

The Old Mam'selle's Secret.

CHAPTER X.—(CONTINUED.)

"Surely, you won't allow this matter to vex you, aunt?" she said, in a sweet caressing voice, when the mechanic had left the room. "My husband never approved of these progressive workmen, and their clubs were an abomination to him. Oh, there is Caroline!"

She motioned toward the door of the kitchen, through which a young girl had passed noiselessly some time before the carpenter left the room. Whoever had seen the juggler's fair young wife, as she stood in front of the soldiers' muskets fourteen years ago, would have involuntarily started at the striking resemblance which made the girl seem like an apparition risen from the dead. The graceful figure was the same, though perhaps a little slighter, and clad in coarse, dark material, while the hapless woman had been surrounded by the glittering display of theatrical splendor. There was the same faultless outline of the head, the low white brow, and the almost imperceptible droop at the corners of the mouth, which lent the face a bewitching expression of melancholy. This expression had been heightened, in the unfortunate wife, by the tearful glance of her dark-gray eyes; but as the young girl at this moment raised her lids, they disclosed sparkling eyes of dark brown. These eyes revealed a nature which would not submit, would not be subdued to mere passive endurance; there was strength and defiance in their glance—Polish blood flowed in her veins, stray drops from the ardent, noble stream which ever rises anew to vain struggles against superior power.

We now know that the young girl standing at the door is Felicitas, though she had been forced to answer to the simple name of Caroline. Frau Hellwig, at the very beginning of her rule, had discarded the "theatrical name" with the rest of the "theatrical rubbish" in the lumber-room.

Felicitas went up to the mistress of the house and laid an exquisitely embroidered cambric handkerchief on her work-table. The councillor's widow hurriedly seized it.

"Is this to be sold for the aid of the mission, aunt?" she asked, unfolding it and examining the embroidery.

"Why, of course," replied Frau Hellwig. "Caroline worked it for that object—she has dawdled over it long enough. I think it ought to bring three thalers."

"Perhaps so," said the councillor's widow, shrugging her shoulders. "Where did you get the design for the corners, dear child?"

A faint flush mounted to Felicitas' face.

"I drew it myself," she replied, in a low tone.

The young widow looked up quickly. For a moment her blue eyes seemed to sparkle with a green light.

"Drew it herself?" she repeated, slowly. "Don't be vexed with me, child, but with my best efforts I can't understand such boldness. How could you attempt anything of the sort without the requisite knowledge? This is real cambric, and must have cost aunt at least a thaler, and now it is spoiled by the awkward pattern."

Frau Hellwig looked up angrily.

"Oh, don't be vexed with Caroline, dear aunt; she undoubtedly meant well," pleaded the young widow's sweet voice. "Perhaps the difficulty may be remedied. See, dear child, I have never studied drawing thoroughly—a pencil in a woman's hand does not please me—but I have a very, very keen eye for any defect of outline. Good heavens! What a monstrous leaf that is!"

She pointed to a long leaf, whose tip was gracefully curved, standing forth in strong relief from the transparent

foundation. Felicitas made no reply, but, compressing her delicate lips, gazed fixedly into the face of her censor. The councillor's widow hastily turned away and covered her eyes with her hand.

"Oh, my dear child, that piercing glance again!" she said, complainingly. "It really is not proper for a young girl in your situation to stare at other people so defiantly. Remember what your true friend, our good Secretary Wellner, always says: 'Sweet humility, dear Caroline.' And there is that scornful curl of the lip again—it is enough to vex anybody. Do you really mean to play a romantic part and obstinately reject the worthy man's proposal because—you do not love him? Absurd! But my cousin John will have something to say about it!"

How thoroughly the young girl must have trained herself to self-control! At the widow's last words she started, and the hot, rebellious blood mounted to her forehead—her head, suddenly thrown proudly back, for an instant showed a face almost demoniac in its expression of hate and scorn. But she replied coldly and calmly, "I shall be read" to listen."

"How often must I beg you, Adele, not to allude to that annoying affair!" said Frau Hellwig, angrily. "Do you expect, in a few weeks, to bend this obstinate creature, this stick of wood—after I have tried nine years in vain? As soon as John comes home, the whole matter will be over, to my great delight. Now go and get me my bonnet and cloak," she said to Felicitas, "I hope this piece of botch-work," tossing the handkerchief scornfully aside, "will be the last you have to spoil in my service."

Felicitas silently left the room. Soon afterward Frau Hellwig and her guest walked across the market-place. The beautiful widow led her sick child tenderly by the hand. Many faces watched her from their windows; the lovely woman bestowed a gentle, artless smile on all. Rosa, her maid, and old Frederica, followed with baskets. They were to have tea in the garden outside the town, and wreaths and garlands were to be made.

The young professor was expected to return home the next day, after his nine years' absence, and though Frau Hellwig grumbled over the "folly," the councillor's widow insisted upon decorating the young man's room for his arrival.

CHAPTER XI.

Heinrich shut the street door, and Felicitas ran upstairs. How dear and familiar to the young girl was the narrow corridor above, with its close, musty atmosphere, down which she now hurried! Then came a quiet landing; a flight of rough, worm-eaten stairs led upward from the mysterious gloom below to an ancient door, covered with stiffly painted tulips and brick-red roses, dimly lighted by the faint rays streaming through bottle-green glass. Felicitas took a key from her pocket and noiselessly opened the door, beyond which appeared a narrow, dark flight of steps leading to the rooms under the roof.

The young girl had never been obliged to repeat her break-neck expedition over the house-tops. From the time of her appearance admittance to mam'selle's hermitage had never been denied. During the first year her visits had been limited to Sundays, and then she had always gone up with Heinrich. But after her confirmation, the old mam'selle had given her a key to the painted door, and after that she had taken advantage of every leisure moment to slip up there. So she led a two-fold life. It was not only in external things that she passed from the depths to the heights, from the dim twilight below to the bright sunshine above—her soul experienced the same transition, and gradually became so strong that all the shadows, all the trials of the lower world were left

behind as soon as she ascended the dark and narrow stairs. Down stairs she ironed and cooked, using her so-called "leisure" in embroidery, whose price was devoted, as we have seen, to charitable objects; and reading, except in her Bible and prayer-book, was strictly prohibited. But, in the rooms under the roof, all the marvels of the human intellect lay wide open before her. She had an eager thirst for knowledge, and the learning possessed by the mysterious hermit was like an inexhaustible fountain, a well-out diamond, emitting sparks of light in every direction it was turned. No one in the household, except Heinrich, knew of this intercourse—the least suspicion of it on Frau Hellwig's part would have given it its death-blow. Still, the old mam'selle had always charged the child to tell the truth if she should ever be questioned on the subject. But this never happened; Heinrich was always on the watch, and kept both eyes and ears open.

The dark stair-case was climbed. Felicitas paused at a door to listen, then pushed a little panel aside, and looked in smiling. There was a perfect uproar of sounds within—a strange melody of singing, chirping and screaming. In the middle of the room were two young fir-trees, along the walls grew perfect groves of plants, as fresh and green as any in the garden, and on their boughs perched flocks of merry birds. This was the only life which mam'selle could surround herself in her solitude. True, the musical little throat always poured forth the same melodies, but on the other hand there was no fear of that terrible change of human voices, which to day cry "Hosanna!" to-morrow "Crucify him!"

Felicitas closed the panel, and opened another door. The reader has already had one glimpse of this ivy-grown apartment, and knows the collection of grave busts ranged along the walls, but is not aware how closely they are connected with the big books bound in red morocco, lying in yonder antique cabinet with the glass doors. A mighty flood poured forth from those grave brows—there is no solitude, no desolation, for those who can unchain it. The busts and the works of the great masters of melody of various times shared the old mam'selle's retreat, and as the ivy wound its tendrils impartially around all the busts, the lonely pianist revealed sometimes in the old Italian, sometimes in the German music. But the antique cabinet, with its glass doors, contained treasures which would have thrown an autograph-collector into transports of delight. Manuscripts and letters of these great composers, most of them of rare value, were portfolios behind these doors. The collection had been made many years before, when, as old mam'selle said, smiling, her blood flowed swiftly through her veins, and her youthful energy supported her wishes—many a yellow sheet had been gained by much perseverance and hard sacrifices.

Felicitas found the old lady in a room beyond her bedroom. She was sitting on a stool before the open cupboard, and around her, on chairs and on the floor, lay rolls of white linen, flannel, and a quantity of the little articles a human being requires immediately after it has uttered its first cry in this world. As the young girl entered, she turned her head—her delicate features had perceptibly altered, and though they were now bright with pleasure, the traces of declining health could not escape unnoticed.

"It is fortunate you have come, my dear Fay!" she cried. "The stork may visit the carpenter Thienemann's house at any moment—and his wife has not even the smallest article of clothing for the poor baby. Our stock is still tolerably ample, and we can make up quite a good bundle, this is all that is wanted"—she held out a pink calico cap in one hand, and laid

some narrow white lace against it. "Could you sew this on at once, Fay?" she added, "the things must be ready this evening."

"Oh, Aunt Cordula," said Felicitas, taking up her needle and thread, "this isn't all these poor people need! I know that Master Thienemann wants money, too; twenty-five thalers."

The old mam'selle reflected.

"It is almost too large a sum for my present finances," she said. "Still, he must have it."

She rose slowly. Felicitas gave her her arm, and helped her to the music-room.

"Aunt," she said, suddenly stopping, "do you recollect that a little while ago, Frau Thienemann refused to do that washing for you, that she might not offend Frau Hellwig?"

"I believe you want to lead your old aunt astray?" cried the old mam'selle, half angrily, but there was a look of amusement in her eyes, and she lightly tapped the girl's cheek with her finger. Both laughed, and went to the cabinet with glass doors.

This clumsy, old-fashioned piece of furniture had its secrets, too. Aunt Cordula pressed an innocent looking ornament, and instantly a little door in one of the sides flew open. The space revealed was the old lady's bank, and in former days had seemed to Felicitas a perfect treasure-house, for she was rarely permitted a timid glance at the valuables it contained. On the narrow shelves lay several rolls of gold, some silver-plate, and articles of jewelry.

While the old lady opened one of the rolls of gold and counted the thalers carefully, Felicitas seized a little box in one of the darkest corners and eagerly opened it. On the bed of cotton-wool inside lay a gold bracelet; no precious stones adorned it, but it weighed heavily in the hand, and must have been made of massive gold. The most striking thing about it, however, was its size—it would surely have slipped over any woman's hand, and seemed to have been intended for the muscular wrist of a powerful man. It was considerably wider in the middle, and here the graver's tool had carved marvellously well a wreath of roses and foliage, beautifully executed, around a medalion, on which were the following lines:

"Swa zwei liep ein ander meinet,
Herzlichen ans wanc
Und sich beidul so vereinet."

The young girl turned the bracelet in every direction, looking for the rest of the verse; for, though not very learned in ancient German, she easily translated the last line into:

"And where both are so united"—but there was no end.

"Don't you know the rest, aunt?" she asked, still scanning the ornament.

The old mam'selle, keeping her finger upon the thaler she had just laid down, looked up from her counting.

"Oh, child! what have you there?" she exclaimed, hurriedly. Indignation, terror, and despair were all blended in her voice. She hastily seized the bracelet, replaced it in the box with trembling fingers, and closed the cover. A faint flush suddenly glowed on her cheek, and her frowning brows gave her expression a gloomy earnestness which the young girl had never seen before. Nay, it seemed as though the present had completely vanished under a flood of memories, and the old lady was no longer aware of Felicitas' presence, for after thrusting the box into its corner with feverish haste, she seized another one covered with gray paper that stood beside it, and passed her right hand caressingly over its worn corners. Her face softened, and pressing it to her bosom, she murmured:

"It must die before me, yet I can not see it perish."

Felicitas threw her arms around the fragile little figure, which seemed at this moment so feeble and helpless. It was the first time, during the nine years of their acquaintance, that she had ever seen her aunt lose her self-command. Tender and delicate in ap-