

The Old Mam'selle's Secret.

CHAPTER XXVIII.—(CONTINUED.)

The stranger bore the name of the ancestor who had left X—so many years ago. This name, which seemed almost antediluvian, was displayed with much aristocratic ostentation on the little card. We like to exhumate ancient appellations from the dust and rubbish of by-gone centuries; they involuntarily summon up before our eyes visions of knightly figures in clanking armor, and betoken aristocratic blood, though they suit oddly enough our modern race of pygmies clad in black dress coats. This branch of the Hirschsprungs evidently set a higher value on its noble ancestors—it was almost certain that the juggler's daughter could not claim kinship without rebuke. Every drop of blood in Felicitas's veins seethed wildly at the thought of a repulse; she closed her lips more firmly, as if to repress any hasty word that might escape them in her excitement. Yet she could not control her ardent desire to see the man, and she was to have an opportunity.

Soon after the stranger's arrival, the young lawyer had sent for the professor, and the interview between the three gentlemen lasted more than three hours. During this time of anxious expectation, Felicitas often heard her lover pacing to and fro overhead with a calm, measured tread. She saw in imagination the man of science passing his slender, well formed hand over his beard, and quietly offering the aristocratic money and lands to efface the stain on the honor of his name.

Afterward the young lawyer sent to ask his mother to have coffee made, as when they had concluded their business he would bring his guest into her sitting-room. Felicitas attended to the matter, and while arranging the coffee-service in the kitchen, she heard the gentlemen coming down stairs. Her courage almost deserted her as she saw the stranger, talking to the professor, pass slowly through the hall. He was extremely tall and very slender; his bearing and gestures evinced the finished man of the world, but also the thorough aristocrat, perfectly conscious of his superior position. He certainly could not be her grandfather, the face, with its delicately chiseled features, was too young for that. At the moment a pleasant smile rested upon his thin lips as he bent toward the professor, but the handsome, clearly cut profile, with its pale, sallow complexion, was evidently more habituated to express imperious command than kindness.

Felicitas smoothed her hair with trembling fingers and entered the room, into which the coffee had already been carried by the servant. The whole party were standing in one of the deep window niches, and the girl's noiseless entrance was unnoticed. She quietly filled the cups, and, placing one on a tray, offered it with a few courteous words to the stranger—he turned hurriedly at the sound of her voice, but staggered back as though he had received a blow, while his face blanched to a death-like pallor, and his startled eyes wandered over the girlish figure before him.

"Meta!" he gasped.

"Meta von Hirschsprung was my mother," she replied, in her low, musical voice, with apparent composure, though she placed the salver on the table because the cups began to rattle perceptibly.

"Your mother? I did not know that she had left a child," he murmured, trying to control his agitation.

Felicitas smiled scornfully—partly no doubt at her own weakness, which, spite of her firm resolutions, had betrayed her into confessing to this man the secret of her origin. There had not been the faintest shade of love or sorrowful sympathy in his tones, nothing save startled surprise, and

she instantly felt that she had exposed herself to a series of humiliations, which she must now endure in the presence of the astonished group, who, in silent amazement, were awaiting the further development of the strange scene.

Meanwhile Baron von Hirschsprung's surprise had passed away, but only to give place to the most painful embarrassment. He covered his eyes with his hand and said in a low, faltering voice: "Ah, yes, it was in this very little town of X—that fate overtook the unfortunate woman—a fate terrible, indeed, yet just."

It seemed as if, in uttering the last words, he had regained complete mastery over himself. Drawing himself up to his full height, he said with the well bred ease of a thorough man of the world, addressing the other members of the group: "Pardon me, if a momentary surprise made me forget the presence of others! But I had supposed a drama formerly enacted in our family, ended and buried forever, and suddenly found myself confronted here with an afterpiece! Then you are a daughter of the juggler D'Orlowska!" he added, turning to Felicitas, and evidently trying to infuse a trace of kindness into his tone.

"Yes," she answered, curtly, facing him with a bearing as haughty as his own. At this moment the family resemblance between the two was very striking. Pride was the predominant expression of those noble features, though it perhaps rested on a widely different foundation.

"Your father then left you in X—after his wife's death? You have grown up here?" he went on, unmistakably impressed by the young girl's appearance.

"Yes."

"The man did not have much time to provide for you—if my memory serves me, he died of nervous fever in Hamburg eight or nine years ago."

"This is my first information that he is no longer living," replied Felicitas, trembling, while the corners of her mouth quivered and tears sprang to her burning eyes. Yet, in spite of the shock of these tidings, she had a certain feeling of satisfaction—Frau Hellwig had so often said that her father was wandering about the world, without caring what it cost other people for his child's support.

"Ah, I regret exceedingly that I have been the person to bring such sad news!" cried Baron von Hirschsprung, shaking his head mournfully. "With him you have lost the only relative you had, after your mother's death. There was a time when I investigated this man's early life—he was left alone in the world when very young. It is very sorrowful, but you no longer possess any kindred."

"And may we be permitted to ask, sir, in what relation the mother of this young girl stood to your family?" cried the councilor's wife, indignant at the pitiless manner in which he excluded Felicitas from the circle of her high-born race.

A faint flush flickered over his face. Bewitching as is the blush on the cheek of innocence, it is repulsive when seen on the countenance of an arrogant man, who is evidently struggling to determine whether to conceal or acknowledge some humiliating fact.

"She was once my sister," he answered, indifferently, though he placed a marked emphasis on the word "once." "I intentionally avoided alluding to this tie," he went on more firmly, after a somewhat long pause, "because, as matters are, I shall be forced to make disclosures which may possibly make me appear unfeeling. I must impart to this young lady certain circumstances relating to her mother, which perhaps might better be suppressed. Frau d'Orlowska forever ceased to be a member of the Von Hirschsprung family at the moment she gave her hand to the Pole. In our family re-

cord there is no mention of the name of the man whom this daughter of the house married. When she crossed our threshold for the last time, my father, with his own hand, erased her name from the book—a deed infinitely harder to his aristocratic nature than if he had been compelled to affix to it the cross that indicates death. From that time the name Meta von Hirschsprung has had no existence for us; neither friend nor servant has ever ventured to repeat it; my children do not know that they ever had an aunt—she was disinherited, cast off, dead to us long before she met with so terrible an end."

He paused a moment. During those disclosures, made in a manner so crushing, the councilor's wife had put her arms around Felicitas and drawn her, with a mother's tenderness, to her heart. And there stood the professor; he said nothing, but his eyes rested fondly on the pale face of the girl who was again made to suffer so keenly for her "idolized" mother. There was a short, painful pause—a silence that evidently expressed stern condemnation. The speaker could not escape the impression. He continued in an unsteady, faltering voice.

"Let me assure you that I find it a very painful task to be forced to wound you in this way—I appear, even to myself, in such an—uncharitable light, but good heavens! how can I help calling things by their true names? I should be glad to do something for you. In what position do you stand in this admirable household?"

"The position of my dear daughter," replied the councilor's wife for Felicitas, looking the speaker keenly in the face.

"Then you see that you have indeed a very happy lot!" he said to the young girl, at the same time bowing courteously to his hostess. "Unfortunately I have not the power to compete with your noble protectress. I could not, in any case, offer you the rights of a daughter of the house because my parents are both living—in their eyes the fact that you bear the name of D'Orlowska would unfortunately prevent their ever admitting you into their presence."

"What, *her* own grandparents!" cried the old lady, indignantly. "Could they know that they have a granddaughter, and yet die without seeing her? You can never make me believe it."

"My dear Frau Hofrathin," replied the baron with an icy smile, "the indelible consciousness of aristocratic birth, the lofty sense of the unsullied honor of our race, are traits of the Hirschsprung family which I also share—love holds a secondary place in our hearts. I perfectly understand my parents' opinions, and should pursue precisely the same course, were one of my daughters to so far forget herself."

"Well, the men of your family may hold such views, perhaps," replied the old lady persistently, "but the grandmother—surely she must have a heart of flint if she can hear of this child and not—"

"She is the least forgiving of us all," he interrupted with calm conviction. "My mother numbers among her relatives members of some of the oldest families in the land, and guards the honor of her race as few women would have the strength to do. But you are entirely at liberty, my dear madame," he added, with a slight touch of irony in his tone, "to make a trial in behalf of your protegee. So far from opposing you, I assure you that I will aid you as much as possible."

"Oh, do not say another word, I implore you!" cried Felicitas, in an agony of pain, as she released herself from her friend's embrace, and clasped her hand beseechingly "Be assured, sir," she continued, calmly, after a moment's pause, though her lips quivered, "that it will never occur to me to claim any rights once my mother's—"

she cast them all aside for the sake of her love, and after what you have just said, she can only have gained by the exchange. I have grown up in the belief that I stood alone in the world, so I now say: 'I have no grandparents.'"

"That sounds harsh and bitter!" he replied, somewhat embarrassed. "Yet," he added, with a shrug of his shoulders, in the present condition of affairs, I am compelled to let you retain your belief. But I will do all that lays in my power. I have no doubt that I can induce my father to make you a large yearly allowance."

"I thank you!" she hastily replied. "But I have just told you that I have no grandparents, can you expect me to receive alms from strangers?"

He again blushed, but now it was the deep flush of shame which, perhaps for the first time in his life, filled the aristocratic nobleman. Evidently greatly confused, he took his hat—no one detained him. Turning to the young lawyer, he alluded, almost in a whisper, to a few points connected with the business they had just discussed; then, as if moved by a sudden impulse, held out his hand to Felicitas, but letting both hands fall slowly by her sides, the young girl courtesied to him formally and profoundly. It was a sharp retaliation for the juggler's daughter to inflict upon the haughty Baron von Hirschsprung! He drew back in confusion, and, bereft for the moment of all aristocratic dignity, bowed to the others with a shrug of his shoulders and accompanied by the young lawyer, left the room.

As the door closed behind him, Felicitas, with an agitated gesture, suddenly covered her face with her hands.

"Fay!" cried the professor, holding out his arms. She looked up and fled to their protection. Clasping her arms around his neck, she hid her face on his breast. The wild young bird submitted forever; it did not make the least attempt to fly. How sweet it was to rest within the shelter of those strong arms, after the weary lonely flight through winds and tempests that had almost beaten it to death!

At this moment the councilor's wife made a sign to her smiling husband, and both noiselessly left the room.

"John, I will!" cried the young girl, raising her long lashes, on which tears of filial grief were still trembling.

"At last!" he answered, clasping his arms still more closely around the slender form those words had made his own. What passion, what tenderness glowed in the stern gray eyes that gazed down at the smiling, upturned face.

"I have waited hour after hour for those words of happiness," he continued. "Thank God, they have been spoken by the impulse of your own heart. Else I should have been forced to plead for them again this evening, and I doubt whether they would have sounded as sweetly in my ears as now. Wicked Fay, must I pass through such bitter experiences ere you could resolve to make me happy?"

"No," she replied, releasing herself from his clasp. "It was not the thought of the change in your circumstances that conquered me; it was in the moment that you so firmly and consistently refused to give me back the book that entire confidence in you first took possession of me—"

"And a few minutes after, when the secret was revealed to me," he interrupted, again drawing her into his embrace, "I perceived that, spite of all your harshness, defiance, and pride, you cherished in your heart a woman's true, joy-bestowing love for me. You would have sacrificed yourself, rather than let me suffer the pain of a sorrowful experience. We have both been trained in a hard school, and—do not deceive yourself, Fay, concerning the task still before you? I have lost my mother, my faith in human nature