

Reed, Mrs. Keseberg

MRS. KESEBERG. *Nein*. For certain not.

KESEBERG. No doubt, towards the end of February, you remember leaving the Lake.

MRS. KESEBERG. Ja, Mrs. Reed and myself, we went out with the First Relief Party sent from this Fort. In all, eighteen people. I felt bad about leaving you behind, Lewis. A proper wife does not do this.

KESEBERG. And yet you went out. Why?

MRS. KESEBERG. Our little one—the baby—he died two weeks before. We had to think of our daughter Ada. You agreed, Lewis. You wanted us to go.

KESEBERG. Why didn't I go out with you?

MRS. KESEBERG. How could you, when you could not walk? It was not possible.

KESEBERG. Perhaps I was exaggerating my condition in order to remain behind.

MRS. KESEBERG. Madness! The only chance for life was getting out. At the Lake was only death. Only a madman would stay back.

KESEBERG. Thank you, my dear . . . Mr. Reed. (*Keseberg retires. Mrs. Keseberg stiffens at the approach of Reed whom she has reason to detest.*)

REED. Madam. How can you be certain your husband was not able to walk?

MRS. KESEBERG. How? I have eyes. The man never left his bed. He stayed inside with me all the time.

REED. No doubt he *would*, and *did*. However, except for the necessity of having to go out and cut firewood, *everyone* was confined indoors. Because of the fearful cold.

MRS. KESEBERG. That is true, but with Lewis—

REED. Isn't it also true that, with firewood being unusually scarce, the warmest place would be bundled up in bed?

MRS. KESEBERG. That is also true; however—

REED. So you never had a decent opportunity to judge your husband's condition.

MRS. KESEBERG. *Nein*, there was never doubt. Why should he think to stay back?

REED. Why indeed! (*A moment to study Keseberg.*) Mrs. Keseberg, was your husband not angry at certain members of the party—myself and George Donner who were in charge?

MRS. KESEBERG. Angry?

REED. Did he not blame us for all his troubles?

MRS. KESEBERG. He was not like that, not Lewis.

REED. Not the sort of man to nurture thoughts of revenge against those he hated?

MRS. KESEBERG. Never.

REED. And yet, Madam, in the episode between me and a drover named John Schneider, he urged the others to hang me. Was this a sign of his forgiving nature?

KESEBERG. Please! My wife is not on trial—

REED. Alcalde, I am trying to establish this man's extreme hostility.

KESEBERG. On the contrary. Mr. Reed is using this court as a platform to whitewash his own crimes.

REED. Madam, deny your husband was eager to see me lynched!

MRS. KESEBERG. There were others just as eager, Herr Reed.

REED. Then you admit he desired my death.

MRS. KESEBERG. *Mein Gott*, the man is half a cripple. All our belongings, everything we had, is no more. We have become like . . . like . . . the poorest of beggars.

REED. You are alive, Madam, and apparently well enough.

MRS. KESEBERG. You dare speak to me of "alive and well!" After my leaving two children in the snow!

REED. Then you blame *me* for that.

MRS. KESEBERG. Who else but you? You and your unnatural pride. To be frozen like ice in the snow! To have to watch *mein kinder* starve before my eyes with no hope of escape. And all this because of your . . . uncontrollable vanity and conceit. Some talk of God's judgment. Other's blame the snow. That is not so. We suffered only because of your wrong thinking. Back at Fort Bridger, we only took the Hasting's route—that road straight to hell—because you influenced Herr Donner.

REED. It was the nearer way.

MRS. KESEBERG. Nearer, sir, but not safer.

REED. Everyone knew it; we put it to a vote.

MRS. KESEBERG. Even Mrs. Donner was not happy with the decision. The presence of wives and children should make any man cautious. But not you, Herr Reed. Because of your mood of the moment, we had to pay the full price! With precious lives! Because your "nearer way" carried so many innocent ones into early graves!

REED. I meant no harm.

MRS. KESEBERG. There is no comfort in that, sir.

REED. If everything could be done over again, only this time it would cost my life—I would give it gladly.]