

Esther

CHAPTER I.

JACOB ALLEN, captain of a lumber-sloop, which lay at her pier far up on the North River side of the city, chose to sleep, one hot, close night, two summers ago, on the deck of his *Lady Franklin*. "The Lady," as he familiarly called her, was his own from keel to streamer; and he liked better to "stay at home" in her cabin or on her deck, than to find lodgings ashore. The tide was high at the stillest hour, not long before dawn, and there was neither ripple at rudder, nor flutter at pennant; and Jacob lay wide awake—it happened so—looking up at the stars. Far off, on the opposite shore, he hears the barking of a dog; on this side, but from streets and streets away, comes the dull rattling of a cart: hardly another sound does he hear, although conscious of faint, indefinite murmurs in the air.

Splash!

"What's that? A rat, I suppose; or a loose stone from a dock."

"Murder! Mur-d-e-r! Mur-d-e-r!"

Up starts Jacob Allen. The dire words, distinct to the last drowned syllable, take possession of him like spirits. For a moment, resting half upright he listens; but there is nothing more. So now he stands up and thinks.

"That was a *woman's* voice. And it came from up stream. If some poor creetur had been shoved overboard, she'll float down this way. Tide's turned by this time. The boat!—quick!"

He has sculled out, under the starlight over the black river; and there he stands, waiting, eyebrows contracted, fingers parted, leaning forward, piercing, as far as he can, into the darkness.

"There! No! Yes! There *is* something! Here it comes!"

He clutches at it, on his knees, leaning over the gunwale of the heeling boat; he struggles with the black tide and conquers, bringing into his boat the—*it*.

"*What* is it? *Who* is it? A woman by the dress; a girl, it's so slight and small. Any life in—it—her! Touch her hands. Why, man, what are you 'fraid of? Never mind now; pull for shore; that's the first thing to do. We've floated down stream a bit. There's 'The Lady's' pennant over there. Daylight's coming. Thunder! I wish I knew somethin' what to do for 'er, when I get 'er aboard!"

An hour later. What has been done meanwhile you may judge by looking at the group on the *Lady Franklin's* deck. A pale girl, lying on a blanket-covered mattress, her head in the lap of a Bridget. The night is over; light and life have come together to her. A doctor; a policeman; Jacob Allen. Arrange them—picturesquely, of course—as you please.

By-and-by she finds voice to answer their questions. “I am German,” she says. That’s all at present. But after a while, to their great disappointment, they find that she speaks German only. All they can gather, by the few words of English in common and by signs, is, that her name is Esther, and that some one gave her that blow on the temple—there’s the mark—which thrust her off into the stream. And then she whispers “Murder! Murder!” Well for her that she had happened to learn *that* word, and that she had happened to *use* it! “Happened!” “*I believe in God, the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth.*”

Poor Esther! *Man* was pitiless! Yet she is fair, even beautiful. Slight; gracefully formed; her pale face oval; her white lips thin, yet full; her hair black, and shining with moisture, though Bridget has tried to wipe it dry with her apron; her eyes—what you can see of them from under the falling lids and long lashes—black and clear.

Jacob thinks her beautiful, and he glories—to himself—over his winnings. Leaning against the mast, arms folded, he looks steadily at her. He wonders who could have been mean enough, unmanly enough, to think of treating *her* so!

When the policeman comes with a cab to take her to the hospital, *Jacob* finds, somewhat to his surprise, that he doesn’t want to give her up, to lose his fair waif. Has he not won her fairly, won her from the gray night and the black river? Has he not some claim on that fair face for a smile, on those black eyes for a look of recognition and gratitude? He can hardly bear to let her go; at least not yet, he thinks. But all the while he is helping to place her in the cab, devoting to her use that huge gray wrapper, which, with its immense steel pin, had been something of a pride ashore last winter. If he were not a “leetle mite” ashamed of his tenderness, he would go with her to the hospital.

By what freemasonic signs women communicate the uninitiated may not know; but somehow Bridget has told Esther that *Jacob* is the rescuer. Has the Irish keenness of perception discovered *Jacob*’s secret? Perhaps so; and if so, he has to thank her for that which he has waited for, longed for—a smile full of thanks, and a faint pressure of hands, and something in German, low and tender, as Esther and the doctor drive away.

“Well! I al’ays thought, before, that Dutch was a ha’sh, jaw-breaking kind of a language; but she spoke it pretty enough! I kinder wish I understood the lingo a little.”

Jacob uneasy, abstracted, all day; *Jacob*’s rough hands doing rough work, but *Jacob*’s soft heart—? In love with a *Dutch* girl! (To himself, *loq.*) “But she’s so blamed pretty and sweet! *I* don’t care! Who’s got anything to say ag’inst it, anyhow? Do jes’ as I’m a min’ to, I reckon!”

CHAPTER II.

ESTHER at the hospital: has a German nurse tells the story of her wrongs: it is an attempt to murder, and worse: a policemen sent for, a German detective—one of Captain Walling’s force—from whom the following:

Esther Hartman is a Jewess from Budweis, in Bohemia. When her father died he left for his widow money enough for the starting of a little shop, and two daughters. The elder has married, and gone with her husband to “Amerika;” letters at long intervals, tell of their humble successes. Esther remains with her mother. The mother dies suddenly, and Esther is alone. The first grief over, she sells out her little inheritance, determined to join her sister in America. Depositing part in safe hands, quilting the rest into her bodice, with a bundle of mementos of the old home, and good-bys to all the Budweisers, she starts alone for America. On foot she gayly takes her way, Juha, Juhee, following the river road (Moldau, *fl.*) to Prague; then to Dresden; and so, partly by steamboat on the Elbe, but mostly on foot, with “lifts” in occasional *fuhrwagens*, she makes progress slowly to Hamburg. On her seventeenth birth-day, with four hundred countrymen, women, children, chests, potato-bags, black-bread loaves, et cetera, et ceterorum, she sails up into the North Sea. — —. [A blank, which is better than any attempted description of such a voyage as the *Helvetia* made in March.] Esther makes friends on the ship—a new-married Hamburg couple, the man of which has been in New York before; so, under his guard, Esther gets by many dangers, and finds a decent, safe home. But nowhere can she find her sister. Piece by piece the gold is pinched from her bodice; week by week time goes by, but Sophia Laderer, born Hartman, is not to be found. So at last Esther gives up, and finds that she must get to work for her living. A good chance sends her to the kitchen of a well-to-do German family in Brooklyn, where she remains until a sudden family break-up and departure for the West, throws her without warning, out of her place. She comes into the city to inquire for employment, and meets, at her old lodging-house, a pleasant-faced countryman from Prague, who seems like a brother almost, coming from so near home. He is a farmer (sham), living up the river, and wants a housekeeper. Esther shall stay with his sister until he is ready, in a few days, to go back to his farm. He brings her trunk from Brooklyn, and then escorts her to the sister’s, a lager-bier boarding-house, somewhere down town. The sister (sham) plays her part: the farmer is attentive: marriage is talked of (sham), to which Esther almost consents. She tells now of evening walks by the waterside, where there are seats under trees (the Battery), and of visits to theatres in a broad street (the Bowery). Max, the farmer, is kind, handsome, earnest, and Esther yields: they are to be married. — — [Blanks are sometimes convenient, often wise.] But though their plans are as well-laid as they are vile, Esther and innocence are too strong for Max and his (sham) sister.

One evening Max hurries in; he must go tonight; this man will carry the trunk. Come, Esther! A parting glass of beer Esther must drink with the sister. Now off, in a hurry, to be in time for the boat. A long, long walk; Esther gets very tired, and strangely tired. Finally they stop at a pier. “The boat’s gone!” exclaims Max; and the pier is deserted. Max is disappointed, but says they can only turn around, go back, and try it again tomorrow. “Let’s rest a while before we start;” and they sit down on timbers. Very tired, strangely tired, poor Esther, and sleepy. — (Drugged beer!) — — [Now blanks again, for Esther remembers no more.] That she slept she knows, and dreamed a horrid dream: fought with a fiend, she thinks, who struck her, and she screamed “Murder!” and fell into a black lake. The rest we know.

CHAPTER II.

MAX—if that be a true name—is a villain, a fiend, not of a dream only, but of a reality, and the detective undertakes to find him, his duty becoming a kind of pleasure. It is to avenge a

countrywoman rather than to earn his policeman's pay. But he starts vaguely. Esther is so much of a stranger that she cannot tell him where to look for that boarding-house, and as she has been out from it only in the evening, she cannot describe the vicinity distinctly. It was not far thence to the Battery; so much. She remembered crossing railroad tracks on her way thence to the theatres; so much more. The officer at length concludes that the den to be found is somewhere in a corner of the city southwest from the Astor House. At his request Esther tries to describe the interior of the place, but it differs in nothing from fifties of such places thereabouts, except Esther tells him that—what seemed to be a fit pet in such a place—there was a large black cat. With these facts, and a thorough description of Max and sister, and Jacob Allen's address, officer Tieman begins.

Four days' industry, adroitness, patience, and the black cat rubs her sides against the officer's legs, delighted with bits of Schweitzer, and says to him, "This is the place—pur-r-r-r!—that is the sister, drawing off beer—pur-r-r-r! pur-r-r-r!—if you'll watch the door for a day or two Max will be in. Miaouowl! He stepped on my *tail* once; I owe him a grudge!" Officer Tinman feels pretty sure that he has found the right place, but to make certain of the fact he brings Esther from the hospital—she has been very sick, poor girl!—and she, looking in at the door from the carriage window, through her veil, assures him of his discovery.

If officer Tieman had known that Max was sea-sick, half-seas over, bound to Bremen, he would not have waited so long and watched for him at the sign of the Black Cat. If officer T. had not watched and waited so long, Esther would not have leaped from the window of the hospital, and flown away, nobody could tell whither, before he came. And another contingency—Jacob Allen would not have suffered that chill that went through and through him when, inquiring at the hospital door for Esther, he was told of her strange disappearance.

Now we are all in a muddle. Max escaped; Esther—where? Officer Tieman and Jacob get together and look into each other's faces, asking, What now? and What next? Jacob feels keenly the loss of his—shawl; cost him seven dollars. Imagine the two sitting in the cheerful (?) parlor of the Detective Police, corner of Elm and Broome, underground, meditating. Poor Jacob! Lost his—shawl! How charming she looked, wrapped up in that shawl, leaning back in the carriage, smiling good-by and gratitude in a known tongue, her paleness adding so tenderly to her rare foreign beauty! Now—gone, shawl and all, like a dream; gone down the back-entry of Time. Where now his plans of a snug little cottage, not far from a landing, a certain landing he knew of, overlooking the river! Sunk, Jacob! Poor Jacob!

Officer Tieman! Why have you been sitting so long within sound of the Metropolitan Telegraph, ticking, clicking in the next room, and haven't thought of asking the stations all over town to look out for an Esther, a Jewess, a German, black eyed, run away from Bellevue!

In a moment that warning is flashing all over—north, east, west, south. In another, "Here she is?" from a station far up town. In another, officer Tieman and Jacob are out and away, Jacob in advance. "Going after your *shawl*, Captain Allen?"

They find her, but crazy, alas! wild with indefinite fright. She knows the officer—that is, thinks him a friend—fancies him somebody else, and gives him an old name familiar in Budweis. Jacob she cowers from, calling him "Max" in a shivering whisper. She wraps the shawl around her, and

gathers herself away from him with a wild scowl. So they put poor Jacob out of her sight, and then coax and carry her away back to the hospital. There it is learned that, after her ride to the house of the Black Cat—she seemed quite well enough to go—a fever had taken her: during this she had probably gone wild, and had spirited herself off. She herself afterward said that Max had chased her out of the house with an oar in his hand, as it seemed to her.

Weep for the captain of the sloop *Lady Franklin*! How much lies between him and the fruition of his hopes! Isn't he crazy himself to *be* in love (yet love is can't-helpable), with a whole army of verbs, substantives, and adjectives, vanguarded with unpronounceable consonantic combinations fighting against him. Why, he can't even say, "*Ich liebe dich*" (I love thee) in Deutsch. But there is an ocular language—and that he relies on—more liquid than *la bella lingua* itself: he will speak the blue dialect, and is sure that he can understand the black, if she'll use it. But she is crazy, and thinks him Max. 'Twon't last long, he says; and having scuttled and sunk these difficulties, he goes back to the smile and the pressure of hands, both of her hands grasping his one huge hand—the one which clutched her out from the river—and he hopes.

Esther gets well. Max stays where he fled to. Esther's sister never is heard from. Nurse at the hospital—delighting in such business doubtless—becomes an interpreter; and so begin the German studies of Captain Jacob Allen. In the which he makes slow progress; but Esther, with Bohemian aptness, learns English rapidly; so with a little Deutsch, more English, much of the ocular—by and by, with solemn joy, a touch of the labial dialect—they come to an understanding. From the hospital to the church, thence by a sloop to a certain landing, and a welcome from old Mother Allen.

Now, the *Lady* having been sold, Jacob is captain of the schooner *Esther*.

Who of my readers is "smart" enough, unfeeling enough, to spoil the ending of my story by saying, "Ah! but how could she marry him? She was a Jewess!" I won't answer you other than in this way: You being Jacob, sir, you being Esther, ma'am, couldn't you have managed it somehow?

Harper's Weekly, January 16, 1858

Russell, William. *Strange Stories of a Detective; or, Curiosities of Crime*. New York: Dick and Fitzgerald, 1863. 122-6