

Badische Landesbibliothek Karlsruhe

Digitale Sammlung der Badischen Landesbibliothek Karlsruhe

Up the Rhine

Hood, Thomas

London, 1840

The fatal word

[urn:nbn:de:bsz:31-124956](https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:bsz:31-124956)

THE FATAL WORD.

A ROMANCE OF BONN.

THANKS to the merry company, and the good Ah-bleichart wine, at his Cousin Rudolph's, it was midnight ere Peter Kraus, the little tailor of Bonn, set out on his road home. Now Peter was a pious and a tender-hearted man, who would not hurt a dog, much less a fellow-creature; but he had one master failing, which at last brought him into a horrible scrape, and that was curiosity. Such was his itch for meddling and prying, that whatever business went forward, he was sure to look and listen with all his might. Let a word or two be pronounced in a corner, and you could fancy his ears pricking towards the sound, like the ears of a horse. Perhaps, if he had ever perused the tragical story of Blue Beard, he would have learned more prudence; but, unhappily, he never read Fairy Tales, nor indeed anything of the kind, except some of the old Legends of the Saints.

Thus Peter Kraus, pipe in mouth, was trudging silently homeward, through the pleasant valley between Røttchen and Poppelsdorf, when all at once he heard something that brought him to a full stop. Yes,—there certainly was a talking on the other side of the bushes; so, giving loose to his propensity, he drew

near, and listened the more eagerly as he recognised one of the voices as that of Ferdinand Wenzel, the wildest and wickedest of all the students of Bonn. The other voice he did not know, nor indeed had he ever heard one at all like it: its tone was deep and metallic, like the tolling of a great bell.

“Ask, and it shall be granted, if within my compass.”

Peter, trembling, peeped through the thick foliage at the last speaker, and to his unutterable horror, descried a dreadful figure, which could only belong to one fearful personage—the Enemy of Mankind. Kraus could nearly see his full face, which was ten thousand times uglier than that of Judas in the old paintings. The Fiend was grinning, and dimly the moonlight gleamed on his huge hard cheek-bones, and thence downward to his mouth, where it gleamed awfully on his set teeth, which shone not with the bright bony whiteness of ivory, but with the flash of polished steel. Opposite to the Evil One, and as much at his ease as if he had only been in company with a bosom crony, sat the reckless, daring, Ferdinand Wenzel, considering intently what infernal boon he had best demand. At last he seemed to have made up his mind;—Kraus pricked up his ears.

“Give me,” said the Wild Student, “the power of life and death over others.”

—“I can grant thee only the half,” said the Fiend. “I have power to shorten human life, but there is only one who may prolong it.”

"Be it so," said the Student; "only let those whom I may doom die suddenly before my face."

"All the blessed saints and martyrs forbid!" prayed Kraus in his soul, at the same time crossing himself as fast as he could. "In that case, I'm a dead man to a certainty! He will make away with all that is Philister—namely, with all that is good, or religious, or sober, or peaceable, or decent, in the whole city of Bonn!"

In the mean time, the Evil One seemed to deliberate, and at length told the Wild Student that he should have his wish. "Listen, Ferdinand Wenzel! I will teach thee a mortal word, which if thou pronounce aloud to any human being, man, woman, or child, they shall drop down, stone-dead, as by a stroke of apoplexy, at thy very feet."

"Enough," said the Wild Student. "Bravo!" and he waved his arms exultingly above his head. "I am now one of the Fates. I hold the lives of my enemies in my hand. I am no more Ferdinand Wenzel, but Azrael, the Angel of Death. Come, the word—the mighty word!"

We have said that the topmost failing of Peter Kraus was curiosity,—it was rather his besetting sin, and was now about to meet with its due punishment. Where other men would have shut their eyes, he opened them; where they would have stopped their ears, he put up a trumpet. O Peter, Peter! better hadst thou been born deaf as the adder, than have heard the three dreadful

syllables that made up that tremendous WORD. But Peter was wilful, and stretched out his neck like a crane's towards the sound, and as the Fiend, at Wenzel's request, repeated the fatal spell nine times over, it was impressed on the listener's memory, never to be forgotten.

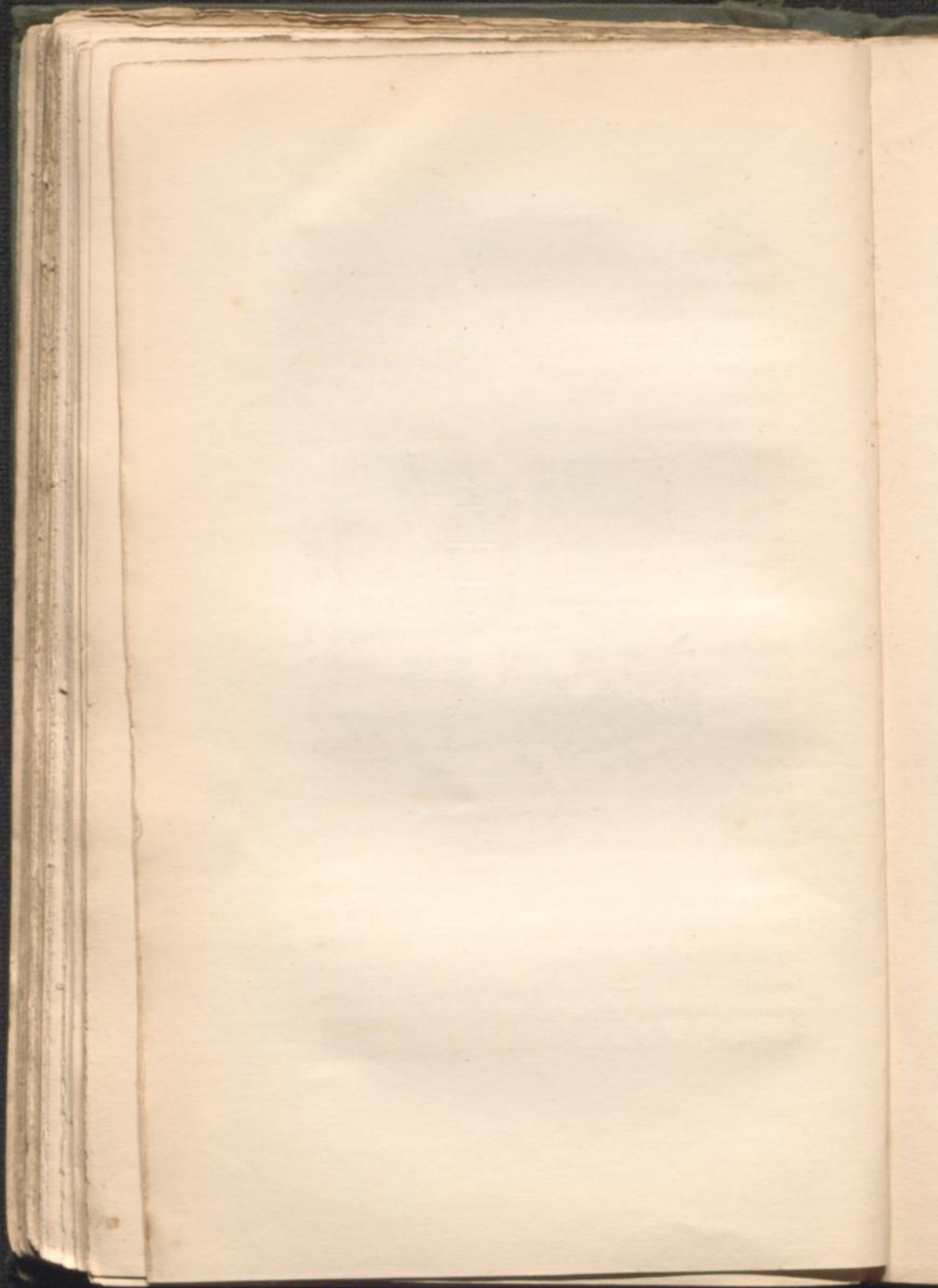
"I have got it by heart," said the Wild Student, "and I know right well who shall hear it the first."

"Bravo!" said the voice that sounded like the toll of a death-bell.

The hair, long as it was, rose erect on Kraus's devoted head; every lock felt alive, and crawling and writhing like a serpent. He considered himself the doomed man. Wenzel owed him money, and debtors are apt to get weary of their creditors. Yes; his days were numbered, like those of the pig at the butcher's door. Full of these terrible thoughts, he got away as hastily as he could, without making an alarm, and as soon as he dared, set off at a run towards his home. On he scampered, wishing that his very arms were legs, to help him to go at a double rate. On, on, on, he galloped through Poppelsdorf, but without seeing it, like a blind horse that knows its way by instinct,—on, on; but at last he was compelled to halt, not for want of breath, for his lungs seemed locked up in his bosom; nor yet from fatigue, for his feet never felt the hard ground they bounded from; but because a party of students, linked arm in arm, occupied the whole breadth of the road. As soon as they heard footsteps behind



"SINCE THEN I'M DOOMED."



them they stopped, and recognising the little tailor, began to jeer and banter him, and at length proceeded to push and hustle him about rather roughly. For some time he bore this rude treatment with patience, but in the end, even his good-humour gave way, and turned to bitterness. "Ay, young and strong as ye be," thought he, "I know that, my masters, which could stiffen your limbs and still your saucy tongues in a moment." "And why not pronounce the word, then?" said something so like a whisper, that Kraus started, expecting to see the Fiend himself at his elbow. But it was only the evil suggestion of his own mind, which, with some difficulty, he subdued, till the Burschen, tired of the present amusement, let go of their victim, and joining in a jovial chorus, allowed the tormented tailor to resume his race. "St. Remi be with me," murmured the frightened man, "and help me to restrain my tongue! Oh that awful word—how nearly it slipped from me in my rage! I shall do a murder, I know I shall—I shall be cursed and branded like bloody Cain!" and he groaned and smote his forehead as he ran. In this mood he arrived at his own door, where he let himself in with his private key. It was late; his good wife Trudchen had retired to rest, and was in so sound a sleep that he forebore to awaken her. But that very sight, as she lay so still and so calm, only excited the most distressing fancies. "One word," thought he, "three little syllables, would make that sleep eternal!" Shuddering throughout his frame, he undrest and crept into his own

bed, which was beside the other—but, alas! not to rest. He dared not close his eyes, even for a wink. “If I sleep,” thought he, “I shall dream, and as people always dream of what is uppermost in their minds, and moreover, as I am apt to talk in my sleep”—the mere idea of what might follow threw him into such an agony, that no opiate short of a fatal dose could have induced him to slumber for an instant. A miserable night he passed, now looking forward with terror, and then backward with self-reproach. A thousand times he cursed his fatal curiosity, that had brought him to such a pass. “Fool, dolt, idiot, ass, long-eared ass that I was, to listen to what did not concern me, and to turn eaves-dropper to the Devil! I am lost, body and soul! Oh that I had been born deaf and dumb!—Oh that my dear mother, now in heaven,—Oh that my good nurse, now in Munich, had never taught me to speak! Oh that I had died in cutting my first teeth! That detestable word—if I could only get rid of it, but it is ever present, in my mind and in my mind’s eye! in the dark it seemed written on the wall in letters of fire; and now the daylight comes, they have turned into letters of pitch black!” Thus he tossed and tumbled all night in his bed, with suppressed moans, and groans, and sighings, and inward prayers, till it was time to rise. Then he got up, and opened his shop, and afterwards sat down to breakfast; but he could not eat. If he tried to swallow, the accursed word seemed sticking at the bottom of his throat—sometimes it rose to the very tip of his tongue,

and then to taste anything was quite out of the question. Life itself had lost its relish, like food with a diseased palate. Conjugal and parental love, which had been his greatest comforts, were now his uttermost torments. When he looked at his good Trudchen, it was with a shudder; and he dared not play with his own little Peterkin. "If I open my lips to him," thought the father, "my child is dead—in the midst of some nursery nonsense, the WORD will slip out, for it keeps ringing in my ears like a bell." In the mean time, his wife did not fail to notice his altered appearance, but it gave her little concern. The good Trudchen was very fat and very philosophic, which some people call phlegmatic, and she took the most violent troubles rather softly and quietly, as feather-beds receive cannon balls. "Tush," said she, in her own full bosom, "he looks as if he had not rested well, but he will sleep all the better to-night; and as for his appetite, *that* will come-to in time." But the contrast only served to aggravate the sufferings of poor Kraus. To see his wife, the partner of his fortune, the sharer of his heart, his other self, so calm, so cool, so placid, grated on his very soul. There was something even offensive in it, like a fine sunny day to the mourners, when there is a funeral in the house. His first impulse was to seek for sympathy, which generally implies making somebody else as miserable and unhappy as yourself; in fact, he was on the point of beginning the story to his wife, when one of those second thoughts, which are always the best, clapped a seal upon his lips.

“No, no,” he reflected, “tell a woman a secret! why, she’ll blab it to the very first of her leaky gossips that drops in.” In sheer despair, he resolved to bury himself over head and ears in his business, and accordingly hurried into his shop. But do whatever he would, his trouble still haunted him—he dreaded to see a customer walk in. “I am liable,” said he, “as all the world knows, to fits of absence, and if I do not say the awful Word to somebody to his face, I shall perchance write it at the head of his bill.” In the midst of this soliloquy, the little door-bell rang, as the door was thrown violently open, and in stalked the abominable Wenzel!

The devoted tailor turned as pale as marble, his teeth chattered, his knees knocked together till the kneepans clattered like a pair of castanets, whilst his hair again rose erect, like the corn after the wind has passed over it. But for once his fears were mistaken; his unwelcome patron only came to order some new garments. “Heaven help me,” thought the afflicted tradesman, “he is too deep already in my books, and yet if I make the least shadow of an objection, I am a dead man.”

After turning over all the goods in the shop, the Wild Student selected a mulberry-coloured cloth, and then, for the first time, addressed himself to the proprietor. “Harkye, Peter Kraus, they tell me thou art a most notable listener!”

The tailor’s blood ran cold in his veins, and he gasped for breath; beyond doubt his eaves-dropping the night before had been discovered, if not known at the time by

the Evil One himself. He was on the point of dropping on his knees to beg his life, when the next speech reassured him.

"You will please, therefore, to listen most attentively to my instructions."

The trembling Peter breathed again, whilst his customer went into a minute description of the frogs, and lace, and embroidery, with which the new garment was to be most elaborately and expensively trimmed. To all of which poor Kraus answered submissively, "Yes," and "Yes, certainly," in the plaintive tone of a well-whipped child. In the midst of this scene, two more students, inferior only to the first in bad repute, came swaggering into the shop, who, on the matter being referred to them, approved so highly of the mulberry-coloured cloth, that Wenzel at once bespoke the whole piece. "And now, Kraus," said the Wild Student, drawing his victim a little aside, "I have *one word* to say in your ear." At so ominous a speech, the little tailor broke out all over in a cold dew; that "one word," he guessed was his death-warrant; the ground he stood upon seemed opening under his feet like a grave. By a natural instinct he clapped both his hands to his ears; but they were almost as instantly removed by the more vigorous arms of his enemy; he then, as a last resource, set up a sort of bull-like bellowing in order to drown the dreaded sounds, but the noise was as promptly stifled by the thrusting of his own nightcap into his open mouth. "Hist, thou listener," said the

Wild Student, in an angry whisper, "those two gentlemen yonder are my most intimate friends; you will give them credit for whatever they may choose to order, and I, Ferdinand Wenzel, will be answerable for the amount."

This was bad enough, but it might have been worse, and the little tailor was glad to assent, though he was now past speaking, and could only bow and bow again, with the tears in his eyes. Accordingly, his two new customers, thus powerfully recommended, began to select such articles as they thought proper, and gave ample directions for their making up. They then departed, Wenzel the last. "Remember," said he, significantly, and hold up a warning finger, "remember! or else"—"I know, I know," murmured the terrified tailor, who felt as if relieved from an incubus, as the back of the Wild Student disappeared behind the closing door. But his grief soon returned. "I'm lost," he cried, in a doleful voice, "the more I'm patronised, the more I'm undone! They never will, they never can pay me for it all. I'm a bankrupt—I must needs be a bankrupt—I'm a ruined man!" "Who is ruined?" inquired the comfortable Trudchen, just entering in time to catch the last words. "It's me," said the sorrowful tailor. "As how, Peter?" "How? Trudchen!—here has been that dare-devil, Ferdinand Wenzel, and brought two other scape-graces almost as bad as himself; and, besides heaven knows what else, he has ordered the whole piece of mulberry cloth." "He shall as soon

have the mulberry-tree out of the garden," said the quiet Trudchen. "But he must have it," said the husband, with great agitation. "But he shan't," said the wife, quite collected. "I tell thee, Trudchen, he *must*," said the little tailor. "Well, we shall see," said the great tailoress, with the composed tone of a woman who felt sure of her own way.

Here was a new dilemma. Poor Peter Kraus plainly foresaw his own catastrophe; but to be pushed on to it, post haste, by the wife of his bosom, the mother of his sole child, was more than he could bear. "I tell thee, Trudchen, he *must* have it," repeated the doomed man. "You always try," said the phlegmatic Trudchen, "to have the last word." "And if I choose, I could make sure of it," retorted the now angry Peter. "Say the WORD to her at once," said the old whisper, which the affrighted husband no longer doubted was a suggestion from Satan in person. He was cool—nay, cold—in a moment, and not daring to trust himself in his wife's presence, ran up to the little bed-chamber. The fat Trudchen stared a little at this manœuvre, but as she reflected that persons who go up stairs will, some time or other, come down again, she placidly resumed her knitting.

"Wretch! miserable wretch that I am!" sighed the disconsolate tailor, throwing himself on the bed, with his face downwards. "I have been within an ace of murdering my own dear wife, the mother of my precious Peterkin! Oh! St. Mark! St. Remi! what mortal

sin have I committed, to draw upon me such a visitation? Me, too, who could never keep a secret in my life! Then, again, if I take a glass extra of good wine, it is sure to set my tongue running. O what hundreds, thousands, of deaths will lie at my door! I shall be a Monster,—a Vampyre! Oh! I shall run mad—and then my head will wander—and I shall pronounce *it* in my ravings! It is sure to come out! Cursed be the year, and the day, and the hour, and the minute, oh Peter Kraus! that thou wast born!”

“Alas!” (thus he continued) “the misfortune of a strong memory! The harder I try to forget it the more it comes into my mind. If it had only been a long sentence—but a single word, that drops out like a loose tooth before one is aware. Ah! there is no being on my guard!” Having thus lamented, with many tears, by degrees he became more composed, and resolved to refresh his spirits by a walk in the open air. But the tyrannical idea still pursued him with its diabolical suggestions. For instance, he could not help saying to himself as a passenger passed by—“There’s a tall swaggering fellow, but I could strike him stone dead in an instant. One word from me, and that flaunting maiden is a corse.” Moreover, the very demon, Curiosity, that first led him to his guilty knowledge, now began to tempt him to its abuse. “I wonder,” thought he, “if it be true, or only a juggle. Suppose I were to try it,—just one syllable,—on that soldier, or that miller, or on his dog!” But remorse

soon followed. "Woe is me! I must fly the faces of my kind! I must turn hermit,—or live like Roland on a bleak rock, beyond speech with man, woman, or child!" As he said this, he was run against by some one, blind with haste, whom he caught by the arm. It was the maid-servant of his old friend and neighbour, Hermann Liederbach. "Let me go," cried the breathless female, struggling to get free. "I am running to fetch the doctor to my poor master, who has dropped down in a fit, if he is not dead."—"That's very sudden," said Peter, as if musing. "Oh, like a gun!" answered the maiden; "he was quite well and merry only the minute before, talking and laughing with that Wild Student, Ferdinand Wenzel."

Poor Kraus was ready to drop down himself. However, he contrived to get home, where he threw himself on his knees behind the counter, and hid his face amongst the bales of cloth. The horrid work was begun—but where would it end? Nor were his fears in vain. On a sudden his attention was excited by the trampling of numerous feet, and going to the shop-door, he saw a crowd following four men, who carried a dead body on a board. "Hollo! what have you there?" shouted an opposite neighbour from his upper window. "It's poor Stephen Asbeck," answered several voices; "he dropped down dead in the Market-place whilst squabbling with one of the students." Kraus stood rooted to the spot, till the whole procession had passed by. "It's dreadful work," said Mrs. Kraus, just

entering from the back-parlour. "What is?" asked the startled tailor, with all the tremor of a guilty man. "To be cut off so suddenly, in the prime of youth and beauty." "Beauty!" repeated Kraus, with a bewildered look, for in truth neither Liederbach nor Asbeck had any pretence to good looks. "Yes, beauty," replied Mrs. Kraus; "but I forgot that the news came while you were absent. Poor Dorothy has died suddenly—the handsome girl who rejected that good-for-nothing Ferdinand Wenzel." Kraus dropped into a chair as if shot. His fat wife wondered a little at such excessive emotion, but remembering that her husband was very tender-hearted, went quietly on with her knitting.

Poor Peter's brain was spinning round. He who would not willingly hurt a dog, to be privy to, if not accomplice in, three such atrocious and deliberate murders! His first impulse was to discover the whole affair to the Police: but who would believe so extraordinary a story? Where were his witnesses? Wenzel, of course, would confess nothing; and it would be difficult to call the Devil into court. Still his knowledge invested him with a very awful responsibility, and called upon him to put an end to the diabolical system. But how? Perhaps—and he shuddered at the thought—it was his dreadful duty to avert this wholesale assassination by the death of the assassin. As if to sanction the suggestion, even as it passed through the tailor's mind, the detestable Wenzel came into the

shop to add some new item to his instructions. "Have you heard the news?" asked the Wild Student carelessly; "Death is wondrous busy in Bonn." Kraus only answered with a mournful shake of the head. "Poor dear Dorothy!" sighed Mrs. Kraus; "so young, and so beautiful." The Wild Student burst into a sneering laugh—"There will be more yet," said he; "they will keep drop, drop, dropping, like over-ripe plums from the tree!"

So fiendish an announcement was too much for even the milky nature of Peter Kraus. His resolution was taken on the spot. "Wretch! Monster! Were-Wolf!" he said to himself, "thou wert never of woman born. It can be no more sin to slay thee than the savage tiger! Yes,—thou shalt hear the WORD of doom thyself!" But the moment he attempted to utter it, his tongue clave to the roof of his mouth; his throat seemed to collapse; and when he had regained the power of speech, the fatal word, that hitherto had never ceased ringing in his inward ear, had vanished completely from his memory! However, such an oblivion was in itself a blessing, as it removed any temptation to actual guilt; but, alas! no sooner had the Wild Student departed, than back came the hateful syllables, clear and distinct on the tablets of Kraus's mind, like a writing in sympathetic ink.

As the vile Wenzel had predicted, the number of sudden deaths rapidly increased. One after another,

the most respectable of the inhabitants fell down in the street, and were carried home. All Bonn was filled with lamentations and dismay. "It's the plague," said one. "It's the Black Death," cried another. Some advised a consultation of physicians; others proposed a penitential procession to the Kreuzberg.

In the mean time the unfortunate tailor again took refuge in the bed-room, desperately closing his eyes, and stopping his ears, against the melancholy sights and sounds that were constantly occurring in the street. But the mortality had become too frightful for even the apathetic temper of the stout Trudchen, who for once, thrown into a state of violent agitation, felt the necessity of comfort and companionship. Accordingly she sought eagerly for her husband, who sitting, as we have said, with closed eyes and ears, was of course unconscious of her entrance. Besides, he was grieving aloud, and his wife bent over him to catch the words.—"Miserable mortals," he groaned, "miserable frail mortals that we are!—wretched candles,—blown out at a breath! Who would have thought that such a cause could produce such a calamity?—Who could have dreamed it?—to think that such a hearty man as poor Leiderback, or poor Asbeck, could be destroyed by a sound—nay that half a town should perish through simply saying ——" and the unconscious Peter pronounced the fatal WORD. It had scarcely passed his lips when something fell so heavily as to shake the whole house,

and hastily opening his eyes, he beheld the comely Trudchen, the wife of his bosom, the mother of his darling Peterkin, in the last death-quiver at his feet!

The horrified Peter Kraus was stunned—stupified—bewildered! With his eyes fixed on the victim of his fatal curiosity, he sat motionless in his chair. It was the shock of a moral earthquake, that shook his very soul to its foundations. He could neither think nor feel. His brain was burning hot, but his heart seemed turned to solid ice. It was long before he was even sensible of outward impressions; but at last he became aware of a continued tugging at the tail of his coat. A glance sufficed—it was little Peterkin. “He will be the next!” shrieked the frantic father; and tossing his arms aloft, he threw himself down the stairs and rushed out of the house. At the top of his speed, as if pursued by the unrelenting Fiend, he raced through the streets and out of the gates, into the open country, where he kept running to and fro like a mad creature, tormented by the stings of conscience. Over rocks, amongst thickets, through water, he leaped and crashed, and struggled; his flesh was torn and bleeding, but he cared not—he wanted to die. At one time his course lay towards the Eifel, as if to end his misery in that scene of volcanic desolation, so similar to his own; but suddenly turning round, he scoured back to his native town, through the gates, along the streets, and dashing into the church of St. Remi, threw

himself on his knees beside the confessional. The venerable Father Ambrose was in the chair, and with infinite difficulty extracted the horrible story from the distracted man. When it was ended, the priest desired to know the awful word which acted with such tremendous energy. "But, your reverence," sobbed Kraus, with a thrill of natural horror, "it kills those who but hear it pronounced."

"True, my son," replied the aged priest, "but all unholy spells will lose their power within these sacred walls."

"But, your reverence—"

"Peter Kraus!" said the priest, in a loud angry tone, "I insist on it, if you hope for absolution."

"Then if I must—"

"Speak, my son, speak."

"I will."

"Now!"

"Yes!"

"Come."

"Ah!—"

"What is it?"

"Sancta Maria!"

"The word! the word!"

"POTZTAUSEND!" murmured Kraus, in a low tremulous voice, with a shudder throughout his frame, and a terrified look all round him. And lo! the ghostly father was a ghost indeed—the church of St. Remi had

tumbled into fragments, and instead of the holy tapers, a few strange lights were gleaming mysteriously in the distance. "Potztausend!" repeated Peter Kraus, giving himself a shake, and rubbing his eyes, "it's all the fault of the good Ahrbleichart; but I've certainly been sleeping and dreaming on the wrong side of the town-gate!"



TAILS FROM THE GERMAN.