

The Old Mam'selle's Secret.

CHAPTER XXIII (CONTINUED)

"I" cried Felicitas, resolutely though her voice trembled with contending emotions—"I will try to defend the dead from these attacks so long as I have the power, Frau Hellwig. There never was a sounder, clearer intellect than she possessed. My statement will of course find no consideration; but even should you succeed in overthrowing every other proof of the unclouded brightness of her mind, the portfolios that contained the collection are still in existence—I saved them. Each one has on the inside a complete list of its former contents, and there is an exact account of the date and price of each manuscript, together with the name of the person from whom it was purchased."

"Indeed! So I have reared in my own house an admirable witness against me!" cried Frau Hellwig. "But now I will call you to account. So you have dared to deceive me all these years with this unparalleled insolence? You have eaten my bread, while you mocked at me behind my back? Had it not been for me, you would have been compelled to beg your bread from door to door! Begone from my sight, you shameful hypocrite!"

Felicitas did not move from the threshold. Her slender figure seemed to grow taller beneath the reproaches hurled at her, her face was deathly pale, but never had the girl's resolute, fearless nature revealed itself so clearly as at this moment.

"The reproach of having deceived you I deserve," she said, with admirable calmness. "I intentionally kept silence, and would have suffered death rather than have permitted even a hint of secret to cross my lips—that is true! Yet my resolve stood on no strong foundation one kind, loving word from your lips, one affectionate glance from your eyes, would have overthrown it, for nothing is more repugnant to me than any concealment of my acts. But there was no wickedness in my deception! Who would call the early Christians hypocrites because, in times of persecution, they assembled secretly and in violation of the laws? I too had my soul to save." She drew a long breath and fixed her brown eyes with an expression of the firmest determination on Frau Hellwig's face. "I should have plunged into the blackest night but for the shelter and protection of the rooms under the roof. In the everwrathful and avenging God to whom you pray, who permits the existence of a hell and leads His children into evil that He may try and then punish them—in this implacable Supreme Being I could never believe. My dead friend led me to God who is all love and pity, wisdom and omnipotence, and who alone reigns in heaven and on earth. The desire to study, the thirst for knowledge, was unquenchable in my soul; had you starved me, Frau Hellwig, it would have been less cruel than your tireless efforts to darken, nay, to kill my mind. I never mocked at you behind your back, for your name was never mentioned to me by my lips, but I have baffled all your intentions. I have been the pupil of the old mam'selle."

"Begone!" cried Frau Hellwig, no longer able to control herself, pointing to the door.

"Not yet, dear aunt!" pleaded the young widow, seizing the outstretched arm. "You will not let such a precious moment slip without availing yourself of it." Then, turning to the young lawyer, she added: "You have just performed your duty admirably as a passionate lover of music—I beg you to inquire with the same zeal for the missing silver and jewelry. If any one has had a hand in their disappearance it is yonder girl."

The lawyer approached Felicitas, whose left hand had clinched the frame

work of the door, and offering her his arm with a low bow, said with grave kindness:

"Will you allow me to take you to my mother?"

"Her place is here!" suddenly fell in loud, resolute tones from the lips of the professor, who had hitherto been so silent. He now stood beside Felicitas, holding her right hand firmly clasped in his own.

The young lawyer involuntarily started back—both men measured each other silently a moment. There was no trace of friendship in the strange look thus exchanged.

"Why, bravo! Two knights at once, a charming picture," cried the widow, laughing—a cup fell crashing on the floor; at any other time Frau Hellwig would have harshly reproved such carelessness, but now she stood speechless with rage and amazement.

"It seems that I am repeatedly compelled to appeal to the past to-day," said the young lawyer, in a tone of bitter irritation, interrupting the momentary silence. "Remember, John, that you fully authorized me to take my present step."

"I will not deny an iota of it," the professor answered. "If you desire an explanation of my inconsistency, I shall be at your service at any time—but not here."

He drew Felicitas across the threshold and went out into the garden with her.

"Go back to the town, Felicitas," he said, and the gray eyes, once so icy cold, rested on the young girl's face with inexpressible tenderness. "This shall be your last struggle, poor little Fay! You shall spend but one more night beneath my mother's roof—to-morrow a new life shall begin for you."

He pressed the hand he still held, as if unconsciously, closer to his heart, then dropped it and returned to the summer-house.

CHAPTER XXIV.

Felicitas left the garden with winged steps. The professor was mistaken—she would not spend the evening, far less the night, under the roof of the old mansion. This was the moment for her to go to Aunt Cordula's rooms. In the narrow street she met Frederica, carrying supper out to the garden, so there was no one left in the house except Heinrich. How the wind raged and howled through the gnarled old linden trees. It swept her restlessly on—here on the firm, level ground, under the shelter of the thick foliage. What a walk was before her over the steep roofs in that rushing blast!

Heinrich opened the street-door. Felicitas slipped breathlessly past him, entered the servants' room, and took the key of the attic from the wall.

"What are you going to do, Fay?" asked the old man, in astonishment.

"I am going to bring back honor to you and liberty for myself. Keep close watch below!" she called back, as she ran up the stairs.

"You won't do anything dangerous! Listen, Fay, don't be fool hardy," he shouted—but she did not hear. He was obliged to remain at his post below, and paced restlessly up and down the hall.

As Felicitas reached the long corridor under the roof, the wind swept over her head in long, moaning blasts, sometimes alternating with low, whistling notes. The rafters creaked, and the hot, sultry breath of the tempest blew in sudden gusts through openings in the sun scorched tiles of the gutters. Just at this moment a mottled gray hail cloud hung over the square formed by the four roofs, pale yellow lightning played over the flower-covered slope, glittered like a deceitful glance on the glass panes of the balcony door, over which tangled garlands of the ivy and scarlet creeper, loosened by the gale, swayed helplessly, and brightly illumined the tossing leaves of the wild vines.

As the young girl put her head out of the attic window, a violent gust of wind blew directly into her face—it fairly took away her breath and forced her to shrink back a moment. Letting it sweep by, she leaped out. Any one who had seen the beautiful pale face, with its firmly compressed lips and look of stern resolve, emerge from the dark garret window, must have perceived that the girl was perfectly aware of the terrible danger she was braving and was ready to meet death for the sake of her purpose. What a strange blending of qualities in her nature! An ardent heart, capable of such passionate hate, and so cool and clear a brain!

She ran lightly along the creaking gutters, her clear eyes were not dimmed by dizziness, a single second, but her raging foe did not give her much time to take breath—a shrill whistle, and he came down upon her with tremendous fury. The door of the balcony flew open, several large flower-pots fell crashing from the railing to the floor and the ancient rafters creaked and trembled under Felicitas's feet. She was still on the next roof, but clung with both hands to the railing of the gallery, which she had just reached.

The tempest loosened her hair and tossed the heavy tresses as if it longed to scatter them to the four winds, but she stood firm. After waiting patiently a moment, she swung herself over the railing and instantly entered the music-room. The storm roared and raved behind her, but she no longer heard it—she never thought of the danger threatening her life on her return. With her clasped hands hanging loosely before her, she stood in the cool, ivy-garlanded apartment—she was beholding it for the last time. The still, snow-white faces on the walls looked familiar, and yet strangely altered—once they had filled the room with life, for their living thoughts had been conjured forth to hover round their pallid brows, now they were only ornaments, mere wall decorations; they gazed down with equal indifference on the radiant face of the coquettish widow, and on the pale, girlish countenance uplifted to them, with streaming tears.

The room looked as cosy and comfortable as it had done in Aunt Cordula's life-time. Not a speck of dust lay on the polished mahogany lid of the piano, the ivy was sending forth countless green shoots in proof that it was carefully tended, and in a niche by one of the windows stood the magnificent caoutchouc and palm, two of the old mam'selle's favorites, which had evidently been the objects of special care. But the other recess was altered the dainty little work-table no longer stood there—the professor had fitted it up for his study.

A burning flash of shame crimsoned Felicitas's face. She was standing like a thief in his room. Who could tell what letters and papers that no stranger's eye should see might be lying on the writing-table! He had left them without anxiety, for he carried the key of the room in his pocket. The young girl darted to the cabinet.

On the side of the old piece of furniture, in the midst of an intricately carved arabesque, was a small metal knob, which could hardly have been discovered by an uninitiated eye. Felicitas pressed it firmly, and the door of the secret compartment flew open. There lay the missing valuables in their well-known order. The large silver coffee-pot and cream-jug, the heavy bundles of spoons tied with silk ribbons, the old-fashioned case containing the diamonds—all these things were in the same places where they had been concealed so many years. There in the corner was the case with the bracelet, and beside it—the little gray box, pushed a little awry, just as the old mam'selle had hastily thrust it

in a few weeks before—she had evidently not touched it again.

Felicitas drew it out with trembling fingers—it was not light—the contents must be destroyed—but in what way? What was it made of?

She cautiously raised the lid—a book somewhat roughly bound in leather lay inside—the stiff pages were gaping apart and the covers were curled and bent by age. A timid glance showed the young girl that the coarse leaves were filled with written, not printed words.

Aunt Cordula, two eyes are resting upon your secret—eyes in which you have countless times read faithful, child-like love and devotion, and a young heart which has never for an instant doubted you is throbbing violently in the presence of the mystery of your life! It is as immovably convinced of your innocence as it is of the existence of the shining sun, but it longs to know why you suffered; it seeks to know the full extent of your life long sacrifice. Your secret shall die, the pages shall crumble into ash, and the lips which even in childhood knew how to maintain inviolable silence will remain as closely shut as your own.

The young girl's trembling fingers opened the volume. "*Joseph von Hirschsprung, Studiosus Philosophæ*," was written in firm characters on the first page. It was the diary of the young student, the son of the nobly born shoemaker, for whose sake Aunt Cordula was said to have worried her father to death. The writer had used only one side of each page, leaving the other for comments. But these others were covered in close lines with the delicate handwriting of the old mam'selle.

Felicitas read the beginning. Profound, original thought, with rare vigor and brevity of expression, instantly fixed the eye and compelled attention. He must have been a remarkable man—the shoe-maker's young son—with an imagination teeming with super's visions, an incisive judgment, and a fiery heart glowing with passionate love! Therefore Cordula, the daughter of the stern merchant prince, had loved him till the day of her death. She wrote:

"Your eyes are closed forever, and you did not see how I knelt beside your bed and wrung my hands in prayer to God that he would save you for me. Amid the delirium of fever, you called my name in all the sweet, caressing tones of love, but you also used the angry accents of a deeply wounded heart, the cry of fierce revenge, and when I spoke to you, you stared at me with eyes that had no look of recognition and thrust my hand away."

"You have departed from this earth under the delusion that I have broken my vow to you—and when all was over and they had removed you from your couch of pain, I found this book under your pillow. It tells me how I have been loved, but also that you doubted me. I watched in mortal anguish for even one look of consciousness—it would have convinced you of my innocence, and my sad fate would have lost its sharpest sting. Vain! There is no greater torture than an eternal separation, without the power of reconciling the departing soul. Had I committed the worst crime, I could not be more cruelly punished than by this heart of mine, which cries out night and day, hunting me restlessly on like the fugitive Cain."

"Your lofty spirit is now treading wider paths, but I am still wandering on this little earth, and know not whether you can look back to me. I can speak to no one of my secret struggles, nor do I desire it—for where could I find any one that would understand my loss? No one knew you save myself. But I must once relate how it all happened. You have written your thoughts in this book;