

## The Old Mam'selle's Secret.

CHAPTER XXVII (CONTINUED)

Hitherto, in her unutterable amazement, Frau Hellwig had remained sitting with folded hands, now, pressing them on the arms of her chair, stood erect, suddenly.

"Return!" she repeated, as though doubting whether she had heard correctly. "To whom?"

"Why to the Hirschsprung heirs, of course, if they are living."

"What, pay so large a sum to the first strolling vagabond who may perhaps come forward? Forty thousand thalers remained in the Hellwig family, after—"

"Yes, after Paul Hellwig, the man of honor, the true and righteous champion of the Lord, one of the elect, had seized twenty thousand thalers!" the professor interrupted, with trembling indignation. "Mother, you condemn my grandmother's soul to eternal punishment, because she ignorantly used stolen money. What does he deserve, who, with fiendish deliberation, and cool calculation, steals a fortune?"

"Yes, he yielded a moment to temptation," she replied, without losing the least iota of composure. "He was a thoughtless young man, then, who had not found the right path. Satan always chooses the best and noblest souls to draw from the kingdom of God—but he has made his way out of the mire of sin, and it is written: 'There is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner that repenteth.' He battles unweariedly for our holy faith. The money has been purified, sanctified in your hands, for he uses it for objects pleasing to God."

"We Protestants have our Jesuits too," cried the professor, with a laugh of bitter scorn.

"It is precisely the same with what fell into our possession," continued Frau Hellwig, immovably. "Look about you! God's hand rests visibly upon all we do! If the crime still clung to the money it could not bring forth such good fruits. We, you and I, and my son, have transformed what was once a sin into a blessing, through our zeal in the service of the Lord, our godly lives."

"Pray do not include me, mother," he interrupted, deeply incensed by this shocking argument. Raising his hand to his forehead, he pressed it as though enduring intolerable pain.

The great lady darted a venomous glance at her son, as he uttered this protest, but nevertheless continued in a raised voice: "We are not authorized to throw away the means we devote to a sacred cause, perhaps to be wasted in worldly pleasures. This is my principal reason for opposing, with all my strength, any revival of this forgotten tale—the second is that, by doing so, you will bring disgrace on one of your ancestors."

"He brought disgrace on himself and all his descendants," said the professor, harshly. "But we can at least save our own honor by refusing to play the part of hypocrites."

Frau Hellwig left her place and approached her son with all her lofty superiority of bearing.

"Well—we will suppose that I yield to your view of this unpleasant affair," she said, coldly. "Suppose we should take these forty thousand thalers—whose loss, by the way, would reduce us to a very moderate income, but no matter, we will consider that—suppose, I say, we should take this money and return every farthing of it. What if the rejoicing heirs should then demand the accrued interest and the compound interest—what then?"

"I do not think they would be entitled to do that—but, if it should be so, you must remember the words: 'The sins of the fathers shall be visited upon the children.'"

"I am not a Hellwig—do not forget that, my son!" she interrupted. "I brought to this house an honored, stainless name—my father was a court councillor. The shame does not touch me, nor am I inclined to make a pecuniary sacrifice for the sake of washing away the blot. Do you think it my duty to starve in my old age on account of the sins of others?"

"Starve, while you have a son who is able to provide for you? Mother, do you not think my profession will enable me to give you a comfortable, even a luxurious support?"

"I thank you, my son!" she answered, in an icy tone. "But I prefer to live upon my own income, and remain my own mistress. I abhor dependence. Since your father's death I have known no will save the Lord's, and my own—and so it must always be. But we will not quarrel about nothing! I assure you that I believe the whole matter to be a mere crazy delusion of that old creature who lived under the roof. Nothing in the world will compel me to believe it a true account of an event that really occurred."

At this moment the door was noiselessly opened, and the councillor's widow entered. The beautiful woman had been weeping, and this time not like a Mater Dolorosa—the traces of tears were plainly visible on her reddened eye-lids, and dark spots burned on the roseate velvet of her cheeks. Passion had rudely shaken her soul—though the lady had done everything in her power to transform its ravages into an image of innocent suffering. To hide her disordered hair, she had wound about her hair a transparent white tulle scarf; the lovely face peeping from the mist like fabric, from beneath which one or two fair locks stole, received a touch of ideal grace. She had evidently attempted to make the tulle supply the place of the girlish delicacy and childlike artlessness, which had so long surrounded her like a halo.

She saw the fatal book lying on the table and started. Slowly, like a penitent, she approached the professor, and, with her face averted as if in shame, held out her hand. He did not take it.

"Forgive me, John," she pleaded. "I cannot account for my anger, even to myself. I, who am usually so calm and quiet, how could I be so excited! But it is all the fault of that miserable business! Just think, John, how that horrible book compromises my dear papa, and, besides, I so longed to save you at any cost from so humiliating a discovery. I can not help thinking that Caroline searched out this horrid story just to play us all an ill turn before her departure—"

"Hold your slanderous tongue!" he cried, threateningly, with such sudden violence, that she was silent in terror. "But I will forgive you," he added, after a pause, struggling to control himself, "on one condition."

She looked at him inquiringly. "That you tell me, without any reserve, in what way you learned the secret."

She remained silent a moment, then began in a sorrowful tone. "During papa's last illness, which, as you know, seemed likely to prove fatal, he asked me to bring him from his secretary various papers, which I was obliged to destroy before his eyes."

"They were Hirschsprung documents—he had probably preserved them as curiosities. Whether the apparent approach of death made him more communicative, or whether he felt the necessity of speaking of this incident to some one, I do not know—but he confided the secret to me—"

"And gave you a certain bracelet, did he not?" asked the professor, angrily.

Adele silently nodded, looking up at him with a helpless, beseeching gaze.

"After this statement, do you still believe the whole story to be the wanderings of a disordered brain?" asked

the professor, turning with a cold smile to his mother.

"I only know that person's folly and senselessness surpass everything I have ever experienced," she answered, trembling with anger, as she pointed to the young widow. "The demon of vanity, which gives her no peace, led her to put on the strange bracelet, that no one could fail to admire, in order to have the beautiful white arm seen also."

The young widow suddenly forgot her role of suffering penitent, and cast a fiery glance at her aunt, who thus pitilessly exposed one of the weakest points in her character.

"I will not discuss, Adele, how the wearing of stolen jewelry can possibly harmonize with the purity and innocence of your soul, which you so strongly emphasize on all occasions," said the professor, with apparent calmness, though his voice sounded like the low muttering of an approaching tempest. "It is your place to decide who is the greater sinner, the poor mother who steals bread for her starving children, or the rich woman reveling in luxury who receives stolen goods. But that you could have the effrontery to place this stolen ornament in the pure hand of the young girl who had just saved the life of your child—you said explicitly that the bracelet was very dear to you, but you would joyfully sacrifice your most cherished possession for Anna's sake—that you also dared, by right of your stainless descent, to sneer at that girl's origin, claiming for yourself all the virtues derived from a spotless lineage, and thrusting her into a sphere of degradation, while all the time you were aware of your father's deed—was so outrageous an act of infamy, that it can not be too severely condemned."

The young widow tottered, her eyes closed, and she grasped with an unsteady hand at the table-cloth as if for support.

"You are not wholly wrong, John," said Frau Hellwig, shaking the tottering figure rudely by the arm—all fainting women were detestable to her—"you are not wholly wrong, but your last sentence was rather too strong. Adele was certainly extremely foolish, but you must not forget what is due to her position. The comparison to the poor woman was—hardly sensible. There is a marked difference between finding property that has no owner, and intentionally stealing the bread of others. But this is another of the abominable new-fangled ideas of making comparisons between common people and those of high position. I am greatly surprised to hear such words from your lips. And it is also unwarrantable to compare a girl like Caroline to a woman of position—a low creature like her."

"Mother, I told you this afternoon, in the garden, that I would no longer tolerate these unpardonable attacks upon Felicitas!" cried the professor, while the veins upon his forehead swelled with anger.

"Oho, show me a little more respect, I beg! You are standing in your mother's presence!" she said, authoritatively, extending her hand toward him with a repellent gesture, while an annihilating glance darted from her cold gray eyes. "You play the part of knight-errant to this wandering princess admirably; there will soon be nothing for me to do save to lay my homage at her feet."

"You will surely treat her with respect, mother," he replied, with great composure, in answer to this biting taunt, and his eyes rested steadily and searchingly upon her face. "You will surely not refuse her your respect and esteem, for—she will one day become my wife."

And—the old house actually remained standing after this unprecedented statement! The earth did not open to swallow up the little town and this most misgueded action of the Hellwigs,

as the lady, in the first horrified moment of astonishment, really expected. The professor himself stood there, calm and immovable, the image of a man who has formed his own resolve, and on whom women's tears, hysterics and outbreaks of anger would produce no more impression than waves beating against a rock-bound coast.

Frau Hellwig, fairly speechless, staggered back, but the councillor's widow roused herself from her half-fainting condition, and burst into a peal of hysterical laughter. The transfiguring tulle fell from her head down on her neck, and her tangled locks, amid which the half-withered crimson rose still clung, twined like serpents about her flushed brow.

"There is the consequence of your far famed wisdom, aunt!" she cried shrilly. "Now it is my turn to triumph! Who begged you to marry off this girl, at any hazard, before John came home? I had a foreboding, at my first glimpse of this person, that she would bring misfortune on us all! Now take the burden of the disgrace, to which you were resolutely blind. I shall go at once to Bonn, to tell the professors' wives what sort of a girl is soon to enter their exclusive circle."

She rushed out of the room. Meantime Frau Hellwig had recovered from her stupor of amazement, and armed herself with all her innate pride and dignity.

"I evidently misunderstood you just now, John," she said, with apparent calmness.

"If you think so, I will repeat my remark," he replied, in a cold, unyielding tone. "I intend to marry Felicitas d'Orloweka."

"Do you dare to persist in this insane purpose?"

"Instead of answering you, I will ask—would you now bestow your blessing on my marriage with Adele?"

"Assuredly. She is a suitable match—I have no wish more earnest."

The professor flushed crimson and clinched his teeth to repress the torrent of angry words that rose to his lips.

"By that declaration you have lost the last remnant of authority to decide any important question in my life," he said, with forced composure. "So you do not consider that this woman, so utterly corrupt in her moral nature, this pitiful hypocrite, would poison my whole existence. You could sit quietly here in your luxurious home, and be perfectly satisfied to say of your absent son: 'He made a suitable match.' In answer to his boundless selfishness, I declare that I mean to secure happiness, and I can find it only with the poor, despised orphan, whom we have treated so cruelly."

Frau Hellwig burst into a harsh, sneering laugh.

"I still refrain from inflicting the worst punishment upon you!" she cried, with quivering lips. "But do not forget the old proverb, 'A father's blessing builds the child's house, but a mother's curse tears it down.'"

"Do you assert that your blessing would efface Adele's faults of character? Nor can a curse produce any effect if it falls on an innocent head. You will not utter it, mother! God will not receive it—it will recoil upon yourself and make your old age lonely and loveless."

"What care I for that? I know but two things, they are my guides—honor and shame! You must honor my will, and by the authority of this duty you will recall your foolish words."

"Never, you may be sure of that, mother!" cried her son and left the room, while she stood like a statue with outstretched arms. Did those distorted, livid lips utter the curse? No sound reached the hall—if it was spoken, it died noiselessly away—the God of love does not give so terrible a weapon to the wicked and revengeful.

The shadows of approaching night were already gathering in the large square court-yard. The wind had fall-