

The Old Mam'selle's Secret.

CHAPTER XIV.

Ere long the graveled paths were enlivened by graceful female figures, clad in white dresses of gauze or muslin, who flitted to and fro like summer clouds. The dark, stiff cypress hedges formed an admirable background for these charming figures; silvery laughter and lively conversation echoed through the air, now and then blended with the resonant tones of a man's voice. The number of invited guests was soon complete, all gathered round the table, and tiny work-baskets were produced.

At a sign from Frau Hellwig, Felicitas approached with the coffee-tray.

"My motto is 'simple and cheap,'" she heard the councillor's widow say, as she came up. In summer I never wear anything that costs more than three thalers."

"But you forget, my dear," replied an elaborately dressed young lady, glancing rather maliciously at the boasted simplicity of the widow's attire, "that you trim this cheap material with quantities of lace which must cost at least three times the price of the dress."

"Pshaw! who will estimate the cost of this airy cloud in prosaic thalers," cried the young lawyer, amused by the spiteful glances the two ladies were exchanging. "One might suppose it would bear the ladies up to heaven, but for—yes, but, for instance, such heavy gold bracelets, which must infallibly drag the wearer down to earth again."

His eyes rested with evident interest on the wrist of the young widow, who sat near him. She involuntarily started, and for a moment a deep flush crimsoned her cheeks and brow.

"Do you know that I have been irresistibly charmed with your bracelet during the last half hour?" he added. "It is such magnificent antique workmanship. But my curiosity is particularly excited by the inscription inside the wreath."

The young widow's face had already regained its usual delicate coloring. Raising her eyes slowly, she quietly unclasped the bracelet and handed it to him.

Felicitas was standing just behind the lawyer and could plainly see the bracelet in his hands. Strangely enough, it was in every minutest particular the precise counterpart of the one lying in the old mam'selle's secret drawer, and which had doubtless played some momentous part in the lonely woman's life. Only this one was much smaller, indeed it was rather tight for the young widow's wrist.

"das ir liebe ist ane kranc,
Die hat got zezammie geben
ut ein wunnelichez leben."

the young man read fluently. "Strange," he cried, "the verso has no beginning. Oh, it is a fragment from the old 'Minnesingers,' a quotation from Ulrich von Lichtenstein's poem 'Constant Love,' the whole runs in this way:

"Wo zwei Lieb einander meinen
Herzlich in rechter Treu
I ud sich beide so vereinen
Dass die Lieb ist immer neu,
Die hat Gott zuzammiegeben,
Auf ein wunneliches Leben."

"Where love dwells with love requited,
In hearts tender, loyal, true,
And these two are so united
That this love is ever new,
To these twain our God hath given
 bliss which maketh earth a heaven."

This bracelet undoubtedly has a faithful companion, closely connected with it by the beginning of the verso," he remarked with eager interest. "Have you its mate, too?"

"No," replied the councillor's widow, bending over her work, while the ornament passed from hand to hand.

"How did you get this very remarkable piece of jewelry, Adele?" asked the professor.

Again a faint flush tinged her cheek. "Papa gave it to me a little while ago," she replied. "Heaven knows how old it may be!"

She took the bracelet, clasped it on her wrist, and addressed a remark to one of the ladies which entirely changed the course of the conversation.

Felicitas had made the round of the table while the attention of the whole party was fixed on the bracelet; the guests had helped themselves without noticing who carried the tray. She was on her way back to the kitchen, still entirely unobserved, when at the entreaty of little Anna, who was playing in the shady walk by the summer house, she stopped a moment, and with her head thrown back and arms uplifted caught the drooping bough of the acacia and tried to break off a small branch for the child. It is difficult for a faultless female figure to assume an attitude better fitted to display its charms than the one which the young girl retained for several minutes. The lawyer hastily seized his eyeglasses—he was rather near sighted—and the dark eyes fixed in evident amazement on the youthful figure under the acacias were in their turn sharply watched by the councillor's widow, though she was apparently engrossed in her embroidery. After Felicitas had entered the summer-house the young man dropped his eyeglasses—he was evidently about to address some question to Frau Hellwig, but the young widow interposed with an enquiry about some accident which had befallen him on one of his journeys, thus cleverly turning his attention to a subject in which he was much interested.

Afterwards she rose noiselessly and went to the summer-house. "Dear Caroline," she said, entering the kitchen, "you need not bring out the coffee—here is a coffee-warmer, I see, that it will do capitally. Fill the pot with hot coffee, and I will carry it to the table and pour it out for the guests myself—it will be pleasanter for our visitors, and to be frank, you look too poverty-stricken in that faded calico. How can you appear before gentlemen in that horrible short skirt? It really is hardly fit to be seen—don't you know it yourself, child?"

The despised gown was the best the young girl owned—her "Sunday dress." It was outgrown and faded, it is true, but it was spotlessly clean and neatly ironed. That she should now be reproached for what she had submitted to in silence and without complaint made her smile bitterly; but she did not answer. Any word of defense would have been superfluous, and, in this case, ridiculous.

When the young widow returned to the table, the conversation she had just attempted to prevent was in full career.

"Remarkably beautiful?" repeated Frau Hellwig with a harsh laugh. "Fie, what can you be thinking of? Remarkable, I admit, but in a way that is not desirable in any young girl. Look at that pale face and disordered hair. That forward manner and those careless movements, the eyes that stare respectable people so boldly in the face, are all inherited from a wretchedly depraved mother. Like seeks like, and the apple doesn't fall far from the tree. I have learned the truth of this: for nine years I have left no means untried to lead this erring soul to the Lord—but the obdurate girl has baffled all my efforts."

"Ah, dear aunt, it will soon be over now," said the councillor's widow soothingly, as she poured out as passed around the coffee. "In a few weeks she will quit your house forever. I, too fear that the good seed has fallen upon stony places—there can be no noble impulses in a soul which has hitherto thanklessly rebelled against the restraints imposed by morality and decorum. But we, who have the good fortune of having descended from pious parents, ought not to judge her too severely—frivolity runs in her blood. If you continue your travels at some future time," she continued, in a jest-

ing tone, turning to the young lawyer, "you may happen to have the opportunity, in some foreign land, of admiring aunt's ex-servant as a performer on the tight rope or in the ring."

"She has no appearance of it!" said the professor, suddenly, in a calm, firm tone. Hitherto he had remained silent; his dissent, which expressed marked disapproval, was therefore doubly striking. Frau Hellwig turned angrily toward her son, and for an instant the young widow's eyes lost the stereotyped gentleness of their expression; but the next moment she shook her curly head, and smiling sweetly, opened her lips, undoubtedly to say something affectionate and charming, but she was interrupted by loud shrieks from Anna. She turned and uttered a scream of terror. The child was running as fast as her feeble strength would permit, directly toward her mother; her right hand clasped tightly in her fright a box of matches, her little dress was blazing. We have said that the mother uttered a cry of horror; her terrified gaze wandered over the light, inflammable material of which her own toilet was composed, all presence of mind deserted her, her face grew deadly pale, and stretching out her arms, to protect herself from her child, she vanished behind the cypress hedge.

The ladies attired in "airy clouds" scattered in every direction, with shrieks of terror, like a flock of frightened doves; Frau Hellwig alone went bravely forward to save the child, and the two gentlemen instantly ran toward it; but they were all too late. Felicitas was ready on the spot to smother the flames—but they were too strong, the thin calico gown caught fire. With hasty resolution she clasped the child in her arms, darted across the grass, up the side of the dam, and plunged into the rushing stream.

The danger and rescue had been comprised within a very few moments; before the gentlemen had even guessed the young girl's intention, as she rushed past them, the fire was extinguished.

They reached the dam just as Felicitas recovered her footing, and holding the dripping child on her right arm, was seizing with her left the bough of a hazel bush to support herself against the rush of water, which at this spot was very strong. The widow appeared on the dam at the same time with the gentlemen.

"My child, save my child!" she cried, in despairing tones. She really seemed on the point of dashing into the water.

"Don't get your shoes damp, Adele; you might take cold," said the professor, with cutting sarcasm, as he swiftly descended the side of the dam, and held out both hands to Felicitas; but he let them fall again, for the young girl's calm face suddenly seemed transformed, a deep line appeared between her eyebrows, and the deadly cold, hostile glance he already knew, met his gaze. Averting her face, she gave little Anna to him, and then accepting, with a faint smile of acknowledgement, the lawyer's offered hand sprung out on the dam.

The professor carried the child to the summer-house, where, with the help of the bemoaning mother, he undressed it and examined it to discover its probable injuries; but, strangely enough, it had escaped almost unharmed; the only burn was on the left hand, where, as the little girl now explained, amid her fears, the trouble had originated. While her mother was in the kitchen the child had taken the box of matches unobserved; in lighting one in the garden the flame had caught a rag tied over a little cut on her thumb, she had tried to wipe off the fire on the skirt of her dress, and thus caused the accident.

The frightened ladies now returned. Sympathy and congratulations for the mother and the rescued child flowed fluently from all the pretty lips, and

the "poor angel" was loaded with caresses.

"But, my dear Caroline," said the widow, in a tone of gentle reproof, to the young girl, who stood near her, anxiously awaiting the result of the examination, "could you not have watched Anna, while she was playing in the garden?"

This reproof was too unjust.

"You had forbidden me to leave the house only a few moments before," replied Felicitas coldly, looking intently at the lady, while an indignant flush crimsoned her cheek.

"Indeed—for what reason, Adele?" asked Frau Hellwig, in surprise.

"Good heavens, aunt!" replied the widow, without any sign of embarrassment, "you can easily understand, if you look at that hair. I wanted to spare her and ourselves the impression such carelessness must produce."

Felicitas hastily raised her hands to her head; she was conscious that she had arranged her hair with the utmost care, but the comb, which would never stick firmly in the thick, rebellious locks, had slipped out—it was probably lying at the bottom of the brook. The lovely, loosened tresses, still sprinkled here and there with pearly drops of water, fell like a halo around her shoulders.

"Is this all the gratitude you express to the person who has borne your child unharmed through fire and water?" asked the young lawyer, sharply. Until now his eyes had rested intently on Felicitas.

"How can you be so unjust to me!" cried the young widow, deeply offended. "Of course a man can never understand a mother's feelings. Against her will, her heart at first stirs her with anger toward any one whose care might have averted danger from a beloved child, though she gratefully acknowledges that the final rescue atones for previous neglect. My dear Caroline"—she turned to the young girl—"I can never repay what you have done for me to-day. If I could only show you my gratitude at once." Then, as if yielding to some sudden impulse, she hastily unclasped her bracelet, and held it out to Felicitas. "Take it—it is of great value to me, but I would gladly sacrifice the dearest thing I possess for the sake of my little Anna's safety."

Felicitas, deeply wounded, pushed back the hand that sought to clasp the bracelet on her arm.

"I thank you," she replied, with the haughty lifting of the head which devout humility regarded as so horribly out of place in the player's child, "I shall never allow myself to be paid for doing my duty to a fellow-creature, far less am I willing to accept any sacrifice. You say yourself that I have merely atoned for neglect, so you can not be under the slightest obligation to me, madame."

Frau Hellwig had already taken the bracelet from the councillor's widow.

"You are out of your senses, Adele!" she said, angrily, without noticing Felicitas' proud reply. "What could the girl do with a thing like this? Give her a good, serviceable gingham dress, that will be quite enough."

When she paused the young lawyer left the room, took his hat, and went up to the open window, where Felicitas was standing.

"I think we are all treating you very cruelly," he said. "First we wound you by offering you gold, and then let you stand there in your wet clothes. I will hurry back to the town and send out everything needful for you and the little incendiary."

He bowed and went away.

"Ho is a fool!" said Frau Hellwig, angrily, to the ladies, who were watching his departure with ill-concealed annoyance and regret.

The professor, absorbed in his attention to the child, had not uttered a word during the preceding conversation, but no one near him could have