

The Old Man'selle's Secret.

CHAPTER XXV.—(CONTINUED)

"In other words, if I desire to have you for my wife, I must either give up my present sphere of action and dwell in a wilderness, or I must seek out some blot, some unworthy deed in the past history of my family!" he exclaimed, in an irritated tone.

A sudden flush crimsoned the young girl's cheeks at the last words, and her hand involuntarily glided over the folds of her dress to feel for the sharp edges of the gray box, that she might be quite sure it was safe in its hiding-place.

The professor paced up and down the room in the most extreme agitation.

"The defiant, unyielding element in your character has already caused me much trouble," he continued, in the same tone, stopping before Felicitas: "it attracts and yet angers me. At this very moment when, with stern consistency you trample my love under foot and condemn yourself to so useless a sacrifice, I feel a sort of hatred, a fierce indignation—I would fain crush it. I see that I cannot advance another step with you at present—but give you up! The thought does not enter my mind! Your assurance that you love me has the weight of an inviolable vow—you will never be faithless to me, Felicitas!"

"No," she answered, quickly, and in spite of herself a ray of love flashed from her eyes.

The professor laid his hand upon her head, bent it lightly back, and gazed at her with an expression of pain, anger, and suffering, all strangely blended. He shook his head as her lashes drooped and her lips closed firmly beneath the searching look—then he sighed heavily.

"Well, go," he said, sadly. "I consent to a temporary separation, but only on condition that I can see you often, wherever you may be, and that a constant correspondence shall be maintained between us."

She reproached herself for her weakness in extending her hand to him in assent, but she could not deprive him of this consolation. He turned hastily away, and she went out into the corridor.

CHAPTER XXVI.

Outside, in her unutterable agony, she involuntarily stretched her arms towards heaven. How she had suffered during the last few moments, whose pain and bitterness far surpassed all the other griefs her young, sorely tried heart had been forced to endure.

Unconsciously she drew out of her pocket the little box—the secret it contained would instantly shatter the barrier between herself and the man she loved; it would weigh heavily in the balance against her despised origin; was the tempter again approaching her? No, Aunt Cordula, your will shall be done—although this book would be so brilliant a vindication! And he! Time will heal his sorrow, the pain of renunciation sanctifies the soul, but complicity in a crime debases and paralyzes it forever. The fatal little book should be consumed to ashes that very hour! Felicitas glanced back once more toward the room where she could hear the professor pacing ceaselessly to and fro, then she glided down the narrow stairs and noiselessly opened the painted door.

The traveler, who unsuspectingly treads upon the body of a snake and suddenly sees the terrible head of the irritated reptile reared before him, can feel no greater horror than did Felicitas at the moment she stepped into the corridor. Five fingers clutched her left hand with an iron grasp—it was the hand in which she held the box—and close to her face glittered two greenish eyes, the gentle, Madonna-like orbs, of the councillor's widow.

At this moment the beautiful woman had entirely flung aside the charm of

feminine grace and tenderness—how could those rosy fingers, which were wont to be so gracefully folded in prayer, clutch with so rude and so powerful a grasp? What an expression of Satanic malice rested on the lovely face, distorting its soft, childish outlines almost beyond recognition!

"How charmingly this happens, my beautiful proud Caroline! I meet you just at the moment you are carrying this lovely little jewel-case to a place of safety!" she cried, with a sneering laugh, clasping her other hand like a vise around the wrist of the hand the girl was struggling to release. "Be kind enough to hold this tiny traitor a little longer—I have no intention of permitting you to let it fall. Have patience an instant; I need a witness who can prove in court that I caught the thief in the very act. John! John!"

How shrill and piercing the young widow's voice, usually so expressive in its silvery tones of Christian love and mercy, now sounded as it rang through the corridor!

"I beg you, for God's sake, to let me go!" Felicitas pleaded in deadly terror, struggling violently to escape.

"Not for the world! He must see whom he placed by his side to-day. How sweetly it sounded! 'Her place is here!' You thought you had gained your end, your dishonorable acquittance, but I am still here."

She repeated her cry for help—it was unnecessary—the professor was already descending the stairs and reached the door just as Heinrich appeared at the other end of the corridor.

"Oh! were you up here, John?" cried the councillor's widow. "I thought you were on the second story. But the skill of the juggler's daughter is all the more admirable, since she has managed to slip your aunt's legacy, as it were, from under your very hands."

"Are you out of your senses, Adele?" he asked, quickly, leaving the last stair, from which he had watched the incomprehensible scene in the utmost astonishment.

"Not at all!" she replied, sarcastically. "Don't think me violent, cousin, because I am compelled to fill the office of a bailiff. Your friend, the young lawyer, indignantly refused me his aid to discover the person who had stolen the silver, and you yourself took this innocent creature under your protection—what could I do except act on my own account? You see these five fingers holding the casket they have just brought down from upstairs. This fact is proved—now we'll see what the magpie was carrying to her nest!"

She snatched the box with the speed of lightning from Felicitas's hand. The young girl, with a cry, tried to recover the captured secret, but the widow, laughing, fled several paces down the corridor with her prize, and raised the lid with frantic haste.

"A book!" she murmured, in a puzzled tone; the box fell on the floor.

She took the volume in both hands, opened it wide, and shook it violently—here must surely be bank-notes, deeds, or something of value concealed inside. But nothing fell out.

Meantime Felicitas had recovered from her fright. Following the lady, she earnestly entreated her to return the book; but, spite of her apparent composure, her anxiety was audible in her voice.

"Aha! do you really want it?" said the young widow, maliciously clasping the book tightly to her bosom as she turned her back upon her. "You seem altogether too anxious for me to give up my suspicions," she continued, glancing scornfully back over her shoulder at Felicitas. "There must be some clue to this mystery; let us see what it is, little maid!"

She opened the book—the yellow leaves contained no bank notes, no valuables, nothing but words, tender, delicately written words, but had a dag-

ger suddenly been aimed at the young widow's breast from the pages of the ugly little volume, she could not have been more terrified, more utterly bereft of composure, than by her momentary glimpse of the writing on one of the pages she had hurriedly turned. The rosy face blanched to her very lips—instinctively she covered her eyes with her hand, and her figure swayed for an instant, as though on the verge of fainting.

But she had constantly practiced self-control before the eyes of others, in order to be surrounded by the halo of piety. She had learned to raise her eyes devoutly to heaven, while her heart was swelling with wrath and malice; she could listen with an air of profound interest to a sermon, while her mind was dwelling on a charming new toilet; she often spoke, with a flush of righteous indignation mantling her cheeks, of the sinful ways of the world and the unpardonable neglect of the Bible, while she secretly read the most questionable French novels.

This incredible flexibility and elasticity of external manner had always come to her aid in critical situations and, even now, only a few seconds elapsed before she gained her composure. She closed the book with an admirably successful expression of disappointment resting on her pale lips.

"It really is mere wretched trash!" she said to the professor, while, apparently unconsciously, slipping the book into her pocket. "It was certainly very silly in you, Caroline, to make such an outcry about such nonsense!"

"Did she make the outcry?" asked the professor, hastily advancing—he was trembling with excitement. "I thought you called upon me to aid you in convicting this young girl of stealing the silver. Will you have the kindness to give me your reason, here on the spot, for your shameful accusation?"

"You see I am unable at the moment—"

"At the moment?" he vehemently interrupted. "You must recall your insulting charge instantly, and, in my presence and Heinrich's, make the most ample apology to her."

"Most gladly, dear John. It is a Christian's duty to own and beg forgiveness for an error. My dear Caroline, pray pardon me, I have wronged you."

"And now give back the book," said the professor, in a curt, inflexible tone.

"The book?" she asked, with all her former childish artlessness. "Why, my dear John, it doesn't belong to Caroline."

"Who told you so?"

"I saw Aunt Cordula's name written in it. If any one has a right to it, it is you, as the heir of her library and furniture. But it has not the slightest real value; it seems to be full of copies of old poetry. What would you do with such sentimental stuff? But I like these old yellow books—spite of their soiled, shabby appearance, I am fond of collecting them. Please give it to me."

"Perhaps I will, after I have seen it," he replied, coldly, shrugging his shoulders, as he held out his hand for the volume.

"But it would have far more value to me, if you would give it to me before looking at it," she replied, in sweet, coaxing tones. "Must I believe that you want to learn the exact market-value of the first and only gift I ever asked you to make me?"

The veins on the professor's forehead swelled angrily.

"I assure you that your opinion of my conduct is a matter of entire indifference to me," he answered, sharply. "I demand the return of the book. Your behavior seems extremely suspicious. Copies of sentimental old poetry could not possibly make a woman of the world, like yourself, turn pale with terror."

As he spoke he stepped in front of her—her restless glance, which had measured with the speed of lightning the whole length of the corridor, and a hasty movement, unmistakably betrayed her intention to take to flight. The professor grasped her hand and stopped her.

Felicitas was almost frantic at the thought that he would attain his end. It was terrible to have the book in the possession of this arch hypocrite, but she could not help admitting that it could be as safe there as if it were in her own hands, and would undoubtedly be destroyed that very day. So she took her place by the young widow's side, to aid her flight if possible.

"I beg you, Herr Professor, to let the lady have the book!" she said, as gravely and quietly as was possible at so critical a moment. "By reading it, she will convince herself that she was too hasty in supposing that the little box contained any article of value."

The first suspicious glance she had ever seen in the steel-gray eyes rested upon her face—it seemed like the thrust of a knife. Flushing scarlet, she lowered her eyes.

"So you, too, come with an entreaty," he said, in a sharp, sarcastic tone. "Then there is certainly something more in question than mere sentimental trash. I remember that my cousin said you looked very anxious, and I confess I noticed the same thing. Now I ask you, on your conscience, what does the volume contain?"

It was a fearful moment. Felicitas struggled to control herself, and opened her lips—but they uttered no sound.

"Do not trouble yourself!" he said, with an ironical smile, tightening his hold on his cousin's hand as she tried to gradually slip from his grasp. "You can be pitiless, stern, and terribly frank, but you can not lie. So the book contains no extracts of poetry, but truth, facts, and facts which I am resolved to know at any cost. Will you at last have the kindness, Adele, to give me what, as you have yourself said, is my own property?"

"Do what you will to me, you shall never have it!" cried the councillor's widow, with the energy of despair, throwing aside in her terror the character of a pleading child. She made several desperate efforts to release herself and at last succeeded, and fled down the long corridor like a hunted creature. But at the end stood Heinrich, with his arms spread out like a wall, completely filling the narrow passage. She started back. "Out of my way, insolent fellow!" She cried stamping her foot in frantic rage.

"Directly, most gracious lady," he replied, quietly and respectfully, without altering his position in the least—"just give up the little book, and I'll move aside instantly."

"Heinrich!" cried Felicitas, rushing to him and shaking his arm violently in her despair.

"Eh, that's no use, Fay!" he said, smiling, as his old bones remained perfectly unmoved by the young girl's efforts. "I'm not so dull as you suppose. You might easily commit some folly out of pure good nature, and I won't have it."

"Let the lady pass, Heinrich!" said the professor, gravely. "But I now tell you, Adele, that I shall instantly adopt the only means in my power to recover my property. No one can prevent me from supposing that the book contains important information containing my aunt's estate—possibly allusions to property as yet undiscovered—"

"No, no!" exclaimed Felicitas, interrupting him.

"It is my affair to think what I please," he answered, in a tone of inexorable sternness, "and both you and Heinrich will, if necessary, bear witness for me in a court of justice, that this lady has purloined a considerable portion of my inheritance."