not seem indifferent to it. Nay, she seemed flattered, and, as it appeared to me, had some slight feeling for me stronger than ordinary friendship. That she should love me with such intensity as I loved her was not to be thought of. This love of a young man, when it is pure, as mine was, ennobles, brightens, beautifies all surrounding things. I sang at my work, though it was even so mean as the patching of boots. I soled and heeled them, one after another, and my very heart went into the stitches. I held them in my hands and kissed them—yes, I am not ashamed to confess it.

I kissed them in a kind of rapture. I took them to bed with me. By the side of my bed hung a cage with a linnet in it. I told the bird in a whisper that the boots belonged to Louisa—ah, what foolish, foolish things we do when the fever is upon us!—and the linnet trilled out in joyfulest notes. I laughed, I chirruped, I shed tears, and when I knelt at my bedside and repeated my prayers I pressed Louisa's boots to my heart. Upon the soleing and heeling of those boots I would have liked to challenge the world. Surely, such excellent workmanship could not elsewhere have been produced.

Louisa Wagner thought so, and said so, as she turned them over and over in her hands.

"You will see," I said, "they will last for years."

"They are beautifully done," she said; "such fine stitches! You are really clever."

"I can earn a living," I said, proudly.

"But you will have to wait," she said; "I cannot pay you for them for a long, long while."

"In money you can never pay me."

"O, yes, I can, Gustave Fink."

"No," I insisted, in a trembling voice; "indeed, you never can."

"Why?" she asked.

"I did not do them for money. I wish you to accept them from me."

She thanked me quite readily, saying: "Well, if you will have it so!" and gave me the sweetest smile.

I ran home in a tremor of delight, carrying the smile with me. It is a fact. Her smiling face was before me all the way.

Of course I told my linnet the news—how that Louisa had accepted my work, and paid me with the sweetest smile—and the bird sang gaily, and the rhythm and the tenderness of the song found an echo in my heart. Up to this point the linnet was my only confidant. Not to a soul did I breathe my secret. None the less did I look upon myself as Louisa Wagner's accepted lover. After what had passed—which, as you see, I had magnified into the most ridiculous importance—how could it be otherwise? That when I could find courage to speak plainly to her she would place her hand in mine, I entertained not the slightest doubt.

I was a proud young fellow the following Sunday when I saw her walking in the boots I had repaired for her, and which looked like new. She wore a new cotton dress and a bit of new ribbon round her pretty throat, which I settled in my mind were worn for me. No man ever tasted a greater happiness than I did on that day. But I could not yet find courage to speak to her—to tell her of the love which filled my heart. I walked by her side and was contented. Ah! how it all comes back to me—the meeting at the church door, the walk through the churchyard and the village till we came to her father's cottage, the stupid little talk about her boots!

"I never in my life felt so comfortable," she said; "they are new, and yet they are as easy as if I had worn them for years. And they do not make my feet look large."

Her feet look large! In my eyes they were the feet of a princess. Now, as she put out her foot, and I was gazing at it in admiration, who should come up to us and stop but a neighbor of mine, a wheelwright, Karl Brand by name. I can see the picture as plainly as if it were put bodily before me in this room. I turn towards the fire, and I see the picture there in the glowing coals.

"The prettiest foot in all the village," cried Karl Brand. "And the prettiest face, and the prettiest mouth, and the loveliest eyes!"

His voice jarred upon me. It was like the voice of a brawler calling out in a church and interrupting the service. No wonder, I thought, that Louisa should blush as he gazed boldly at her. His look was a sacrilege. To save the girl I loved from further indignity I bade her good-by, and left her. Turning my head for a moment as I walked away, it pierced my heart like a dagger to see that Karl Brand had followed her into her father's cottage.

I have called Karl Brand a wheelwright. Well, he might be that for two days in the week—for the other five, an indolent sot. He bore a bad character in the village, and there was much suspicious talk concerning him. How could Louisa Wagner's father encourage such a character? But I could not forget that old Wagner and Karl Brand were by no means on unfriendly terms. They were often seen together. "When Louisa is mine," I thought, "and I have the right to protect her, she shall have nothing to say to such a vagabond." When Louisa was mine! Ah, how full of happiness was the future I mapped out! I resolved to speak to her soon—before the week was out, if I could find an opportunity.

On the Monday Karl Brand popped his head into my little shop where I sat working.

"What a fine pair of soles you have put on Louisa Brand's boots!" he cried. "Here—mend mine at the same price." And he flung down a pair.

I threw them back at him with some passionate words. He picked them up, and walked away, laughing. That evening I saw him and Louisa Wagner together, and I made the acquaintance of that torturer, Jealousy. There was no sleep for me that night. When I came upon them Louisa had not seen me, but he, meeting my eye, gave me a malicious triumphant smile to feed upon. I did feed upon it for days and days till I could bear it no longer, and determined to put an end to my torture. I spoke to Louise; I declared my love for her. I told her that I was able to support her and I asked her to be my wife. She answered me in a kind, pitying voice, she had already promised to become the wife of Karl Brand. I stood for a little while transfixed. My life seemed most terribly and suddenly to have come to an end.

"Do not hate me," she said softly. "I am very, very sorry."

"I cannot hate you," I replied; my voice was so strange in my ears that I could scarcely believe it was I who was speaking.

"I shall love you all my days."

"We are still friends," she said, holding out her hand.

"Yes, we are still friends," I said mechanically. "Loving you as I do, it is not possible I should ever be your enemy." I took her hand, and I held it in mine. As I felt the pressure of her fingers the tears fell from my eyes.

"You will see some other girl whom you will love," she said; "you are a good man; every one speaks well of you; your wife will be proud of you."

"I shall never marry," I said sadly; "I love only one."

Our conversation was interrupted by Karl Brand, who stole abruptly upon us.

"No poaching!" he exclaimed. "One would have supposed that an honorable man like you would respect the rights of property."

"It is not in that way, Karl Brand," I said, and at that moment I confess I entertained a deadly hatred toward him, "I should speak of the girl I was going to marry."

"You choose your way," he retorted, "and I will choose mine. Not a bad way, is it?" he asked, as he stood with his arm around Louisa Wagner's waist; her eyes cast down; she never looked at me. "And again I say, no poaching."

"Words are wasted between us," I said. "Farewell, Louisa Wagner, may you be happy."

He sent a shout of mocking laughter after me. "Truly," I could not help thinking, "in good feeling I have the advantage over you."

I suffered terribly, and for some time my mind was plunged into such darkness that I could see no gleam of goodness in all the wide world. That is the selfish view we take of things when sorrow comes to our door. Why, I asked, does Louisa Brand marry that brute and gambler instead of an honest, hard-working youngster, who not only loved, but respected her? If I could have answered that question I might be able to tell you more of the workings of a woman's heart. It is beyond me, and beyond you, and therefore I have kept myself free from woman's power from that day to this. I recovered my peace of mind, and so that it might not again be disturbed by sight of the woman I loved, I left my native village with my knapsack on my shoulders and came here, where I set up in business for myself as a watchmaker, and have jogged along ever since, with a fair share of happiness and content. There is no condition of life in which a man has not good reason to be grateful; I have grown to know this, and it has been of value to me in my ideas of life's struggles and disappointments. I have my work, I have my connection, I owe no one a florin. That is happiness enough.

III.

RELATES HOW NICOLAS BRAND BECOMES MASTER FINK'S APPRENTICE.

Year after year passed peacefully and prosperously over my head, until sixteen years had gone by. I was fortunate in many ways in making friends, in making myself respected, in forming a connection and in obtaining the services of old Anna, who saved much anxiety. She had no wooers, no men dancing at her heels; I doubt if I myself had offered to marry her, whether she would have accepted me. Not that such an idea ever entered my head. Heaven forbid! I had too great a respect for her years.

One morning, at the end of this time, a woman entered my shop. A pale, thin, elderly woman, with an expression of intense anxiety and weariness on her worn face. She gazed at me wistfully, and I at her in wonder and pity.

"Master Fink," she said.

"Yes," I said, "I am he."

I recognized her immediately, changed as she was. My old sweetheart, Louisa Wagner, stood before me. It saddened me to see that she had already arrived at the winter of her life. Her eyes were dim, her hair was nearly white; and my hair was still brown, and my eyes clear and strong, and in my heart some gladness reigned. Ah, me! Time's hand had weighed heavily upon her during the eighteen years which had flown by since last I saw her. Had, then, all the flowers of her life withered? No; one still bloomed, and brought joy to her. But this I had yet to learn. No joy was in her face, only deep anxiety and weariness. I saw that she was ready to faint with fatigue.

"Have you come to see me?" I asked.

"Yes," she sighed.

"Where from?"

"From our native village."

"You have ridden here?" I said.

"No," she replied, faintly; "I walked."

"Gracious heavens!" I cried. "Walked! It is fifty miles!"

"Yes," she sighed, "it is fifty miles. What a long, long road! But I am here at last, thank God!"

I saw that it was no light errand that had brought her to me, and I saw, also, that her strength was almost spent. Indeed, it was as much as she could do to prevent herself from falling to the ground. I called Anna hastily from her kitchen, and bade her attend to my visitor. A heart of quick sympathy beat in my old Anna's breast, and, without asking who my visitor was, she administered to her wants. It was not without difficulty that this was accomplished, for Louisa Wagner—it pained me to think of her by the name of Brand—was so eager to disclose her errand that, had she been allowed to have her way, she would not have tasted food until it was done. But Anna insisted, and so did I, and the woman I once had loved so dearly had not the strength to reject the kindly offices which were forced upon her. When she had drank a basin of nourishing soup which Anna had prepared—I never really knew what soup was till Anna made it for me; what a treasure that woman was!—and had somewhat regained her strength, I told her I was ready to listen to her.

"I have come to you for help," she said.

"I will give it to you," I replied, "if it is in my power."

She bent her head gratefully and humbly.

"You see," she said, "that I am very, very poor."

"I grieve to see it." And, indeed, I was filled with pity for her. Had the picture of her, as she was now, been presented to me eighteen years ago, with the words, "This is what the beautiful girl by your side will become in a few short years," I should have laughed at it in derision as a monstrous impossibility. Her eyes that were bright as the stars, her cheeks that rivaled the peach in delicate bloom, her skin that was soft as velvet—where were they now? Ah! Beauty, Beauty, be not over-vain and confident! Old Father Time has tricks in store for you of which you do not dream, as you walk, erect and proud and happy, through the flowery paths of youth. Be humble, maiden, and grateful for your fair outside, and pray to God not to weigh you down with grief and trouble. These were some of the thoughts that crossed my mind as I looked at the pale, thin woman, who had walked fifty miles to beg me to help her.

Presently she disclosed what she wished me to do for her. Her husband, Karl Brand, died six years ago, having done his best to make her life unhappy. She did not tell me this; she did not say that he had ill-treated her, had passed his days in the alehouse, had made her slave for him, had never given her a loving word after the first few months of their marriage. I guessed it, and it was the truth. He had led her a life of misery, and when he died left her in a state of direst poverty.

She took up her burden meekly, and battled on as women do more bravely than men I think, and did her duty to the utmost extent of her power. Her parents were dead, and she had no friends in a position to help her. Indeed, she had led me to infer, more by the construction I placed upon her words than by the words themselves, that the friends of her girlhood had fallen from her one by one—driven away, of course, by the vagabond she had married. But she had one treasure, one dear priceless treasure which compensated for all, which kept hope alive even in her sad life. She had a child, a son, and his name was Nicolas. Two other children had been born to her, but they had died, and Nicolas was the only one left. A heavenly light came into her eyes as she spoke of him; color touched her cheeks; her skin seemed to grow white and softer. There, in the Mother, I saw once again, for a brief space, the presentment of the beautiful girl I had loved in my youth. She told me much of her darling that interested me deeply—how brave he was, how truthful, bright, intelligent—how that he was the pride of her life and the best son a loving mother was ever blessed with.

"He is growing fast," she said, her eyes beaming with pride; "and, please God, in a few years will be a fine, handsome man. I am anxious about him, and I want to perform my duty by him. I wish him to learn a trade from an honest master, who will set him a good example. Your father, Gustave Fink, was an upright, just man, and it was his example that helped you to become one yourself. In our little village there is no opportunity for a lad to learn a trade that will advance him in the world. He must learn it elsewhere, and my prayer is that I may live to see him prosperous, honored, with a wife and children around him, who shall look up to him with love and respect, as they should do to a father, and with his old mother doing what she can in the day to assist the household matters, and in the night sitting in a corner by the fireside, praising the great Lord of all in her grateful heart for the blessings He has showered upon her. Ah, what happiness, what happiness!"

Her slight form shook, and her face was bedewed with tears, as she spoke of his future.

"Then do you propose," I asked, "to leave the village yourself, if you find a master elsewhere for your son?"

"O, no," she replied, with eager haste, "I shall be a clog upon him, a burden. How should I be able to live? I am not clever, and I should be among strangers. No; I must stop at home, where I can manage to make a living, and I will wait patiently till my son is a man, and says to me, 'Mother, come to me; I have a home for you.' O, Gustave Fink, you took a bold step when you left our village—a right step. The world has prospered with you."

"I acknowledge it gratefully," I said.

"This shop is your own—you are the master here."

"It is my own—I am the master here."

"Be my son's master—I have walked fifty miles to beg it of you. Teach him your trade—let him profit by your example. Counsel him, guide him. You will lose nothing by it. He is so good, so quick, so willing, so obedient! If you search the whole world through you would not find another lad so bright, so easy to teach and mold. Oh, Gustave Fink, I beg of you—I implore you!"

So eager was she, so fearful lest I should refuse her, that she would have knelt to me had I not prevented her. My mind was made up while she spoke. Long before she finished her appeal I knew what proposal she was about to make to me, and I had resolved to do as she wished me to do. Accept it from me, that I was not guided by any stupid sentimentality in the matter. No, no; all that had passed away, and I was now a practical man, who would not permit sentiment to interfere with his business. I had a shrewd eye for a good bargain, and here was one unexpectedly offered to me. Besides, was it not a fine revenge? It was my stupidity that never made me think before to-day that I wanted an apprentice. But I really required one, and here he was, ready made, in the person of Nicolas Brand, the son of my old sweetheart, who had had the bad taste to choose another man, and bestowed upon him the happiness I hoped to enjoy.

"Louisa Brand," I said, "I will do what you desire. Your weary journey shall not be fruitless. I will take your son as my apprentice, and will do my best by him."

She simply said, "God will reward you." And then she turned aside, and cried quietly to herself.

She remained with me for quite three hours, resting herself for her return journey home, and she accepted a trifle of money from me to assist her on her way. Not a word of the days that were gone was spoken by either of us. That will show you that there was no sentiment mixed up in this affair. I did not mention the name of Karl Brand, nor did she, nor did the slightest reference to the love I had borne for her escape our lips. What we thought, we thought. It is necessary sometimes to keep a strict watch over the mind, so that it shall not upset our worldly calculations. Her lips quivered as she pressed my hand, and bade me good-by. But it was not I who caused her emotion—it was the thought of her son Nicolas, from whom she was soon to be separated.

But although in our waking hours we are generally successful in controlling our minds, it is different when we are asleep. Then we become the slave, and the mind is the master, the magician which causes us to play the most extravagant pranks, and to accept whatever it chooses to present to us. It is like sitting in a theater, witnessing the representation of a play which sways us this way and that, which makes us laugh, which makes us weep, which makes us enjoy, which makes us suffer. So I dreamt that night—having no power to prevent it—of the old days, and I saw Louisa Wagner in the springtide of her beauty. I was sitting on my low stool soling and heeling her boots—golden boots, with jewels around the eyelet holes. A silver hammer was in my hand, and as I tapped and tapped, and drove in the shining nails, musical notes rang out and sang, "Love is yours! she loves you! loves you! loves you!" And then the linnet which hung above me in a crystal cage piped sweetly, "Let me out! let me out!" I opened the door of the cage, and straight through the window flew the pretty bird—through the open window, from which I saw the church and the churchyard so closely associated with one memorable Sunday in my life. And who should come dancing towards me over the tombstones but Louisa Wagner, dressed in the self-same dress she had worn on that Sunday, and with the bit of ribbon at her throat. The linnet wheeling round and round her pretty head, encircled it with thin lines of light, and sang as it flew, "She loves you—loves you—loves you—" Suddenly we were walking in a great field of flowers, and I was gazing in rapture at Louisa's golden boots. A thousand linnets were singing above us, the flowers were whispering around us, Louisa's hand was resting on my arm. "Then it is all a dream these eighteen years," I said to her. "Yes," she answered, "all a dream. How could you be so foolish as to believe I loved any man but you? What proof of my love shall I give you?" "Make this field of flowers," I answered, "grow above our heads so that we shall be hidden from the world, and there shall be only you and I."

Immediately the flowers began to grow higher, higher, higher, shutting out the light till we were almost in perfect darkness, and then the linnet came and perched on my shoulder, and whispered, "She is fooling you. She is not a young girl at all; she is an old witch. Put me in your waistcoat pocket and you will be able to see." I did so, and the bird began to tick like a watch, "Karl Brand—Karl Brand—Karl Brand!" and through a pathway of light in the field of flowers ran a little shrivelled old woman with gold boots on her feet, and Karl Brand, running after her and catching her, flung her, screaming for help into the air. I rushed with the fury of a tiger, upon the monster, and he raised a great sheet of bright brass and crashed it on my head——

Bang! The din was enough to drive one crazy, and Louisa Wagner screaming all the while as she flew through the air with her golden boots——

Bang! Bang! Bang! I jumped out of bed and ran to my bed-room door and threw it open; and there I beheld old Anna sitting in the passage outside, screaming out that every bone in her body was broken, while a lot of my best plates and dishes, all in little pieces, lay around her. She was coming down stairs with a tray full of crockery when she tripped and fell all the way down, and that was the end of my dream. I could not help laughing at it, which made old Anna cross the whole of the day.

After breakfast I thought over my interview with Louisa Brand on the previous day, and the new apprentice who would soon take up his abode with us. How his mother would grieve at parting with him. But it would never have done for me to have married that trustful woman. She was so unworldly that she had never even asked me whether Nicolas was to receive any wages during the seven years of his apprenticeship. It was an act of folly which would have made me angry had she been my wife. But she had been another man's, and he had broken her heart. That was as clear as the light which, shining through my shop-window, had exposed her gray hairs to the eyes of one who, years ago, was ready to die for her. To think that at any time of life a man should be so simple as to have such ideas! So Nicolas Brand came to me, and, being duly apprenticed, lived in my house, and learnt the trade. Old Anna was against him from the first. I had taken the important step without consulting her, and the moment she set eyes upon Nicolas prophesied that evil would come of this innovation.

"Have not things been going on well enough to please you, Master Fink?" she asked.

"They have always gone well," I replied, "and I am well pleased, Anna."

"Then you must be growing avaricious in your old age," she said.

"If I had a vein of avariciousness in my body, Anna, I would pluck it out by the roots." She was as much a companion as a servant, and I respected her too much to be angry at anything she said.

"Why do you make the change, then, Master Fink?"

I really could not answer her without deceiving her, so I merely shrugged my shoulders and smiled.

"Ah, you may smile," she exclaimed, "and make light of it; that won't alter what you've done. Tell me one thing, Master Fink."

"I will tell you many, Anna—that is, as many as I can."

"When you have a watch in good order, that has not lost or gained a minute for ten years, that you can depend upon as you can depend upon the sun, is it the act of a good workman, out of simple wickedness, to take it to pieces and put it together again? Answer me that, Master Fink."

"I understand your meaning, Anna. But rely upon me, I have a good reason for what I have done. Let us not anticipate evil. Go down to your kitchen and prepare for me my favorite dinner—French beans, stewed sweet and sour. You have not your equal in that dish; you really make me enjoy my life."

I shared Anna's fears respecting Nicolas Brand before many months had passed. Little by little it loomed up that he had a thoroughly bad nature; that he was sly, greedy, envious, small-minded, mean-spirited. Every now and then I sent to his mother a small sum of money, which I said was due for the services he rendered; and you may be sure that, as well as doing this, I paid him fair wages. But had I known how he would turn out, I would as soon have taken the son of the Arch Fiend himself for my apprentice as the son of Louisa Brand.

IV.

RELATES HOW NICOLAS BRAND WAS SEEN BY OLD ANNA PLAYING CARDS WITH THE DEVIL.

He grew into a tall, thin, sallow-faced young man, about as ill-favored as one of Pharaoh's lean kine; with large splay feet; with sandy hair; with a nose which looked as though it had been broken in the middle; with eyes as dull as the eyes of a fish; with a voice in which you never heard a note of natural gaiety. Such men are a mistake in the world, and how any young woman can be drawn to them is a mystery which I defy philosophers to satisfactorily explain. A mother's love for her ugly bantling is easily understood; but a fine young woman's, with bright eyes in her head, for such a scarecrow, is beyond ordinary comprehension. Yet they draw prizes, the ill-favored ones, while better men are left to sigh in vain.

You have already heard how Nicolas Brand passed through his apprenticeship, and how I continued to employ him as a workman when his time was out. He was twenty-two years of age when, on a certain evening, old Anna, who had been cut marketing, burst in upon me with a plump goose in her hand, and cried in a great heat:

"Fine doings, Master Fink; fine doings! I wonder the world doesn't come to an end!"

"What in heaven's name has put you in such a fever, Anna?" I inquired, looking up from the newspaper in which I was reading an account of a wonderful ox which had a man's head growing out of one shoulder and a turtle growing out of the other. "Ah!" I cried in sudden fear, "That goose—you have been taken in with it. It is not a fresh goose—it ought to have been eaten days ago, and the dealer will not change it. Give it to me—I will go to him myself——"

"No need to trouble, Master Fink," interrupted Anna, in a slightly acid tone. "The goose is a good goose, and I bought it cheap. I should like to see the dealer who could take me in. Look at it."

I did more than look at it; I poked its ribs; I felt its fat breast; my eyes glistened.

"Already, Anna," I cried joyously. "Already I smell the stuffing?" I don't deny it; I am fond of good cooking. It's nothing to be ashamed of; we were sent into the world to eat.

"It is not the goose that has put me into a fever," said Anna; "it is Nicolas Brand."

I pricked up my ears. "Has he behaved rudely to you, Anna?"

"What!" she screamed, in a voice so shrill as to cause me to jump in my chair. "He! A lamppost like him! If he dared, I'd box his ears till I set them on fire!"

I laughed quietly; I could not help it, her indignation was so comical. "Well, then," I asked wiping my eyes, for I had brought the tears into them, "What has he done?"

Her reply was brief and startling. "Nicolas Brand is courting."

"It is not possible," I cried. "You must be dreaming."

"I don't dream," said Anna, "with my eyes wide open. This very evening, not ten minutes ago, as I was coming home after buying the goose, I saw him with his arm round her waist."

"Round the goose's waist?" I exclaimed, for really she was speaking in enigmas.

She looked at me solemnly, reproachfully. "Pray to-night, Master Fink," she said, "to be forgiven for making a joke of my words," and she was about to leave me.

"Stay, Anna," I said, "and forgive me. With his arm around whose waist?"

"Katrine Loebeg's," replied Anna, sorrowfully. "The child! the poor, misguided child! It was only yesterday I was nursing her on my knee and tossing her in the air."

Anna was deeply moved, and I scarcely less so, at this discovery. It was hardly to be believed that a fresh young heart like that which beat in the breast of pretty Katrine Loebeg should have given itself up to this scarecrow. But it was true. Nicholas Brand had cast a spell upon her, and she was as securely in his wiles as a trout on a hook.

Sweet Katrine Loebeg! Whom I looked upon almost as a child of my own; who could have chosen from the best, and for whom many a heart was aching. An orphan, too, with no father to protect her, and no mother to warn her of the pitfalls which lie open in the path of innocent maidenhood. That made it worse—a thousand times worse. What could there be in Nicolas Brand to attract that pure young soul? What unholy arts had he used to draw her to him? It was incredible, but most unhappily a fact, that he had infatuated her, and was paying court to her.

"Did you speak to them, Anna?" I asked.

"No; they didn't see me."

"But, surely, Anna, this was not done in the open street!"

"No; that's where the villany of it is. You know the archway on the right-hand side of the Court of Public Justice. At this time of the day there is no one there, and scarcely any one passes through it. I should not have done so had I not wanted to go to the blind-house to give Mother Morel a paper of snuff. She is ninety-eight, but her nose is in splendid condition. It is the only sense she has left to enjoy, Master Fink. She is blind, she is deaf, she can only mumble words it is impossible to understand, and she has scarcely any feeling in her. Her nose is her sole comfort in this world, for her mind has quite gone. Well, when I went through the archway there was no one there, and outside the archway in the open court there were only the pigeons picking up the crambs. But when I came back through the archway, there, in the darkest part of it, was your treasure, Nicolas Brand—"

"Don't call him my treasure, my good Anna," I said, mildly; "I have not a high opinion of him."

"What did you take him as your apprentice for, then? I warned you how it would be.

"Is it possible," I exclaimed, testily, "to find in this world a woman who will tell a story in a straight way, without flying away from it in all directions? Get out of that archway, Anna."

"There was Nicolas Brand, in the very darkest part of it, with his arm round Katrine's waist. And unless my ears are mistaken, Master Fink, I heard the sound of a kiss."

"When two young people are together like that, Anna," I said, "there are more unlikely things."

"Well," she asked very sharply, "what are you going to do about it?"

"What *can* I do, Anna?"

"Do! Prevent it going any further."

"How, Anna? In what way? You must not forget that Nicolas is no longer my apprentice. He is his own master; he is an independent workman."

"A fine workman!" she cried, scornfully. "It was an act of folly to take him as an apprentice; but when he was out of his time it was easy enough to get rid of him. Over and over again I have wondered why you have kept him on."

She did not know of my little romance when his mother and I were girl and boy together. I had the greatest confidence in Anna, but this secret of my youthful days was not likely to divulge to anyone. Besides, if in an unguarded moment I *had* confided in Anna, I am sure she would not have sympathized with me. She might even have lost confidence in me, and this was a risk I did not care to run.

"You manage your kitchen," I said to this faithful old servant, "and I will manage my shop. If I took the liberty of suggesting to you how you should cook that plump goose you have in your hand, I should not be surprised to feel it flying about my head, dead as it is."

"From the first day I came here," said Anna, and there was really a touch of pathos in her voice, "everything has gone right in my kitchen. Never a joint have I spoilt, nor a bird, nor has an ounce of fat been wasted. Out of what has been saved by careful management we have even been able to feed the beggars. Go down stairs now and you will see the saucepans and the pans and the molds shining like new silver; and if you can find a speck of dust on a plate or a glass, you may cut off my head." It was true, every word of it, and I should have melted into tears had it not been for the tragic tone in which my good old Anna said I might cut off her head. "And why,"