

The Old Mam'selle's Secret.

CHAPTER XX. (CONTINUED)

He grasped the bough of an apple tree, pulled it down and examined with much interest the growing fruit. The branch swung back again, and he pursued his way. Now he was coming straight toward Felicitas. Stooping, he hastily picked something at the edge of the grass.

"See, Felicitas, it is a four-leaved clover," he said, without looking up.

The words were uttered as quietly and easily as though his intercourse with her had never been interrupted or shadowed, as though it were a matter of course that he should find her sitting there under the chestnut-tree; yet there was, at the same time, something in his manner which bound her by a spell to the spot.

"People say that the four-leaved clover brings good fortune to its finder," he continued, coming quickly toward her across the grass. "I will see how much of the proverb is pure superstition."

He was standing before her. There was a certain tenseness in his bearing it seemed instinct with the whole force of his will. The clover leaf fell—he stretched both hands toward Felicitas.

"Good evening!"

The voice that uttered these two commonplace words was tremulous with feeling. Ah, he should have adopted that tone nine years ago to the child who was longing with all the ardor of her passionate little heart for love and sympathy—to the girl whom he had so long ill-treated the familiar greeting, thrilling with the joy of return, was absolutely incomprehensible. Yet she raised her hand, she, the pariah who had declared that she would reject his help even though it were offered to save her from death—urged by some incomprehensible power—for one moment laid her right hand in his. It was a sort of marvel, and so he seemed to consider it; a single unguarded movement might frighten it away forever. With all the self-command he had won in the practice of his profession, he adopted a different tone.

"Has Anna given you much trouble?" he asked, sympathizingly.

"On the contrary, the child's helplessness touches me—I am fond of taking care of her."

"But you look paler than usual, and the sorrowful lines around your lips seem to me more distinct than ever. You said just now that the child's helplessness touched you—others are dependent too, Felicitas. I will show you that it is so. I suppose you have not given a single thought to those who left the little town of X—to seek new strength for mind and body in the bracing air of the forest."

"I had neither time nor opportunity to do so," she replied, blushing deeply.

"I suppose so. But I was more kind. I thought of you. You shall hear when and where. I saw a noble young fir tree growing alone upon a rocky cliff—it seemed as if it had been wounded and hurt in the forest at its feet and had taken refuge on the lonely height. There it stood, firm and gloomy, and my imagination lent it the contours of a human face with a familiar expression of haughty disdain. A thunder-storm came the rain lashed its branches, and the wind pitilessly shook them, but after each assault it reared itself again, and stood more steadfast than before."

Felicitas raised her eyes with a glance of mingled shyness and defiance. He had come back greatly altered. This man with the cold steel-grey eyes, ex-devotee and ascetic, thorough conservative, whose every spark of poetic feeling must have been stifled by his adherence to line and rule, was telling her, in his deep voice, hitherto devoted solely to the service of science, a fairy-

tale, invented by himself, whose meaning she could not misunderstand.

"And just think," he continued, "there I stood in the valley below, while my companions rebuked the unpractical professor for allowing himself to be drenched to the skin instead of seeking shelter. They did not know that the sober, dull physician was gazing at a vision neither rain nor tempest could banish. He saw a bold traveler leave the wood below, climb the rocks, and throw his arms around the fir, saying, 'You are mine!' And what happened then?"

"I know," the girl interrupted, in a low, angry tone; "the lonely tree remained loyal to itself and used its weapons."

"Even when I saw that he longed to clasp it close to his heart, Felicitas? When it perceived that it could rest on his heart sheltered from every storm, that he would guard it tenderly, like the very apple of his eye, all his life?"

The narrator had evidently become passionately interested in the fate of these two visionary creatures, for he spoke with quivering lips, his voice vibrating with the tones that had so touched Felicitas's heart beside the child's sick-bed—but they had no power now.

"The lonely fir must have had sufficient experience to know that he was merely telling it fairy-tales," she answered, harshly. "You say yourself that it had defied the assaults of the storm—it had grown strong and needed no support."

Felicitas had not failed to notice how the color had slowly faded from her companion's face—for a few seconds he was ashy pale. He seemed about to turn and leave her, when steps were heard approaching, and he stood still beside Felicitas, quietly awaiting his mother, who, leaning on the widow's arm, was approaching between the hedges.

"Well, John, do you suppose it is agreeable to me to have you stand there, keeping Caroline from her work and making us wait an endless time for our supper? Or do you imagine I am fond of eating omelets as tough as leather?"

The young widow dropped her aunt's arm and crossed the lawn. She was by no means as pretty as usual; her fair curls hung tangled in wild confusion on her cheeks, whose flush was too deep for beauty, and her eyes sparkled with a baleful light.

"I haven't been able to thank you for taking care of little Anna during my absence, Caroline," she said. The words intended to sound pleasantly, but the gentle accents were sharper and higher than usual, the tone was almost shrill. "But here you stand like a hermit under this lonely chestnut-tree—how was anybody to find you? Have you often played the role of an interesting recluse? That would make it easier for me to understand why I discover that Anna has been so shamefully neglected. I have just been giving Rosa a good scolding about it; her hair hasn't had the least care; her skin is so tanned that she looks like a little Hottentot, and I am afraid that she has been overfed."

"Have you no more reproaches for her nurse, Adele? Think!" said the professor, in a tone of cutting contempt. "Perhaps it is her fault that your child has scrofula, possibly she is to blame for the numerous showers in the Thuringian forests that have spoiled your temper, who knows—" he stopped and turned scornfully away.

"Yes, you had better not say it, John," cried the young widow, struggling with her tears. "I am almost inclined to believe that you don't care what you say to me. I did not mean to offend you, Caroline," she continued, turning to Felicitas, "and that you may see that I have neither withdrawn my confidence nor feel the least resentment, I beg you to take care of Anna

to-night. I am tired out by my journey."

"By no means!" said the professor, sternly. "The time for these perpetual sacrifices is over. You understand how to make other people useful admirably well, Adele; henceforth, you must take charge of your child yourself."

"Well, I am glad of it!" cried Frau Hellwig. "Now the girl can weed the beds thoroughly to night. I can't ask Heinrich and Frederica to do it, they are growing too old."

A deep flush crimsoned the professor's face. Difficult as it usually was to read the expression of his features, they now clearly revealed shame and embarrassment. Perhaps he had never before fully realized the position into which he had himself forced this gifted young creature. Felicitas instantly left her place under the chestnut-tree; she knew that these few words from Frau Hellwig were a command which must be at once obeyed, if she did not desire to hear a torrent of sharp reproaches. But the professor stepped in front of her.

"I think I have a word to say here as guardian," he remarked, with apparent calmness, "and as such I do not wish you to perform work of this kind."

"Aha—perhaps you would like to put her in a glass case!" cried his mother, planting her huge foot on the grass and advancing with more speed than usual. "She has been brought up precisely as you directed. Shall I show you your letters in which you repeated over and over again, till I was fairly tired of it, that she must be trained to work and could not be kept under too rigid discipline?"

"I have no idea of denying a single iota of what has been done by my express desire," replied the professor, in a dull but steady tone, "nor can I repent a course that proceeded from an honest conviction and the sincere desire to do what was best—but I shall never be guilty of the weakness of obstinately persisting in an error for the sake of consistency, and therefore I shall now state that my opinions have changed, and so I must act differently."

Adele stooped as she heard the last words and, plucking a clover blossom which the scythes had spared, tore it to bits. Frau Hellwig laughed scornfully.

"Don't be ridiculous, John," she said, with icy contempt. "A man of your age cannot alter his opinions so suddenly; they must be firm and strong or his whole life will be mere botchwork. Besides, you did not act alone; I took my part in the matter, and I think my whole life should prove that, by God's blessing, I have always done right. I should be very sorry if the Hellwig weakness were now to show itself in your character, for—I tell you plainly—our lives would be apart. So long as the girl stays in my house she will be my servant, and shall not spend one idle moment; that settles it. After she leaves me she may be utterly useless—for aught I care, fold her arms in her lap and play the great lady."

"That she never will do," replied Felicitas, smiling furtively, as she glanced at her hands, beautifully shaped, but brown and hardened by toil. "Labor is one of the conditions of her life. Will you be kind enough to tell me which beds are to be weeded, that I may begin?"

The professor, who had maintained his usual calm demeanor under his mother's bitter words, suddenly turned and looked angrily at Felicitas.

"I forbid you to do it," he said, in a stern, resolute tone, while his brows contracted in a heavy frown. "If my authority as guardian has no power to subdue your obstinate resolution, I will appeal, as your physician, to your reason. You have overexerted yourself in nursing little Anna. Your whole appear-

ance proves it. In a short time you will leave my mother's house—it is our duty to see that you at least enter upon your new duties in good health."

"That is a reason which should be considered," said Frau Hellwig. To her ears, which had hitherto waited in vain to hear her son reproach Felicitas, the words, "obstinate resolution," were evidently music. "For aught I care she can go back to the house now," she added, "though I really don't see how that little nursing could have done her any harm. She is young, and has always had plenty to eat. Other girls in her position have to work night and day, John, and yet what red cheeks they have!"

She took the young widow's arm and went back across the lawn, expecting her son to follow—Adele, evidently from resentment and anger, avoided looking back at him. At first he seemed to intend to accompany them, but after walking a few steps turned back, and while the last fold of the luckless pale-blue dress was vanishing behind the hedge, he came slowly toward the tree, and stood for a few seconds in silence beside Felicitas, who was tying the strings of her straw hat under her chin. Suddenly he stooped and looked under the broad brim, which entirely concealed the young girl's eyes and brow. His face still betrayed irritation, but his glance softened as soon as he met her eyes.

"Do you not feel that you have wounded me very deeply to-day?" he asked, shaking his head, in a tone as gentle as though he were speaking to a child.

She was silent.

"Felicitas, it is impossible for me to believe that you are one of those women who find genuine enjoyment in hearing a man's lips plead for pardon," he said, very earnestly, yet not without an accent of reproof in his tone.

She started, and her fair face, so virginal in its purity, flushed to her very brow.

"Such petitions, in my eyes, must always bring pain to the offended party," she answered, after a pause, in a tone far more gentle than the one in which she was accustomed to address him. "But I would not, on any account, listen to them from those in whom, according to the arrangements of society, a special dignity is vested. Children should ask their parents' forgiveness, but I can not imagine the case reversed. Nor can I—" she paused, while the faint flush again tinged her face.

"Nor can you desire to see a man humble himself before you Felicitas. Is that what you were going to say?" he interrupted, quickly completing her unfinished sentence, his voice thrilling with joy. "But such noble views must be consistently carried out," he continued, after a moment's silence. "And now be really kind, and reflect whether it is not a woman's duty to hold out a helping hand to a man who desires to repair an error! Stop, I want no answer now. I see by your eyes that it would not be what I wish. I will wait patiently—perhaps a time may come when the angry fir tree on the height will not use its weapons."

He went away. Her eyes rested on the ground where lay the four-leaved clover which had fallen from his hands, and which he had gathered as a symbol of good fortune. It was lying on the closely cut lawn with its four little leaves delicately spread out, as though it had been painted. She would not pick it up—she had nothing to do with his happiness—but she made a wide circuit around the tiny green prophot—she would not actually crush it.

CHAPTER XXI.

After a succession of beautiful days, filled with sunshine and spring breezes, a leaden sky overhung the little town of X—. The clouds seemed actually to rest on the summit of the tall tower, whose round white shaft, surmounted by a glittering green top, rose