

## The Old Mam'selle's Secret.

CHAPTER XV.—(CONTINUED.)

The young lawyer's face crimsoned to the roots of the fair locks waving on his brow. For a moment he gazed out of the window down into the marketplace—while talking they had entered the professor's room—then turned with a smile, and answered with a slight touch of sarcasm:

"From what I can judge of that girl's character she will hardly trouble herself about your blessing. I should only need to gain her own consent; and if you expect to frighten me by the words 'juggler's daughter,' you are greatly mistaken, my esteemed professor. Of course, with your views, such an idea would upset your nerves entirely. A player's child, with her warm heart, and the cool blood of the old line of merchant ancestors that flows slowly through your veins—such a marriage would never do. Those people would turn in their graves."

He pointed through the open door into the large room adjoining. There on the wall hung a long row of admirably painted oil-portraits—stately, corpulent figures, with glittering diamonds on their fingers and on their neatly tied cravats. These were the various burgomasters and councillors of commerce who had formerly borne the name of Hellwig.

The professor walked across his room and entered the apartment—the stings of his friend's sarcasm seemed to glide off from him. Folding his arms across his breast, he paced up and down several times under the portraits.

"They led blameless lives," he said, suddenly stopping.

"Did they all maintain this stainless external dignity without secret struggles? I do not believe it. Human nature is contradictory, and rebels most obstinately where it ought to submit. All these sacrifices have become stones in a solid structure, and this edifice is called the 'House of Hellwig.' Have they been demanded and made only to have some base descendant overthrow the whole like a house of cards? Heaven forbid!"

It almost seemed as if these words had decided some mental conflict, for the unusual irritation his friend had noticed with surprise had disappeared when he returned to his own room.

Felicitas had been sitting by the child's bedside about half an hour, when the councillor's widow returned. Her face instantly darkened at the sight of the young girl.

"Why are you here, Caroline?" she asked, sharply, throwing her sunshade upon the sofa and hurriedly drawing off her gloves. "I certainly did not request this service."

"But I did," said the professor sternly, suddenly appearing behind her on the threshold of the open door. "Your child needed watching; she ran out to me, with bare feet, as I came upstairs."

"Impossible! Why, Anna, how could you be so disobedient!"

"Am you really in doubt, Adele, as to the proper person to reprove in this case?" asked the professor, still controlling himself, though there was a tone of indignation in his voice.

"Dear me, I'm at my wits' end with this careless creature Rosa. She had nothing in the world to do except take care of the child, and yet I know my back was hardly turned before she was gaping out of the window or staring into the looking-glass."

"She happens to be standing at the ironing-table, toiling in the sweat of her brow at a dress which you must *à tout prix* put on to-morrow," interrupted the professor, emphasizing every word with cutting scorn.

The young widow started. For an instant her face expressed the most intense confusion, but she quickly recovered herself.

"Oh, how absurd!" she cried, knitting her white brow angrily, "she

entirely misunderstood me—that misfortune often happens."

"Well," he said, "we will let it pass as a misunderstanding. But how could you leave your sick child in the care of a person you have just accused of utter negligence?"

"John, I obeyed the summons of a sacred duty!" she replied, impressively, raising her lovely eyes to heaven.

"Your most sacred duty is your duty as a mother!" he exclaimed, now thoroughly angry. "I did not send you here to attend missionary meetings, but solely for the health of the child."

"Why, John, suppose aunt and papa should hear you. You used to have very different views."

"I admit it, but individual reflection will always lead us to the one fundamental principle of morality, that we should use our whole powers in the sphere where Providence has placed us. If you could count a hundred pagan children saved by your instrumentality, it would not relieve one jot of the reproach that must rest upon you for neglecting your own daughter."

The young mother's face glowed like a peony. But, after a struggle, she succeeded in maintaining her usual gentleness.

"Don't be so harsh to me, John!" she pleaded. "Remember, I am only a weak woman, but I always mean to do what is right. If I have erred, it was principally on account of your dear mother. She wished me to go with her. But it shall not occur again."

She had spoken in the sweetest tones of her musical voice, and now held out her hand to the professor. Strange, the grave man blushed like a girl. Doubtless he was unconscious of the side-glance cast toward the young figure sitting with downcast eyes by the child's bed, as he took the little hand in two fingers and instantly let it fall again. The dove-like eyes, which had rested so beseechingly on his face, flashed, and she turned pale, but calmness was bravely maintained. Taking her child's head between her hands she kissed her feverish forehead.

"I can take charge of Anna now, and thank you most warmly, dear Caroline, for filling my place here," she said, kindly, to Felicitas.

The young girl rose, but the child began to cry bitterly and clasped both little hands tightly around her arm.

The professor felt her pulse.

"She is in a violent fever, I can not allow her to be excited," he said, kindly, though formally, to Felicitas.

"Will you take the trouble to remain until she falls asleep?"

She silently resumed her place, and he went out of the room. At the same time the councillor's widow hurried into her sitting-room, letting the door close behind her somewhat noisily. Felicitas heard her walking rapidly up and down. Suddenly there was a sharp noise, like the tearing of some texture. Anna started up and began to tremble: the noise was repeated several times in quick succession.

"Mamma, Anna will be good. Anna won't behave so again. Don't whip Anna, mamma!" cried the child suddenly.

At this moment Rosa entered. Her blooming face looked pale and startled.

"She is tearing something to bits again. I heard her on the landing," she whispered to Felicitas, with an expression of great contempt. "Lie still, dear," she murmured, soothingly, to the child, "mamma won't hurt you. She isn't coming out now, and will soon be kind again."

A door shut, the councillor's widow had evidently left the room. Rosa went in and soon came back with a bunch of white rags in her hand—the remnants of a cambric handkerchief.

"When she gets into a rage she does not know what she is doing: grumbled the maid. "She tears whatever she happens to have in her hands, and strikes without mercy. Yonder poor little creature knows that well enough."

Felicitas clasped the child in her arms, as if to protect her from her mother's passionate anger; but her anxiety was groundless. The widow's voice was heard on the landing in its usual bell-like clearness, as she talked gayly with the lawyer on his way downstairs, and when, soon after, she entered the bedroom, she looked even more beautiful and winning than ever. The flush evoked by anger still lingered as a delicate tinge of rose upon her cheek, and who would ever have dreamed of attributing the enhanced brilliancy of the eyes in that sweet face to anything save some lofty emotion of a beautiful soul!

CHAPTER XVI.

When Felicitas, at the professor's request, resumed her seat by the bed of the little sufferer, she had not supposed that her position as nurse was to be occupied for many days. But the child became dangerously ill, and would not let either her mother or Rosa come near her. She would permit no one to touch her or give her medicine, except the professor and Felicitas. In her feverish ravings the torn handkerchief played a conspicuous part. The professor listened in astonishment to the child's cries of terror, and his searching questions often called a blush of mingled embarrassment and alarm into his cousin's cheeks. But the latter, supported by Rosa, always asserted that Anna must have had some bad dream.

Felicitas soon became familiar with her duties as nurse, for though her task was at first made more difficult by the necessity of hourly intercourse with the professor, the anxiety for the child's life which they both felt helped her to master the awkwardness of the situation far more quickly than she had expected. It seemed strange to herself to find that she so readily understood him in his professional character. While to others, even to the child's mother, his manner appeared impenetrable, she instantly knew whether he detected an increase of danger or saw ground for hope. Therefore, he rarely needed to utter any word of explanation to make her perceive what was required at the moment. He watched himself on alternate nights, and during the day passed a great deal of time in the sick-room. For hours he sat patiently beside the little bed, laying first one hand and then the other on the child's forehead. The little girl would lie quiet and motionless—there was evidently something peculiarly soothing in his touch.

Felicitas angrily tried to shake off the thoughts that stole over her as, sitting at no great distance from him, she watched him in silence. There were the same hard, irregular lines in the face, the same massive brow, from which the thick hair was brushed smoothly back, the same eyes, the same voice, everything precisely as it had been when he was the terror of her childhood, but there was no trace of the expression of gloomy asceticism which had robbed the face of its youthfulness and made it so repellent. A mild light seemed to irradiate the intellectual forehead, and when she heard him speak in soothing tones to the excited child, she could not help owning that he fully appreciated the sacredness of his calling. He did not stand coldly watching the sufferings of others, did not seek merely to save the body—the terrified soul found a support in him, read sympathy in his eyes, and drew courage and consolation from his voice. He had a rare gift of language. Words and tones were at his command that stirred the young girl's heart like an electric shock. Who at such moments thought of his angular movements, his repellent manner in society. Here he possessed the beauty of goodness—he was a man conscious of great moral power—the over-thinking, tireless mediator between the two determined foes, Life and Death. Yet spite of these softening thoughts which passed

through Felicitas's mind, her final conclusion was always the same: "He can think and feel humanely, can pity the helpless condition of the humblest of his fellow-mortals, therefore the juggler's outlawed child has double cause to abhor him, for to her he has been a pitiless oppressor, a prejudiced, unjust judge."

During their daily intercourse the professor had never again adopted the gentle tone that was so terrible to her, and against which she armed herself with the weapons of defiance and pride. He retained the coldly courteous manner he had assumed since their last conversation, and this was evinced in bearing rather than in words; for, except to ask the most indispensable questions, he rarely addressed her. He had a hard position to fill toward the councillor's widow. At first she had behaved as if she were frantic, and would not consent to have Felicitas fill her place beside the child's sick bed; it required all his determination in order to calm her. Then she could not be kept from constantly putting in at the door the lovely curly head the child so dreaded—especially if her cousin and Felicitas chanced to be alone in the room. She wept and wrung her snowy hands. There is no human face that looks beautiful amid a torrent of tears which spring from real agony, no matter what poets may say about "heroines bewitching 'mid their tears"—but not a line was deepened in the blooming oval of her countenance, not a single muscle twitched convulsively; no disfiguring red blotches marred the transparent complexion, the pearly tears trickled gently down the cheeks. It was as exquisitely perfect weeping as ever artist could imagine in the most beautiful Mater Dolorosa. What a contrast she afforded to the pale, careworn, anxious face of the young girl beside the bed! Every evening regularly she appeared in an elegant wrapper, a delicate lace cap shading the bewitching face, and a religious book in her hand, and said that she was going to watch. The same discussion always took place between her and her cousin. She repeated precisely the same phrases about what she termed the interference with her maternal rights, and went away, gently weeping and complaining, to rise the next morning as fresh as a May rose.

It was the ninth evening of Anna's illness. The child lay in a dull stupor. From time to time an unintelligible murmur escaped her lips. The professor had been sitting a long time beside the little bed with his anxious face hidden by his clasped hands; suddenly he rose and beckoned to Felicitas to come into the next room.

"You watched all last night, and have not allowed yourself a moment's rest either yesterday or to-day, yet I am going to ask a further sacrifice from you," he said. "The result will be determined to-night. I might let my cousin or Rosa stay with the child, for she is unconscious, but I need beside me entire devotion and thoughtfulness. Will you watch again to-night?"

"Yes."

"But you will probably be compelled to undergo hours of anxiety and suspense—do you feel strong enough?"

"Oh, yes. I love the child, and in short I will have strength."

"Have you such firm confidence in the might of your will?"

His voice was already assuming that dreaded tone of gentleness.

"It has never yet deserted me," she replied, her eyes, hitherto so calm, growing cold and repellent.

Night closed in; a sweet, still spring night. The full, bright light of the moon was flooding the sleeping town; it hovered as if on silvery wings into the large room of the merchant's house, touching the old portraits, and breathing a strange life into their still features. The flowers on the carpet bloomed anew in the pallid light, and myriads of silver sparks flashed from