

The Old Mam'selle's Secret.

CHAPTER XVI—(CONTINUED.)

She panted, but no word escaped the professor's lips; he did not even glance at her. At the commencement of her accusation he had once hastily stretched out his arm as though he wished to interrupt her, but as she went on his listening attitude became more and more motionless; he did not even raise his hand to stroke his beard, a gesture very frequent when his attention was arrested.

"My uncle had kept me in happy ignorance," she continued, after a pause, "but he died, and with him all pity left this house. That morning I had been for the first time to my mother's grave—I had learned her horrible death only the night before—they had told me, at the same time, that the juggler's wife was a lost creature, whom even the merciful God would not admit into His Heaven—"

"Why did you not tell me all this then?" interrupted the professor in a hollow tone.

Felicitas, out of regard for the sleeping child, had spoken in a suppressed tone, which only heightened the intensity of resentment pervading her whole manner. Nor did she raise her voice as she now turned her beautiful, flushed face fully toward him.

"Why did I not tell you all this then?" she repeated. "Because you had just declared that the class to which I belonged was unutterably detestable to you, and that there was frivolity in my blood."

The professor covered his eyes with his hand.

"Though I was so young, and my first bitter experience of sorrow was so fresh in my heart, I knew at that moment that I should find neither sympathy nor pity. And have you ever felt any sympathy or pity for the player's child?" she continued, advancing a step nearer, and emphasizing every word with inexpressible bitterness. "Have you ever thought that the creature you sought to force under the yoke of servitude might possibly have a mind? Have you not racked her soul a thousand times by your endeavor to stifle every loftier aspiration, every expression of suitable independence, every yearning for intellectual culture? Do not imagine that I resent your rearing me to labor—even the hardest toil can never bring disgrace. I work willingly and gladly; but that you sought to make me a mere soulless machine, and utterly destroy the intellectual element which can alone ennoble a life of the hardest toil—that I will never forgive."

"Never, Felicitas?"

The young girl shook her head with an almost wild gesture of refusal.

"Then I must submit to your decision," he said, with a faint smile, which, probably much against his will, was strangely sorrowful. "I have offended you mortally, and yet, I repeat, I could not do otherwise." He paced up and down the floor several times. "To defend my motives I must touch a sensitive spot in your nature," he hastily continued. "You are entirely without property, and of—despised birth. You are compelled to support yourself. If I had given you a better education it would have been cruel to degrade you to the level of a servant—or do you believe that any family would consent to receive a juggler's daughter as a governess for their children? Do you not know that a man"—he stopped a moment, and drew a long, sighing breath, while a livid pallor overspread his face—"yes, that a man in the upper circles, who might wish to unite his life to yours, would be forced to make great sacrifices, both of his own prejudices and in his relations to society? What a humiliation that would be to your proud heart. These are the social laws which you despise, but to which the

majority of men submit with unspeakable mental struggles, maintaining them out of reverence for the past, and because they deem them to be a political necessity. I, too, must submit—we do not all bear our secret experiences written on our foreheads—and from me these laws demand resignation and—a life of loneliness."

He was silent. Felicitas felt a strange thrill as she listened in the solemn midnight to the inmost secret of this man's close-shut heart, uttered so hastily, with quivering lips, almost against his will. Doubtless he loved some woman far above him in social station. Though confronting him with wrath and hatred, she felt an emotion of sorrow never experienced before. Was it possible that she could experience any emotion of pity for him? Had she such culpable weakness of character; she, who but a short time ago had said so positively that, no matter what misfortune might befall him, she would have no compassion. And, after all, there was no occasion to pity him—why did he fold his hands submissively in his lap, instead of striving with manly energy to win the lofty prize?

"Well, Felicitas, have you no answer?" he asked. "Or are you again offended by my explanation, which I could not avoid?"

"No," she coldly replied. "These are your personal opinions—I have not the slightest desire to see them altered. But you can not deprive me of the belief that there are kind, unprejudiced hearts, who will recognize an honest nature and upright intentions even in a juggler's daughter. Why should I answer? We should never reach the end of our discussion. You stand on the pinnacle of so-called aristocracy, and impose fetters on yourself, lest you might fall from this vantage-ground. I belong to the class despised by your caste, because we believe that thought is free. You say yourself that our paths in life will soon diverge forever, but we are already widely sundered in mind. Have you any other directions for me about the sick child?"

He shook his head, and ere he could add another word Felicitas had left the room.

CHAPTER XVII

Anna's convalescence was rapid, but Felicitas was not yet released from her office of nurse. The little one, usually so quiet and patient, grew cross and excited as soon as the young girl left the room, and the mother could do nothing except beg Felicitas to stay with the child until her health was fully restored. The young widow undoubtedly did this with a lighter heart because the professor no longer remained any length of time in the sick-chamber. He came every morning, but his visits lasted scarcely three minutes. Often he took the child in his arms and carried her up and down the sunny, sheltered court-yard—but with these exceptions he was scarcely seen in the house. It seemed as if he had been suddenly seized with a perfect passion for the garden; his method of life was entirely changed; he no longer spent the early morning hours in his room—whenever wished to see him was sent out to the garden. Frau Hellwig, strange to say, submitted to this freak, as she termed the sudden transformation, and, to the widow's great satisfaction, arranged to have their principal meals usually served in the garden. The old house thus became at times even more quiet than before; the family often did not come back until ten o'clock in the evening. But it frequently happened that the professor returned earlier and alone. Then Felicitas heard him slowly ascend the stairs, and a singular incident almost always occurred. He would walk several paces mechanically toward the sick-room, then stop short in the middle of the landing, as if recollecting himself, and ascend the second flight at a much more rapid pace. His room was

directly over little Anna's, and on these evenings he did not sit quietly down to his books, but paced restlessly to and fro for hours. This solitary striding up and down always excited Felicitas—she connected it with her midnight confession.

Anna usually went to sleep about eight o'clock, then Rosa took Felicitas's place by the child's bed, and now came the young girl's hours of rest—she went up to the rooms under the roof. Aunt Cordula's recent attack of weakness and premonition of death seemed to have passed away; she was more cheerful than ever, and talked as gayly as a child about the near approach of the time when she should have Felicitas entirely to herself. She usually kept her supper waiting for the young girl. The neatly arranged table stood in the balcony, some favorite dainty was always provided for Felicitas, and a package of new periodicals waited to be read aloud. During these few brief hours of recreation everything that had recently oppressed and grieved Felicitas's heart would fade away—often to her own astonishment. She never mentioned anything that happened in the front of the house; the old mam'selle, true to her custom, never incited her to make any communication, so Felicitas's secret struggles, inexplicable even to herself, readily passed out of notice.

One beautiful sunny afternoon Felicitas was sitting alone with Anna—the whole house was as still as a church. Frau Hellwig and the councillor's widow had gone out to pay some visits, and the professor was doubtless in the garden; for there was no sign of life heard in the second storey. The child had been playing a long while, but now she lay back wearily on the bed and said, coaxingly:

"Sing to me, dear Caroline!"

The child was passionately fond of hearing Felicitas sing. The young girl had a contralto voice—its notes had a clear, bell-like sound, which is peculiar to the violoncello; the tone which melts into the air without any sharpness of accent and has a tinge of gentle melancholy, the expression of a fathomless depth of thought. The old mam'selle, with her rare knowledge of music and the careful cultivation her own talent had received from able masters, had given admirable training to this exquisite organ. Felicitas sang German songs in a thoroughly classic style. She had found that she could always soothe the little girl by beginning a sustained melody in a low tone, and gradually allowing her voice to attain its full power—never doing so, of course, if she knew that unfriendly ears were near.

"Thou sollage now, thou gram so fresh!"

Schumann's song now rang through the quiet sick-room with the chaste expression that only the lips of a pure young girl could lend it. Felicitas sang the first verse with pathetic simplicity and with suppressed power; but with the words:

"Forth from mankind I now must go,
No human words can ease my woe,"

her resonant voice pealed out like the music of an organ. Just at that moment in the professor's room above a chair was hurled aside, hasty steps approached the door, and a bell rang shrilly and violently through the quiet house. It was the first time the bell in the professor's study had ever been used. Frederica hurried up the two flights with breathless speed, and Felicitas stopped in mortal terror. In a few minutes the old cook came down again and entered the sick-room.

"The Herr Professor sends word that you must not sing any more—he can't study," she said, in her harsh, unfeeling way. "He was as white as chalk and could hardly speak for rage. . . . Why do you do such stupid things. I never heard anything like it in all my life—you sing just like a man, and—Lord have mercy on us—what songs they are! Just fit for a

night-watchman! I don't know what sort of a girl you can be! I could sing, too, when I was young. But they were beautiful songs, 'Lifo lot us oberish' and 'Beautoous moon, so calmly shining; you'd better not try it again, Caroline. You can't sing at all! Yes, and you are to take the child down into the court-yard and drag her about a little, the professor says."

Felicitas hid her burning face in her hands; she felt as though she had received a severe reproof. How ashamed, how humbled she was! Brave as she could be in the defence of her own convictions, in telling her foes the undisguised truth, she was exceedingly timid and reserved in regard to her own talents and attainments. The bare thought that her voice might reach the ears of strangers would instantly silence her, the idea of annoying any one was unendurable. And now it had actually happened; she was thought bold, she had exposed herself to the suspicion of trying to attract attention, and so she had been pitilessly reproofed and humbled. Frau Hellwig's greatest injustice and ill-treatment had never extorted a tear from Felicitas, but she now wept bitterly.

Fifteen minutes after the young girl was dragging the child's carriage slowly up and down the court-yard. The feverish flush on her cheeks was gradually disappearing under the cooling influence of the soft air, but it could not efface from her pale brow the sorrowful expression of gloomy reverie. Ere long Frau Hellwig and the councillor's widow returned together, and at the same time the professor came down stairs, evidently on his way to take a walk, for he held his hat and cane in his hand. All three entered the court-yard together. The young widow carried a large bundle and, after kissing and petting her child, pushed back the paper a little from the parcel and said to her cousin with a smile:

"See, John, am I not a very heedless woman? Though my heart is steeled against feminine finery, it can not resist the temptations of a linen-shop. I saw this exquisite table-cloth—could I pass it by? Impossible! Almost before I was aware of it I had this table-cloth in my arms, and a piece of wonderfully fine linen besides. But farewell to winter toiles. I fill up this gap in my purse by giving up new garments—be it so—a good German housekeeper can not get her linen-chest full enough."

The professor made no reply. He was looking past the speaker toward the gate of the court-yard. The woman whom Felicitas had seen in his study upstairs was just coming in. She seemed to be carrying something under her big cloak, and approached the professor with an almost reverential manner.

"Herr Professor, my William can see again, see just as well as I or anybody else," she said in a tremulous voice amid her tears. "Who would have believed it? Oh! he was so wretched, and we wore all so miserable, too! Now he can earn his bread and I can die quietly, since I shall not leave a blind, helpless child behind me. Oh! Herr Professor, all the treasures in the world would not be too much to give you. But we are very poor people—we can not even think of repaying what you have done for us. Don't be angry, Herr Professor, I thought a trifle—"

"Well, what is it?" interrupted the professor, barely retreating a step.

While uttering the last words the woman had thrown back her cloak, displaying a large bird-cage and a roll of linen.

"You are so fond of hearing the nightingale sing, when you came to see us," she began; "if you put the bird in a small cage you can easily take it to Bonn with you. And the piece of linen—it's not fine, but very strong, I