

## The Old Mam'selle's Secret.

## CHAPTER VI.—(CONTINUED.)

Hark! What was that hammering outside. The sound echoed harshly through the arched hall, where not one of the throng scarcely ventured to whisper. Felicitas cautiously lifted the green curtain and looked out. Horrible! Her uncle's form had disappeared, the black cover was laid on his kind face, and would always keep him lying stretched in that stiff position. If he even lifted his hand a little it would strike against the hard, thick boards. And the man kept on hammering the cover to make it firm, so the hand inside could never lift it, shutting the still form into the darkness of the narrow box, where no one could breathe, and it must be so terrible to stay alone. The child screamed loudly in her fright.

All eyes were turned in surprise toward the window, but Felicitas saw only the large gray ones, whose glance had already so alarmed her. They looked at her reproachfully; she left the window and hid herself behind the big, dark curtain that divided the room. There she crouched on the floor, gazing timidly at the door, which he would certainly soon enter, and drive her with harsh words away.

From her hiding-place she did not see the bearers lift the coffin on their shoulders, nor how her uncle left his home forever. She did not see the long, black, gloomy procession that followed the dead man, like the last shadow, on his now completed life-pilgrimage. At the corner of the street a breeze lifted and waved the white satin ribbons that hung from the coffin—was it a farewell greeting from the dead to the deserted child a mother's tender love had snatched from the desolate slough of her father's profession, to ignorantly fling upon a dreary inhospitable shore?

## CHAPTER VII.

The murmur of voices in the hall had suddenly died away—perfect silence followed. Felicitas heard the house-door shut; but she did not know that the sound was the closing act of the drama enacted in the hall. Yet she dared not quit her hiding-place, but she sat down in the little cushioned arm-chair her uncle had given her last Christmas-eve, and rested her head on her hands, which were clasped on the table before her. Her heart no longer throbbled so anxiously, but the little bent head ached, as thought after thought flashed swiftly through her brain. She was puzzling over the little old lady whose bouquet was lying on the stone floor, probably trampled underfoot by the heedless crowd. So this was "the old mam'selle," who lived alone in the highest rooms of the back building of the house, a continual source of discord between the cook and Heinrich. Frederica declared that the old mam'selle had a terrible crime on her conscience—she had been the cause of her father's death. This shocking story had filled little Felicitas with fright and horror, but she did not believe it now. The little lady, with her kind face and tearful eyes, kill her own father! Heinrich was undoubtedly right when he persistently shook his head and maintained that there must be a different side to the story.

Years before the old mam'selle had lived in the front rooms. "but"—as the cook repeated with ever-renewed expressions of wrath—"she could not be prevented from profaning the Sabbath afternoons by singing unholy songs and playing merry tunes." In vain had "the mistress" pictured to her the bliss of heaven and the tortures of hell, the abomination was continued till nobody in the household could bear it any longer, and Herr Hellwig finally yielded to his wife's will, and made the old mam'selle go up to the attic rooms just under the roof.

"There she could do no mischief," Frederica always added, and she was undoubtedly right, for not a note of the piano was ever heard in the house.

Her uncle must have been very angry with the old mam'selle, the child fancied, for he had never mentioned her, and yet she was his father's sister and looked so much like him. The thought of this resemblance roused an eager longing in Felicitas' heart; she would have gone up to the rooms under the roof, but she remembered John's stern face and trembled with fear—the old mam'selle had lived for years behind bolts and locks.

At the end of a long, disused passage, close by the stairs leading from the lower stories, was a door. Once, when she and Nathanael were playing there together, the boy had said, softly:

"She lives there." Then, pounding on the door with both fists, he had shouted: "Old witch under the roof, come down!" and dashed off downstairs as fast as he could go.

Oh, how little Felicitas' heart had throbbled with fright! Not for an instant did she doubt that some terrible old woman with a big knife in her hand, must dart out and clutch her by the hair!

Twilight was approaching. The last golden rays of the autumn sun were shining on the cross surmounting the gable of the town-hall opposite, and the tall clock in the room slowly struck five—its strokes had been just as slow and distinct two hours before, when it marked three, the time when its gentle owner, who for years had regularly wound it with loving care, had been borne out of his house.

Hitherto a sort of hush had pervaded the whole mansion; but now the sitting-room door suddenly opened and a firm, heavy step sounded on the floor. Felicitas shrank further into the shadow of the curtain, for the widow was approaching her husband's room. This seemed a strange thing to the child; during Hellwig's lifetime his wife's tall figure had never crossed this threshold. She entered hastily, bolted the door behind her, and stood still a moment in the center of the room, gazing slowly, with an indescribably triumphant expression, around the apartment she had so long avoided.

Over Hellwig's desk hung two finely executed portraits, in oil colors, of a gentleman and lady. The latter, whose haughty features were animated by eyes sparkling with intelligence and mirth, was attired in the ugly costume that was an attempt to revive the dress of the ancient Greeks. The short waist of the gleaming white silk was made still shorter by a red girdle embroidered with gold, the neck and arms, almost too plump for beauty, were scantily covered, and by no means harmonized with the modest bunch of violets worn in the belt. This was Hellwig's mother.

The widow now approached this picture, and for a moment seemed to fairly gloat over it. Then she mounted a chair, took it down from the place where it had hung so many years, and with as little noise as possible cautiously drove a new nail just between the two old ones, on which she hung the portrait of Hellwig's father. He now looked down alone, while the widow left the room with the other picture. Felicitas strained her ears to listen as her footsteps echoed through the hall, mounted the first flight of stairs, then climbed higher and higher—she had probably gone to the attic.

She had not wholly closed the door behind her, and when the sound of her steps had died away Heinrich's face peered timidly through the crack.

"Yes, Frederica!" he called, in smothered, awe-struck tones, "yes, it really was the old mistress's picture."

The cook pushed the door wide open and looked in.

"Heavenly powers! so it was!" she cried, clasping her hands. "Dea, me,

if the proud lady knew it she would turn in her grave and our dead master too. But she really was shockingly dressed—with her bosom so bare—enough to shame any good Christian!"

"Do you think so?" replied Heinrich, with a sly twinkle in his eyes. "I'll tell you something, Frederica!" he added, counting his remarks on his left thumb with the forefinger of his right hand. "Firstly, old Frau Hellwig couldn't bear to have her son marry our mistress, and she will never forget that, secondly, the old lady was bright and lively, fond of a gay time, and, thirdly, she once called our mistress 'a heartless devotee.' What do you say to that?"

While Heinrich was speaking Felicitas came out of her hiding-place. The child instinctively felt that the rough, but kind-hearted old servant, would henceforth be her sole protector in the house. He was very fond of her, and it was principally due to his watchful care that she had hitherto remained in blissful ignorance of her past.

"Ah, little Fay, are you there?" he said, pleasantly, taking her little hand in his hard fingers. "I've been looking everywhere for you. Come down to the servants' room; you won't be allowed to stay here now, poor thing. If the old pictures have to go, why—"

He sighed and shut the door. Frederica had hurried back to the kitchen, for her mistress was heard coming down the stairs.

Felicitas glanced timidly around the hall it was empty. Scattered leaves and flowers strewed the floor where the coffin had stood.

"Where is uncle?" she whispered, as she let Heinrich lead her toward the servants' room.

"Oh, they have carried him away; but you know, child, he is now in heaven—and much happier and better off than he would be here on the earth," replied Heinrich, sorrowfully.

He took his cap from the nail and went away to do some errand in the town.

The servants' room was already dark. After Heinrich had left her Felicitas knelt on the wooden bench under the narrow, grated window and gazed up at the little patch of sky which could be seen above the gable roofs of the houses in the steep street the sky where her uncle was now.

She started in terror as Frederica came in with the kitchen lamp. The old cook set a plate of bread and butter on the table.

"Here is your supper, child; come and eat it," she said.

Felicitas advanced, but without touching the food, took the slate Heinrich had brought from her uncle's room and began to write. Hasty steps passed through the adjoining kitchen, and Nathanael's fair head was thrust through the open door. The little girl trembled, for he was always very disagreeable when they were alone together.

"Aha, there's Miss Fay!" he cried, in the voice Felicitas dreaded. "Tell me, you naughty creature, where have you been hiding all this while?"

"I have been in the green room," she replied, without looking up.

"Well, don't try that again," he said, angrily. "Mamma says you don't belong there now. What are you writing?"

"My exercise for Herr Richter."

"Who—for Herr Richter," he repeated, effacing, with a hasty movement of his hand, everything she had written on the slate. "Do you suppose mamma will be stupid enough to pay for expensive private lessons! That's all over now," he says. "You can go back again to the place you came from, and become what your mother was, and they'll make an end of you so"—he went through the pantomime of shooting and cried, "bang!"

The child gazed at him with dilated eyes. He spoke of her mother—he had

never done that before, but she could not understand what he meant.

"You don't know my mamma!" she said, in a tone of mingled doubt and inquiry; it seemed as though she was fairly holding her breath.

"Oh, I know a great deal more about her than you do!" he answered, and, after a pause, during which he glanced spitefully at her from under his bent brows, added: "I'll warrant you don't even know what your parents were!"

The child shook her head with lovely, artless grace, and her eyes rested on him with a timid, pleading expression—she knew the boy's nature far too well not to be aware that he was going to say something to give her pain.

"They were players!" he shouted, every tone instinct with malice. "People like those we saw at the fair—they performed tricks, turned somersaults, and then went round with a plate and begged."

The slate fell on the floor and was shattered into fragments. Felicitas had started up and rushed wildly past the bewildered boy into the kitchen.

"He lies, oh, surely he lies, Frederica!" she shrieked, in piercing tones, clutching the cook's arm,

"I can't quite say that, but he has exaggerated it," replied the cook, whose hard heart felt a thrill of pity at the sight of the child's terrible excitement. "They did not beg—but they were play-actors."

"And very poor tricks they played, too!" added Nathanael, going up to the hearth and looking sharply into Felicitas's face. She was not crying, and gazed so boldly at him with her bright, glowing eyes that he flew into a rage.

"They did awful things," he continued. "Your mother tempted God, and so she can never get to heaven, mamma says."

"She is not dead!" panted Felicitas. Her little white lips quivered, and she convulsively clutched the folds of the cook's skirt.

"Oh, yes, she died long, long ago, you stupid creature. Papa wouldn't tell you. She was shot by one of the soldier's over there in the town hall, while performing one of her tricks."

The tortured child uttered a piercing shriek. Frederica had nodded assent at the boy's last words, so he had told no lie.

At this moment Heinrich returned from his errand, and Nathanael took to his heels as soon as the old servant's sturdy figure appeared on the threshold. Malicious natures always have an unconquerable fear of a frank, honest face. The cook's conscience also pricked her, and she busied herself about her hearth.

Felicitas no longer cried loudly. Pressing her forehead against her folded arms, which rested on the wall, she struggled to repress her passionate sobs.

The child's piercing shriek had reached Heinrich's ears as he entered the hall, he saw Nathanael vanish behind the door, and instantly knew that some act of cruelty had been done. Without a word he drew the little one back from the wall, and lifted her face—it was distorted with suffering. At the sight of him, Felicitas again burst into loud weeping and gasped amid her sobs:

"They have shot my dear little mother, my good, kind mamma!"

Heinrich's broad, good-natured face grew white with rage—it cost him a struggle to repress an oath.

"Who told you that?" he asked, looking fiercely at Frederica.

The child made no reply, and the cook began to tell the story, while she stirred the fire, basted the meat that was roasting, and did all sorts of needless things to avoid looking Heinrich in the face.

"I think, too, that Nathanael need not have told her to-day," she wound