

The Old Mam'selle's Secret.

CHAPTER VIII.—(CONTINUED.)

"Dear mamma," she whispered, "you can't see me, but I am here beside you! And though God does not care for you—He hasn't given you even one little flower—and no one thinks of you, I love you and will always come to you! I will love nobody else, dear mamma, not even God, who is so harsh and unkind to you."

This was the child's first prayer beside the grave of her outcast mother. A light breeze swept by, soft and cool as the soothing touch of a mother's hand upon the throbbing brow of her fevered child. The asters nodded to the grieving little one, and a faint whisper ran through the dry seed-vessels of the weeds, while above stretched the transparent vault of heaven in unclouded brightness—the eternal, changeless heaven which human faculties convert into a battleground of earthly passions.

When Felicitas returned to the gloomy house on the market-place—the child did not know how long she had been sitting dreaming in the vast, quiet grave-yard—she found the secret door ajar. She slipped in, but stopped in terror in the nearest corner, for the door of her uncle's room stood partly open, and John's voice was heard as he paced with firm, slow steps up and down the apartment.

Spite of the fierce defiance which had animated the child since the day before, her fear of the cold, unmoved voice, and unfeeling gray eyes was still greater. She could not pass the half-open door, her little feet paused as though rooted to the stone floor.

"I think you are perfectly right, mother," John said, stopping; "the troublesome little creature would be much better off if reared in some honest mechanic's household. But this unfinished letter is as binding to me as if it were a legally executed will. My father once said that he would never let the child leave the shelter of his house, unless her own father reclaimed her, and in the words, 'I wish to leave the child intrusted to me in your charge,' he makes me the executor of his wish. It is not fitting for me to find fault with any of my father's acts, but had he only known how I detest the class of people from which this child descended, he would have spared me this guardianship."

"You don't know what you are expecting from me, John," replied the widow, in a tone of extreme annoyance. "For five years I have been forced to tolerate the presence of this outcast, God-forsaken creature—I can bear it no longer."

"Then we have no expedient except an appeal to the father."

"Oh, you can appeal as long as you choose," replied Frau Hellwig, with a short, sneering laugh. "He's thankful to be rid of the expense of her support. Doctor Boehm told me that all he knows is that the man wrote once from Hamburg—never since."

"Yet, as a good Christian, mother, you could not consent to let the child go back where her soul would be forever lost—"

"It is lost now."

"No, mother. Though I won't deny that frivolity must be inherent in her blood, I am a firm believer in the blessing of a good education."

"Then you mean that we are to go on for years paying out our money for this creature who is nothing in the world to us? She is taking French lessons, drawing lessons, and—"

"No, indeed, I have no such intention," John interrupted—for the first time the monotonous voice gained a shade of animation. "I have no intention," he repeated; "I have a horror of these modern ideas concerning the education of women. We shall soon find no women like yourself, of true

Christian spirit, who never overstep the bounds of propriety. No, all that must cease! Bring up the child to understand household duties, fit her for what she must some day become—a servant. I leave the matter entirely in your hands, with an anxiety, mother. With your strong will, your Christian character—"

Here the door was suddenly pushed wide open, and Nathanael, who had evidently grown tired of the conversation, rushed out of the room. Felicitas drew back against the wall; but he saw her and pounced upon the trembling child like a bird of prey.

"Oh, yes, hide, but that will do you no good!" he exclaimed, grasping her slender wrist so roughly, as he dragged her on, that she screamed aloud. "Come straight along with me, and tell mamma the text of the sermon! You can't do it though! You were not on the school benches. I watched for you. And what do you look like? Just see her dress, mamma!"

While speaking he dragged the struggling child to the door.

"Come in," said John, who was standing in the middle of the room, still holding his father's letter in his hand.

Felicitas slowly crossed the threshold, and gazed a moment at the tall, slender figure before her. There was not an atom of dust upon his neat black garments; his linen was dazzlingly white; there was not a hair awry upon his forehead under the hand that constantly stroked it—everything about him was scrupulously neat and orderly. He glanced with an expression of disgust at the hem of the child's dress.

"Where did you get that?" he asked, pointing to the spot that had attracted his eye.

Felicitas glanced down timidly—it certainly was a sorry spectacle. The grass and paths had been wet with dew; when she threw herself down on the grave she had not thought of the conspicuous stains that might be left upon her black dress. She stood in silence, her eyes fixed on the floor.

"Well, no answer? You look like guilt itself. So you were not at church?"

"No," replied the girl, frankly.

"Where were you then?"

She made no answer. She would have been flogged to death rather than utter her mother's name in the presence of these ears.

"I'll tell you, John," replied Nathanael in her stead, "she was out in our garden eating fruit—she's always doing it."

Felicitas flashed an angry glance at him, but did not speak.

"Answer," John ordered, "is Nathanael right?"

"No, he has told a lie, as he always does," replied the child, firmly.

John quietly stretched out his arm and stopped Nathanael, who was about to rush at his accuser.

"Don't touch her, Nathanael," said Frau Hellwig. Hitherto she had been sitting silently at the window in her husband's arm-chair; now she rose. Oh, what a gloomy shadow her tall figure cast upon the room!

"You will believe me, John," she said, addressing her son, "when I assure you that Nathanael never tells falsehoods. He is devout and God-fearing to a degree rarely seen in a child. I have watched and trained him myself, which will be enough for you. This miserable creature must not cause strife between brothers, as she did between their parents. Is it not unpardonable, that, instead of going to church, she should have been wandering about in other places—no matter where."

Her eyes coldly scanned the little figure.

"Where is the new shawl given to you this morning?" she suddenly asked.

Felicitas, startled, raised her hands to her shoulders—alas, it was gone

she had doubtless left it in the grave-yard. She felt that she had been guilty of great carelessness and was deeply ashamed. Her downcast eyes filled with tears, and an entreaty for forgiveness rose to her lips.

"Well, what do you say to this, John?" asked Frau Hellwig, in cutting tones. "I gave her the shawl a few hours ago, and you see by her face it is already lost. I should like to know how much her clothes cost your father yearly. Give her up, I say. She is past amending. You will never uproot what she inherits from a frivolous, wicked mother."

A terrible change instantly took place in Felicitas' whole appearance. A deep scarlet flush suffused her face and throat to the edge of the coarse black woolen frock. Her dark eyes, still glittering with tears of penitence, flashed fire at Frau Hellwig. The timid fear, which for five years had weighed upon her heart and closed her lips, had vanished. Everything which, since the day before, had strained her nerves to the most painful tension, suddenly rushed upon her memory with overpowering strength. She was fairly frantic.

"Do not speak of my poor mother, I will not bear it," she cried, the tones of her voice, usually so soft, becoming almost shrill. "She has done you no harm. My uncle always said that we must not speak evil of the dead, because they can not defend themselves. But you do it, and it is very, very wicked."

"Do you see the little fury, John?" said Frau Hellwig, scornfully. "This is the result of your father's mode of education! This is the 'fairy-like creature,' as he calls her in his letter."

"She is right to defend her mother," said John, in a low tone, with a very grave expression, "but her way of doing it is shocking. How can you speak so improperly to this lady?" he went on, turning to Felicitas, and a faint flush tinged his pale face. "Don't you know that you must starve if she does not give you bread, and that the stones in the street will be your pillow if she turns you from the house?"

"I don't want her bread," gasped the child. She is a wicked, wicked woman! She has terrible eyes. I won't starve here in your house where people tell lies, and I am always afraid of being ill-treated. I would rather go under the black earth to my mother. I'd rather starve—"

She could say no more. John seized her arm, his thin fingers closed on her soft flesh like an iron vise, and shook her violently.

"Come to your senses, you naughty child!" he exclaimed. "Fy, a girl, and so wilful! Besides your tendency to frivolity and unruliness, have you also this ungovernable temper? I see much has been neglected here, mother," he continued, "but under your training all will soon be changed."

Still holding the child by the arm, he led her roughly to the servants' room.

"From this day you are under my control—remember that!" he said, harshly. "Even when I am away I shall know how to punish you severely whenever I hear that you are not perfectly obedient to my mother. For your conduct to-day you shall be kept in the house a long time, especially as you make such bad use of your liberty. You are not to enter the garden at all without my mother's special permission, nor must you go into the street except on your way to and from the parish school, which you will now attend. You will have your meals here in the servants' room and remain here all the time until you learn to behave better. Do you understand me?"

The little girl silently turned away her face and he left the room.

CHAPTER IX.

In the afternoon the Hellwig family drank their coffee in the garden.

Frederica put her flannel-lined calico Sunday cloak and the wadded black silk hood she wore on state occasions, and went first to church and then to see "a cousin." Heinrich and Felicitas were left alone in the big, quiet house. The former had gone privately to the church-yard some time before and brought back the unlucky shawl, which now lay dusted and neatly folded in a drawer.

The worthy fellow had heard and partly seen from the kitchen the incident of the morning, and been sorely tempted to rush in and shake the son of the house with his sturdy fists as John had shaken the fragile form of the rebellious child. Now he sat in the servants' room, whittling away at his cane, and meanwhile whistling very unmusically. He was by no means absorbed in his task, but constantly cast troubled stolen glances at the silent child. That was not like the face of little Felicitas. She sat there like a prisoned bird, but the bird whose heart still throbs with the fierce longing for liberty, and which still remembers, with implacable animosity, the hands that caged it. On her lap lay the "Robinson Crusoe" Heinrich had brought at his own peril from Nathanael's book-case, but she had not looked at it. The lonely man was happy on his island, there were no hateful people there who called his mother frivolous and wicked, the sparkling sunbeams shone on the palm-trees and the green waving grass of the fertile meadows; here the light of heaven came dimly, like a gloomy twilight, through the narrow, grated windows, and nowhere, neither in the narrow street outside nor here in the house, was there a single green leaf to refresh the eye. True, there was an asclepias plant in the sitting-room, the only flower Frau Hellwig valued, but Felicitas could not endure its stiff blossoms which looked as though they were made of china, while the hard rigid leaves hung motionless, unstirred by any breeze. What could be lovelier than the green boughs of the trees and bushes outside the town, awaying lightly as the wind swept through them with a ceaseless rustle and murmur?

Suddenly the child sprang up. From the garret she could get a wide view of the surrounding country; the sun, too, was shining there. She flitted swiftly up the winding staircase like a shadow.

The old house had degenerated from its former estate. Long ago it had been the residence of nobles. There was still something very stately in its aspect, though not to the degree of the soaring towers which seem to leave the whole earth below them and would fain pierce the sky; there was a trace of this aspiration in the turreted bay-windows, and especially in the enormous chimneys, whose size had been a necessity in times when deer were roasted whole in the kitchens of noblemen's houses. The blue blood that had once pulsed in the hearts of its aristocratic owners had long since died, nay, in its last scions, had, like the old house, greatly degenerated.

The front of the house, which faced the market-place, which had been somewhat modernized, but the three huge wings that formed the back buildings still stood untouched, just as they had been left by the architect. There were still long, echoing passages, with crooked walls and sunken floors, where even at high noon a dusky twilight reigned, and one might expect to see some legendary ancestress, in a trailing gray robe, with pallid face and shadowy hands crossed on her breast, glide noiselessly along. Short flights of stairs that creak under the lightest footstep suddenly appeared at the end of a corridor, leading down to some mysterious door securely locked, or out-of-the-way, apparently useless corners with a single window, through whose round, leaden-cased sash a faint light fell on the mouldering floor. The