

Jezebel's Daughter

By

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Chapter I.1

In the matter of Jezebel's Daughter, my recollections begin with the deaths of two foreign gentlemen, in two different countries, on the same day of the same year.

They were both men of some importance in their way, and both strangers to each other.

Mr. Ephraim Wagner, merchant (formerly of Frankfort-on-the-Main), died in London on the third day of September, 1828.

Doctor Fontaine--famous in his time for discoveries in experimental chemistry--died at Wurzburg on the third day of September, 1828.

Both the merchant and the doctor left widows. The merchant's widow (an Englishwoman) was childless. The doctor's widow (of a South German family) had a daughter to console her.

At that distant time--I am writing these lines in the year 1878, and looking back through half a century--I was a lad employed in Mr. Wagner's office. Being his wife's nephew, he most kindly received me as a member of his household. What I am now about to relate I saw with my own eyes and heard with my own ears. My memory is to be depended on. Like other old men, I recollect events which happened at the beginning of my career far more clearly than events which happened only two or three years since.

Good Mr. Wagner had been ailing for many months; but the doctors had no immediate fear of his death. He proved the doctors to be mistaken; and took the liberty of dying at a time when they all declared that there was every reasonable hope of his recovery. When this affliction fell upon his wife, I was absent from the office in London on a business errand to our branch-establishment at Frankfort-on-the-Main, directed by Mr. Wagner's partners. The day of my return happened to be the day after the funeral. It was also the occasion chosen for the reading of the will. Mr. Wagner, I should add, had been a naturalized British citizen, and his will was drawn by an English lawyer.

The fourth, fifth, and sixth clauses of the will are the only portions of the document which it is necessary to mention in this place.

The fourth clause left the whole of the testator's property, in lands and in money, absolutely to his widow. In the fifth clause he added a new proof of his implicit confidence in her--he appointed her sole executrix of his will.

The sixth and last clause began in these words:--

"During my long illness, my dear wife has acted as my secretary and representative. She has made herself so thoroughly well acquainted with the system on which I have conducted my business, that she is the fittest person to succeed me. I not only prove the fullness of my trust in her and the sincerity of my gratitude towards her, but I really act in the best interests of the firm of which I am the head, when I hereby appoint my widow as

my sole successor in the business, with all the powers and privileges appertaining thereto."

The lawyer and I both looked at my aunt. She had sunk back in her chair; her face was hidden in her handkerchief. We waited respectfully until she might be sufficiently recovered to communicate her wishes to us. The expression of her husband's love and respect, contained in the last words of the will, had completely overwhelmed her. It was only after she had been relieved by a burst of tears that she was conscious of our presence, and was composed enough to speak to us.

"I shall be calmer in a few days' time," she said. "Come to me at the end of the week. I have something important to say to both of you."

The lawyer ventured on putting a question. "Does it relate in any way to the will?" he inquired.

She shook her head. "It relates," she answered, "to my husband's last wishes.

She bowed to us, and went away to her own room.

The lawyer looked after her gravely and doubtfully as she disappeared. "My long experience in my profession," he said, turning to me, "has taught me many useful lessons. Your aunt has just called one of those lessons to my mind.

"May I ask what it is, sir?"

"Certainly." He took my arm and waited to repeat the lesson until we had left the house; "Always distrust a man's last wishes on his death-bed--unless they are communicated to his lawyer, and expressed in his will."

At the time, I thought this rather a narrow view to take. How could I foresee that coming events in the future life of my aunt would prove the lawyer to be right? If she had only been content to leave her husband's plans and projects where he had left them at his death, and if she had never taken that rash journey to our branch office at Frankfort--but what is the use of speculating on what might or might not have happened? My business in these pages is to describe what did happen. Let me return to my business.

Chapter I.2

At the end of the week we found the widow waiting to receive us.

To describe her personally, she was a little lady, with a remarkably pretty figure, a clear pale complexion, a broad low forehead, and large, steady, brightly-intelligent gray eyes. Having married a man very much older than herself, she was still (after many years of wedded life) a notably attractive woman. But she never seemed to be conscious of her personal advantages, or vain of the very remarkable abilities which she did unquestionably possess. Under ordinary circumstances, she was a singularly gentle, unobtrusive creature. But let the occasion call for it, and the reserves of resolution in her showed themselves instantly. In all my experience I have never met with such a firm woman, when she was once roused.

She entered on her business with us, wasting no time in preliminary words. Her face showed plain signs, poor soul, of a wakeful and tearful night. But she claimed no indulgence on that account. When she spoke of her dead husband--excepting a slight unsteadiness in her voice--she controlled herself with a courage which was at once pitiable and admirable to see.

"You both know," she began, "that Mr. Wagner was a man who thought for himself. He had ideas of his duty to his poor and afflicted fellow-creatures which are in advance of received opinions in the world about us. I love and revere his memory--and (please God) I mean to carry out his ideas."

The lawyer began to look uneasy. "Do you refer, madam, to Mr. Wagner's political opinions?" he inquired.

Fifty years ago, my old master's political opinions were considered to be nothing less than revolutionary. In these days--when his Opinions have been sanctioned by Acts of Parliament, with the general approval of the nation--people would have called him a "Moderate Liberal," and would have set him down as a discreetly deliberate man in the march of modern progress.

"I have nothing to say about politics," my aunt answered. "I wish to speak to you, in the first place, of my husband's opinions on the employment of women.

Here, again, after a lapse of half a century, my master's heresies of the year 1828 have become the orthodox principles of the year 1878. Thinking the subject over in his own independent way, he had arrived at the conclusion that there were many employments reserved exclusively for men, which might with perfect propriety be also thrown open to capable and deserving women. To recognize the claims of justice was, with a man of Mr. Wagner's character, to act on his convictions without a moment's needless delay. Enlarging his London business at the time, he divided the new employments at his disposal impartially between men and women alike. The scandal produced in the city by this daring innovation is remembered to the present day by old men like me. My master's audacious experiment prospered nevertheless, in spite of scandal.

"If my husband had lived," my aunt continued, "it was his intention to follow the example, which he has already set in London, in our house at Frankfort. There also our business is increasing, and we mean to add to the number of our clerks. As soon as I am able to exert myself, I shall go to Frankfort, and give German women the same opportunities which my husband has already given to English women in London. I have his notes on the best manner of carrying out this reform to guide me. And I think of sending you, David," she added, turning to me, "to our partners in Frankfort, Mr. Keller and Mr. Engelman, with instructions which will keep some of the vacant situations in the office open, until I can follow you." She paused, and looked at the lawyer. "Do you see any objection to what I propose?" she said.

"I see some risks," he answered, cautiously.

"What risks?"

"In London, madam, the late Mr. Wagner had special means of investigating the characters of the women whom he took into his office. It may not be so easy for you, in a strange place like Frankfort, to guard against the danger----" He hesitated, at a loss for the moment to express himself with sufficient plainness and sufficient delicacy.

My aunt made no allowances for his embarrassment.

"Don't be afraid to speak out, sir," she said, a little coldly. "What danger are you afraid of?"

"Yours is a generous nature, madam: and generous natures are easily imposed upon. I am afraid of women with bad characters, or, worse still, of other women----"

He stopped again. This time there was a positive interruption. We heard a knock at the door.

Our head-clerk was the person who presented himself at the summons to come in. My aunt held up her hand. "Excuse me, Mr. Hartrey--I will attend to you in one moment." She turned to the lawyer. "What other women are likely to impose on me?" she asked.

"Women, otherwise worthy of your kindness, who may be associated with disreputable connections," the lawyer replied. "The very women, if I know anything of your quick sympathies, whom you would be most anxious to help, and who might nevertheless be a source of constant trouble and anxiety, under pernicious influences at home."

My aunt made no answer. For the moment, the lawyer's objections seemed to annoy her. She addressed herself to Mr. Hartrey; asking rather abruptly what he had to say to her.

Our head-clerk was a methodical gentleman of the old school. He began by confusedly apologizing for his intrusion; and ended by producing a letter.

"When you are able to attend to business, madam, honor me by reading this letter. And, in the meantime, will you forgive me for taking a liberty in the office, rather than intrude on your grief so soon after the death of my dear and honored master?" The phrases were formal enough; but there was true feeling in the man's voice as he spoke. My aunt gave him her hand. He kissed it, with the tears in his eyes.

"Whatever you have done has been well done, I am sure," she said kindly. "Who is the letter from?"

"From Mr. Keller, of Frankfort, madam."

My aunt instantly took the letter from him, and read it attentively. It has a very serious bearing on passages in the present narrative which are yet to come. I accordingly present a copy of it in this place:

"Private and confidential.

"Dear Mr. Hartrey,--It is impossible for me to address myself to Mrs. Wagner, in the first days of the affliction that has fallen on her. I am troubled by a pressing anxiety; and I venture to write to you, as the person now in charge at our London office.

"My only son Fritz is finishing his education at the university of Wurzburg. He has, I regret to say, formed an attachment to a young woman, the daughter of a doctor at Wurzburg, who has recently died. I believe the girl to be a perfectly reputable and virtuous young person. But her father has not only left her in poverty, he has done worse--he has died in debt. Besides this, her mother's character does not stand high in the town. It is said, among other things, that her extravagance is mainly answerable for her late husband's debts. Under these circumstances, I wish to break off the connection while the two young people are separated for the time by the event of the doctor's recent death. Fritz has given up the idea of entering the medical profession, and has accepted my proposal that he shall succeed me in our business. I have decided on sending him to London, to learn something of commercial affairs, at headquarters, in your office.

"My son obeys me reluctantly; but he is a good and dutiful lad--and he yields to his father's wishes. You may expect him in a day or two after receipt of these lines. Oblige me by making a little opening for him in one of your official departments, and by keeping him as much as possible under your own eye, until I can venture on communicating directly with Mrs. Wagner--to whom pray convey the expression of my most sincere and respectful sympathy."

My aunt handed back the letter. "Has the young man arrived yet?" she asked.

"He arrived yesterday, madam."

"And have you found some employment for him?"

"I have ventured to place him in our corresponding department, the head-clerk answered. "For the present he will assist in copying letters; and, after business-hours, he will have a room (until further orders) in my house. I hope you think I have done right, madam?"

"You have done admirably, Mr. Hartrey. At the same time, I will relieve you of some of the responsibility. No grief of mine shall interfere with my duty to my husband's partner. I will speak to the young man myself. Bring him here this evening, after business-hours. And don't leave us just yet; I want to put a question to you relating to my husband's affairs, in which I am deeply interested." Mr. Hartrey returned to his chair. After a momentary hesitation, my aunt put her question in terms which took us all three by surprise.

Chapter I.3

"My husband was connected with many charitable institutions," the widow began. "Am I right in believing that he was one of the governors of Bethlehem Hospital?"

At this reference to the famous asylum for insane persons, popularly known among the inhabitants of London as "Bedlam," I saw the lawyer start, and exchange a look with the head-clerk. Mr. Hartrey answered with evident reluctance; he said, "Quite right, madam"--and said no more. The lawyer, being the bolder man of the two, added a word of warning, addressed directly to my aunt.

"I venture to suggest," he said, "that there are circumstances connected with the late Mr. Wagner's position at the Hospital, which make it desirable not to pursue the subject any farther. Mr. Hartrey will confirm what I say, when I tell you that Mr. Wagner's proposals for a reformation in the treatment of the patients----"

"Were the proposals of a merciful man," my aunt interposed "who abhorred cruelty in all its forms, and who held the torturing of the poor mad patients by whips and chains to be an outrage on humanity. I entirely agree with him. Though I am only a woman, I will not let the matter drop. I shall go to the Hospital on Monday morning next--and my business with you to-day is to request that you will accompany me."

"In what capacity am I to have the honor of accompanying you?" the lawyer asked, in his coldest manner.

"In your professional capacity," my aunt replied. "I may have a proposal to address to the governors; and I shall look to your experience to express it in the proper form."

The lawyer was not satisfied yet. "Excuse me if I venture on making another inquiry," he persisted. "Do you propose to visit the madhouse in consequence of any wish expressed by the late Mr. Wagner?"

"Certainly not! My husband always avoided speaking to me on that melancholy subject. As you have heard, he even left me in doubt whether he was one of the governing body at the asylum. No reference to any circumstance in his life which might alarm or distress me ever passed his lips." Her voice failed her as she paid that tribute to her husband's memory. She waited to recover herself. "But, on the night before his death," she resumed, "when he was half waking, half dreaming, I heard him talking to himself of something that he was anxious to do, if the chance of recovery had been still left to him. Since that time I have looked at his private diary; and I have found entries in it which explain to me what I failed to understand clearly at his bedside. I know for certain that the obstinate hostility of his colleagues had determined him on trying the effect of patience and kindness in the treatment of mad people, at his sole risk and expense. There is now in Bethlehem Hospital a wretched man--a friendless outcast, found in the streets--whom my noble husband had chosen as the first subject of his humane experiment, and whose release from a life of torment he had the hope of effecting through the influence of a person in authority in the Royal Household. You know already that the memory of my

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