

The Old Mam'selle's Secret.

CHAPTER XVIII.—(CONTINUED.)

"What do you want here, you insolent creature!" she asked, in loud, harsh tones, raising her large hand and pointing imperiously toward the door.

Felicitas made no reply, but the pause in the monotonous reading seemed to produce some impression on the dying woman. She tried to fix her wandering eyes—they rested on Felicitas. A ray of joyful recognition flashed into them; her lips moved at first vainly, there was an evident effort to speak, and the strong soul conquered, forcing the half-dead mechanism of the body to obey its will. "Bring a lawyer!" fell in faltering but distinct accents from her lips.

The girl instantly left the room, there was not a moment to lose. She darted along the corridor, but just as she was passing the door of the bird-room it was thrown wider open, and she felt herself seized from behind by strong hands and hurled violently into the middle of the room, while the door was closed and locked. A terrible uproar followed, the frightened birds flew hither and thither with a din of cries fairly bewildering to the senses. Felicitas had fallen forward, dragging down with her one of the fir trees that stood in the middle of the apartment. What had happened? She rose and pushed back the hair that had fallen over her face. She had seen no one, heard no sound, yet some one had evidently stood near and seized her with demoniac power, just at the moment she was hurrying to fulfil the last wish of a dying woman, and when every minute's delay burdened her soul with a terrible weight of responsibility.

She rushed to the door, but it was firmly locked; her knocking and shaking was drowned by the frightful clamor of the birds. The excited little creatures flew over her head, dashed frantically against the walls, and hardly grew quiet when the young girl in despair at last let her arms fall by her sides. Who would open the door? Surely not the hands which had just thrust her in. She knew her iron grip only too well; they were the same hands that had just held the hymn-book, which had been flung aside to execute this deed of violence and now the terrible woman was again seated beside the death-bed, reading on in those same monotonous, unmoved tones. She would pitilessly permit the dying woman, with superhuman strength, to prolong her death agony, in the belief that she was still needed to perform some last deed of charity. Poor Aunt Cordula! She must leave the world where she had been so lonely with a bitter disappointment; the last impressions that her departing soul would bear away would be of religious fanaticism in the person of the woman she had loathed, and the proverbial ingratitude of mankind of which Felicitas was made to seem guilty. The thought drove the young girl wild. Fairly frantic with excitement, she rushed up and down the room, and shook the door still more violently—in vain. Why had she been locked in? Aunt Cordula had told her to bring a lawyer; had she a last confession to make? No, no, the old mam'selle had nothing to confess! If she had been obliged to bear through life any burden of guilt, it was the guilt of others, a burden which she might cast aside in the other world. Felicitas had gradually perceived that the old mam'selle might have been the innocent sharer, but never the guilty accomplice of any disgraceful secret. Perhaps she had wished to make some deposition of her property, and this desire had been baffled by Frau Hellwig's act of violence. If Aunt Cordula should die without a will her whole estate would fall to the Hellwig family. Who knows how many poor, unfortunate human beings, whom she

would have made comfortable for life, would be robbed of their support by this delay, while the great lady's coming into the fortune would add fresh treasures to the chest and coffers of a family whose wealth was already reputed vast.

Felicitas went to the window and looked down at the neighboring houses, anxiously watching for some human being whom she might summon to her assistance, but they were all so far below that she was neither heard nor seen. How her pulses throbbled with anguish and feverish excitement! She threw herself into the only chair in the room, and burst into tears of hopeless despair. It would be too late now, even if she were released that very moment. Perhaps the beloved eyes were already closed, the heart that had anxiously watched for her return was already still in death. The universal consolation, that the transfigured soul was now aware of the reason its last earthly wish had been baffled, brought no comfort to the young girl's keen, logical mind. It is difficult to believe that the human soul, which like everything God has created, must pass gradually through countless phases to attain the highest perfection, can instantly exchange its limited earthly vision for the divine gift of omniscience, and from the other world read, as if in an open book, all the acts, impulses, and most secret motives of the dwellers on this earth.

Felicitas had probably spent nearly two hours in this imprisonment, alternating between gloomy despair and frantic efforts to obtain release. The place had become actually horrible to her. The senseless creatures, formerly her pets, but which now at any hasty movement renewed their shrill cries and wild flutterings, seemed to her excited imagination like spectral forms; she trembled at her own movements. Night was closing in, the shadows of twilight already darkened the uncanny room, her heart was aching with her first wild anguish of grief for the friend she had lost—she was on the very verge of madness! Again she rushed to the door, and stood as if paralyzed with amazement—it yielded without the least resistance to her hands. The passage was still as death. Felicitas might have fancied herself the victim of some terrible dream, had not the sitting room been firmly locked. She looked through the key-hole; a strong draught was blowing through the apartment, rustling the ivy trained along the walls—they had opened the window; yes, all was over, over forever!

Down in the front mansion below the old cook sat knitting at the open street-door, as was her habit on pleasant summer afternoons. From the kitchen came a strong odor of newly-baked bread. Frederica had just taken out of the oven a pan filled with the cracknels Frau Hellwig liked with her coffee. Everything here had gone on in its usual course, while upstairs one of the family had departed from the world.

Felicitas entered the servants' room. Directly after Heinrich came in, and, after hanging his cap on a nail, went silently up to Felicitas and held out his hand. The sorrowful expression of his old, weather-beaten face, and eyes reddened by weeping, brought relief to the young girl's aching heart. Springing up, she threw both arms around his neck and burst into a passionate flood of tears.

"Didn't you see her again, Fay?" he asked gently, after a pause. "Frederica told me that Frau Hellwig closed her eyes—alas, that her hands should have done it! Of course you would not be there; the mistress would have been furious if she had seen you. Where have you been all this while?"

Felicitas's tears instantly ceased to flow. With flashing eyes she told him what had happened. Heinrich walked

up and down the room like one possessed.

"Is it possible?" he cried again and again, running his fingers through his bushy gray hair. "Can God permit such wickedness! By the cross of Christ— Yet, if you should go and accuse her before a magistrate you would be sent home because you have no witnesses, and not a soul in the whole town would believe you, because she is the upright, pious Frau Hellwig, and you— And how slyly she did it!" he interrupted himself, with a grim laugh. "Just when the birds were screaming loudest, she gently unfastened the door again. Yes, yes, I've always said so—she's one of the worst. And Fay, you poor child, she has robbed you! I was sent this very morning to old mam'selle's lawyer—to-morrow afternoon at two o'clock she intended to make her will—in your favor. Yes, yes, 'who knows how soon my end may come'—she was so wonderfully clever, and might have awed many a man by the display of so much wisdom in a woman's head, but she could not have known that beautiful hymn, or she wouldn't have waited so long."

CHAPTER XIX.

It was very early the next morning when Frau Hellwig appeared in the court-yard. Instead of the familiar white cap, whose shape had remained unchanged for so many years, a black one now framed the pale, flabby features. The wicked woman who had so often profaned the Sabbath by her "unholy songs and merry tunes" was dead; even the last trace of her despised existence was already banished from the house—the body had been removed to the undertaker's the evening before. But, nevertheless, the dead woman had borne the name of Hellwig, so the mistress of the mansion wore the black cap and strip of crape, which to-day took the place of the stiff linen collar around her neck.

She opened the door through which Felicitas had once seen the old mam'selle disappear. Besides the well-known staircase behind the painted door, another narrow, winding flight went straight from the steep, narrow street to the old mam'selle's abode. This was the way Heinrich and her maid had taken, and the door in the court-yard also opened upon it.

The busts still looked down unaltered from their lofty pedestals, but the genius of the place had fled from the apartment. Frau Hellwig now entered with the assured confidence of the possessor. A cold, scornful smile hovered around her lips as she passed through the suite of rooms, each one revealing in its tasteful arrangement the poetic nature and sensitive spirit of its former mistress, but she frowned with an expression of hate as her eyes rested on the rows of books in handsome morocco bindings, visible through the glass doors of a book-case—books which bore the names of famous poets and authors.

Seizing a large bunch of keys that lay on the table, she opened a desk, evidently the most interesting piece of furniture in the room to her. The drawers were in the most perfect order; one after another was pulled out, revealing packages of yellow letters tied with faded ribbons, and piles of closely written books. The plump, white hands thrust them in again impatiently—what interest could she take in all that stuff, the great lady was not inquisitive. But a little box filled with documents was treated far more kindly. With great care, and an expression of much satisfaction, Frau Hellwig unfolded paper after paper. She was a good accountant; in a very short time she had found the sum-total of the various sums invested—the property was larger than she had expected.

But this by no means ended the search. The various bureaus and trunks were examined in turn, and the

longer she remained the greater became her haste and impatience. Her face gradually flushed, her clumsy figure hurried with unwonted speed from room to room, her hands rummaged among the dainty underclothing, tossed about the dead woman's caps and collars, and pushed the glass and china so rudely to and fro that it rattled loudly—what she sought was nowhere to be found. At last, greatly vexed, she went out upon the balcony. Her clumsy movements upset several flower-pots, scattering the blossoms and leaves in all directions, but she paid no heed—she did not even bestow her stereotyped smile of contempt upon the "rubbish." Frederica was feeding the chickens in the court-yard. Frau Hellwig called to her to send Heinrich up at once, and, stepping back, began her search afresh.

"Don't you know where the old lady kept her silver?" she cried, as soon as Heinrich entered. "There must be a great deal of it; my mother-in-law told me so. She had at least two dozen heavy table-spoons, the same number of gilt tea-spoons, besides silver candlesticks, a coffee-pot, and a milk-pitcher." The last, which she had remembered with wonderful accuracy, rolled from her lips as though she was reading aloud. "I can find none of these pieces—where are they?"

"I do not know," replied Heinrich, quietly. He went to a table, pulled out a drawer, and took from it two silver dishes. "This is all the silver I have ever seen," he said. "I often had to clean it because the maid did not make it bright enough."

Frau Hellwig walked up and down the room, biting her lips angrily. The strict reserve she usually maintained in her servant's presence deserted her for a moment.

"It would be a pretty nice piece of business—an outrageous thing—if the old woman had sold these valuable family heir-looms, or even—given them away. It would be just like her!" she added, as if to herself. "It must be found, I won't rest till I know. She had diamonds, too—very beautiful jewels; everything of the kind that belonged to the Hellwig family was divided between her and my mother-in-law." She stopped suddenly, for at that instant her eyes rested upon the cabinet with glass doors containing the portfolios of music; she had not yet searched that.

The lower part of this cabinet had very beautifully carved wooden doors, which she tore open. Piles of neatly arranged periodicals filled the two shelves. The cruel, malicious smile appeared on her angry face, her upper lip curled, revealing the whole row of her strong sound teeth. Dragging out one pile after another, she flung them so violently on the floor that the scattered sheets flew all around the room. The old servant was furious. He clinched his fists and glared savagely at the Vandal. He had brought all those papers from the post-office to the old mam'selle; they had afforded genuine refreshment and recreation in her lonely life; he could still see her kind eyes sparkle as he laid a new pamphlet on the table.

"These are all the foes of our Church!" she muttered. "These disgraceful papers, this abominable devil-try! Yes, yes; this wicked old maid led an evil life—and I have been compelled to tolerate this impious creature beneath my roof so many long years."

She stood up and looked through the glass doors. A short, harsh laugh escaped her lips at the sight of the music. She unlocked the doors, and ordered Heinrich to bring a clothes-basket, in which he was told to put all the books and portfolios of notes on the shelves. The old man racked his brain to guess the fate of the beautiful books which had so often lain on the piano and from which the old mam'selle had played such exquisite music. The great lady stood beside him,