

The Old Man'selle's Secret.

CHAPTER III.

It was late in the evening. A sharp November wind was sweeping through the streets, and the first snow-flakes were falling on the roofs, the pavements, and the dark, new-made grave of the Pole's young wife.

The table was laid in the Hellwig's sitting-room. The service was of heavy silver, and the handsome pattern of the white damask table-cloth shone like satin. The lamp was standing on a little round sofa-table, behind which sat Frau Hellwig knitting a long woollen stocking. She was a tall, broad-shouldered woman, a little over forty. Perhaps, when illumined by the light of youth, her face might have been considered beautiful; the profile had the classic outlines required by the laws of regular beauty, but it could never have been charming. Spite of the large, well-formed eyes and brilliant complexion, it must always have lacked the attraction with which a noble soul irradiates the features. The countenance could never have become so stony if it had been animated by any warmth of feeling. How could the gray eyes have glittered with a light so icy-cold, if her youth had known the blissful exchange of emotions, the countless excitements and experiences life arouses in every susceptible nature. Bands of dark brown hair were brushed plainly over a forehead which still retained its fairness, the rest of the head was concealed under a snowy-white muslin cap. This cap, and a black dress made in the simplest fashion, with tight sleeves and narrow white cuffs at the wrists, lent a somewhat puritanical aspect to her whole figure.

From time to time a side door opened, and an old cook's wrinkled face peered inquiringly through the crack.

"Not yet, Frederica!" Frau Hellwig always said, in the same monotonous voice, without glancing up; but her needles flew faster, and a peculiarly irritated expression hovered around her thin lips. The old cook was perfectly aware of "madame's" impatience—she liked to aggravate the feeling—and at last exclaimed, in a very piteous tone:

"Oh, dear! where can the master be? The roast will be ruined, and when shall I get through my work to-day?"

This remark brought a stern rebuke. Frau Hellwig never allowed her servants to express their opinions unasked, but Frederica returned to the kitchen very well satisfied, spite of the reproof, for she had seen the effect of her speech in the deep furrow that had appeared between her mistress' eyebrows.

At last the door was opened, as the full, deep peal of the bell echoed through the house.

"Oh, what a pretty ting-a-ling!" cried a child's clear voice outside.

Frau Hellwig put the stocking she was knitting into a little basket by her side, and rose. Surprise and perplexity had effaced the expression of impatience, as she looked intently across the lamp, toward the door. Somebody outside was rubbing his feet on the mat—that was her husband. Directly as he entered the room, and approached his wife with somewhat faltering steps, carrying in his arms a little girl about four years old.

"I've brought something home to you, dear Brigitta," he said, appealingly; but stopped instantly as he met his wife's glance.

"Well?" she asked without moving.

"I bring you a poor child."

"Whose is it?" she interrupted, coldly.

"The daughter of the unfortunate Pole, who lost his young wife in so terrible a way. Dear Brigitta, pray receive the little one kindly,"

"Only for this one night of course!"

"No. I solemnly promised the father that the child should be brought up in my house."

He uttered the words in a quick, firm tone—sooner or later they must be spoken.

A bright flush suddenly crimsoned his wife's fair face, and a contemptuous expression hovered around her lips. Taking a step forward from her former place, she tapped her forehead with her forefinger with a gesture of indescribable malice, saying:

"I'm afraid, Hellwig, that you're not quite right in your mind." Her voice still retained its cold composure, doubly offensive at this moment. "To expect such a thing from me, me! To bring a player's brat under the roof I strive to make a temple of the Lord—indicates something more than—folly."

Hellwig started back, an angry light sparkled in his pleasant eyes.

"You have made a grave error, Hellwig," she continued. "I shall not receive into my house this child of sin—the child of a lost woman, so visibly overtaken by the righteous judgment of God."

"Indeed—is that your opinion, Brigitta! Then I will ask you of what sin your brother was guilty that he was killed by a chance shot while hunting? He was seeking his own amusement, this poor woman died in the performance of a painful duty."

The flush faded from Frau Hellwig's cheeks, and she suddenly became deathly pale. She remained silent a moment, her eyes rested with an astonished, watchful gaze upon her husband, who was displaying such unwonted energy in her presence.

Meantime the little girl, whom Hellwig had placed on the floor, had pulled off her pink hood, revealing a pretty little head covered with brown curls. The little cloak, too, was dropped. Hard indeed must have been Frau Hellwig's heart not to have held out her arms and clasped the child in a loving embrace. Was she totally blind to the indescribable charm of the tiny figure tripping about the room on the prettiest of little feet, and gazing in childish amazement at her new surroundings? The round, rosy shoulders were in most becoming contrast to the light-blue woollen frock, bordered with dainty embroidery—perhaps the last work of her mother's hands, now rigid in death.

But the elegance of the dress, the careless fall of the curls on brow and neck, and the grace of the little one's movements merely irritated the lady.

"I won't have this will-o'-the-wisp two hours about me," she said, suddenly, without a word in reply to her husband's startling rebuke. "The forward little creature, with her tangled hair and bare shoulders, does not suit our quiet, decorous household—it would be throwing our doors wide open to frivolity and dissipation. Surely, Hellwig, you will not sling this apple of discord into our midst, but see that the child is taken back to where she belongs."

She opened the door leading into the kitchen and called the cook.

"Frederica, put on this child's clothes," she said, pointing to the little cloak and hood still lying on the floor.

"Go back to your kitchen at once!" cried Hellwig, in loud, angry tones, waving his hand toward the door.

The bewildered servant vanished.

"You force me to ex'remities by your own harshness and cruelty, Brigitta!" exclaimed the irritated husband. "So attribute it to yourself and your own prejudices, if I now say to you what otherwise would never have crossed my lips. Who owns the house, which you falsely say you have tried to make a temple of the Lord?"

"I! Brigitta, you too came to this house a poor orphan—in the course of years you have forgotten it—and alas! the

more zealously you have toiled at this so-called temple, the more you have striven to have the words of God, Christian love, and humility on your lips, the more arrogant and hard-hearted have you become. This house is mine, I pay for the food we eat, and I must positively declare that the child shall stay where she is. If your heart is too narrow and loveless to have a mother's affection for the poor little thing, I at least require my wife, in accordance with my will, to extend the necessary protection to the child. If you do not wish to lose your dignity in the eyes of our servants give the needful orders for the little girl's reception—or I shall do so myself."

Not another word escaped Frau Hellwig's blanched lips. Any other woman, in such a moment of complete helplessness, would have turned to the last weapon of the weaker sex, tears; but their sweet relief seemed unknown to those cold eyes. Her utter silence, her icy composure, seemed to envelop her whole person like a coat of mail and exerted a benumbing influence on all who surrounded her.

Taking up a basket of keys, she silently left the room. Sighing heavily, Hellwig took the child by the hand and walked up and down the room with her. He had fought a terrible battle to secure the deserted little creature a home in his house, and had mortally offended his wife. Never, never—he well knew—would she forgive the bitter truths he had just uttered. She was implacable.

CHAPTER IV.

Meantime Frederica placed on the table a little tin plate, a child's knife, fork, and spoon, and a clean napkin. The bell rang outside, and directly after Heinrich opened the door, admitting a little boy about seven years old.

"Good evening, papa!" cried the child, shaking the snowflakes from his fur cap.

"Good evening, my boy," he replied, "Well, did you have a good time at your little friends'?"

"Yes, but that stupid Heinrich came for me far too early."

"Your mamma wished him to go, my child. Come here Nathanael, see this little girl, her name is Fay—"

"Nonsense! How can her name be 'Fay'? It's no name at all."

Hellwig's eyes rested tenderly upon the little creature, on whom parental love had sought to shed a light of poetry in its very name.

"Her mother called her so, Nathanael," he answered gently, "her real name is Felicitas. Isn't she a poor, pretty little thing? Her mother was buried to-day; she will live with us now, and you will love her like a little sister, won't you?"

"No, papa; I don't want a little sister."

The boy was the very image of his mother. He had handsome features and a remarkably clear, rosy complexion, but he had a disagreeable habit of resting his chin on his breast and looking from under his eyebrows with his large eyes, which gave him a peculiarly sly, crafty expression. His head sank at this moment even lower than usual, he raised his right elbow in an attitude of defiance and looked spitefully from beneath it at the little girl.

Fay stood shyly pulling at her little dress; the big boy evidently awed her, but she gradually approached, and, without being frightened by his hostile attitude, seized with beaming eyes the toy sword that hung at his belt. He pushed her angrily away, and ran to his mother, who had just entered.

"I don't want any little sister!" he repeated, whimpering. "Mamma, send that rude little girl away! I want to stay alone with you and papa!"

Frau Hellwig silently shrugged her shoulders and went to her place at the table.

"Say grace, Nathanael," she said in her monotonous voice, and clasped her hands. The boy instantly interlocked his little fingers, bowed his head humbly, and repeated a long grace. Under the circumstances this prayer was an abominable profanation of a most beautiful Christian custom.

The master of the house touched no food. The flush of excitement crimsoned his pale forehead, and while mechanically toying with his fork, his perturbed gaze wandered restlessly over the sullen faces of his wife and son. But the little girl had an excellent appetite. She carefully put into her pockets some bonbons Hellwig laid beside her plate.

"Those are for mamma," she said; "she's very fond of bonbons. Papa brings her great boxes of them."

"You haven't a mamma!" cried Nathanael, crossly.

"Oh, you don't know anything about it," replied the little one, greatly excited. "I have a much prettier mamma than you."

Hellwig cast a timid, startled glance at his wife, and unconsciously raised his hand as if to close the rosy little mouth that had so little knowledge of the way to protect its own interests.

"Have you supplied her with a bed, Brigitta?" he asked, hastily, but in a gentle, pleading tone.

"Yes."

"Where is she to sleep?"

"In Frederica's chamber."

"Wouldn't there be room, at least, for the first few nights—in ours?"

"If you want to have Nathanael's bed taken out of it!"

He turned angrily away, and called the servant.

"Frederica, you will have charge of this child at night—be kind to her. She is an orphan, and has been accustomed to the care of a loving mother."

"I won't harm the little girl, Herr Hellwig," replied the old woman, who had evidently been listening, "but I come of respectable parentage who have never had anything to do with players. It would be something, at least, if we knew that her father and mother had been married."

She glanced at Frau Hellwig, doubtless expecting an approving look for her answer, but her mistress was just untying Nathanael's bib, and appeared as though she had neither seen nor heard anything of the whole affair.

"This is too much!" cried Hellwig, indignantly. "Must I learn to-day that there is neither sympathy nor pity in my whole household? Do you think yourself at liberty to be cruel, Frederica, because you are 'come of respectable parentage'? Well, for your satisfaction you may rest assured that this child's parents were honestly married; but I tell you now that you shall be most severely dealt with if I see that you are unkind to her in any way."

He seemed weary of the strife, rose, and carried the little girl to the cook's room. She willingly allowed herself to be put to bed, and soon fell asleep, after praying in her sweet voice for papa and mamma, for the kind uncle who would take her back to mamma to-morrow, and for "the tall lady with the cross face."

Late at night Frederica went to bed. She was angry because she had been kept up so long, and moved noisily about the room. Little Felicitas started from her sleep, sat upright, and pushing her curls back from her face cast a frightened glance around the dingy walls and scanty furniture of the small, faintly lighted chamber.

"Mamma, mamma," she called, loudly.

"Hush, child, your mother isn't here; go to sleep again!" said the cook crossly, as she went on undressing.

The little girl looked at her in alarm; then she began to cry softly. She was evidently frightened by the strange room.