

The Old Mam'selle's Secret.

CHAPTER XIV.—(CONTINUED.)

"Frau Hellwig calls him 'the chosen of the Lord,' the tireless champion of religion," said Felicitas, hesitatingly, after a pause. "He must be a stern bigot, one of those gloomy zealots who, living themselves with the most iron consistency, according to God's decrees, for that very reason are inexorable to the faults and weaknesses of their fellow-men." A strange, low laugh reached Felicitas's ear. The old mam'selle heard one of those peculiar faces of which we never ask, "Are they beautiful or ugly?" The winning expression of feminine gentleness and kindness, and a deeply thoughtful mind, here mediated between the rigid laws of beauty and the irregular forms of nature—where the outline deviated from the rule of beauty, expression repaired the defect; but for this very reason this sort of countenance suddenly becomes unfamiliar as soon as its usual harmony is disturbed. At this moment Aunt Cordula looked actually uncanny, her laugh low and subdued, was full of scorn; her face, usually so calm and sweet, was almost Medusa-like in its inexpressible bitterness and unutterable contempt. The remark, in connection with the strange manner of the old mam'selle, threw a faint light upon her mysterious past, but not even one gleam was visible amid the dark web, and she now made every effort to efface the impression her momentary self-forgetfulness might have produced upon the young girl.

Several large portfolios lay open upon the round table in the middle of the room. Felicitas was perfectly familiar with the scattered sheets and papers. Illustrious names—Handel, Gluck, Haydn, and Mozart, appeared on the coarse yellow paper, often in almost illegible hieroglyphics, written with faded ink. It was Aunt Cordula's manuscript collection of famous composers. When Felicitas entered, the old lady had been turning over the papers, which after having lain undisturbed for years behind the glass doors of the cabinet, exhaled a penetrating odor of mold. Now she quietly resumed her work, replacing them in portfolios with the utmost care. The table was gradually cleared, and a thick book of manuscript, which had been at the bottom of the pile, appeared. On the title-page was written: "Music of the operetta, 'Wisdom of the Magistracy in Establishing Breweries,' by Johann Sebastian Bach."

The old mam'selle laid her finger significantly upon the composer's name. "You have never seen this, have you, Fay?" she asked, with a mournful smile. "It has been lying for many years in the upper drawer of my secret cabinet. This morning all sorts of thoughts flitted through my old brain—all reminding me that it was time for me to prepare for my last journey, and among these preparations I must put this book in the red portfolio. It is probably the only copy in existence—and will be worth its weight in gold some day, my dear Fay. The libretto, written specially for our little town of X—, mainly in the dialect of this place, was discovered nearly two decades ago, and created some stir in the musical world because the music belonging to it was supposed to have been written by Bach. This music, for which the search is still going on—the melodies, which have slept on this paper for more than a century, are a sort of Nibelungen treasure to musicians, especially as they are the only opera airs Bach ever composed. In 1705, the pupils of the public school here, and some of the citizens, brought out the operetta in the old town-hall.

She turned to the title-page, on the back was written, in a delicate hand—
"Score written by the hand of Johann Sebastian Bach, and received

from him as a memento in the year 1707. Gotthelf v. Hirschsprung.

"He sung in the operetta," said the old mam'selle, in a somewhat tremulous voice, pointing to the last name.

"And how did the book come into your hands, aunt?"

"By inheritance," fell curtly, almost harshly, from Aunt Cordula's lips, as she put the MS. into the red portfolio.

At such moments it was quite impossible to prolong a conversation the old mam'selle desired to break off. The fragile little figure expressed such resolute reserve, in gesture and bearing, that only the most utmost want of tact and the most shameless curiosity could persevere. Felicitas cast a longing look at the disappearing MS.; the melodies, which no living being except Aunt Cordula possessed, excited the keenest interest, but she did not venture to ask for a glimpse of them, as she had just avoided mentioning the bracelet in her account of what had happened—never would she have intentionally touched for the second time any chord that vibrated painfully in her old friend's memory.

The old mam'selle opened the piano, and Felicitas went out upon the balcony. The sun was just setting. The view of the distant landscape opposite was veiled by what seemed like a mist of whirling, golden dust, that dazzled the eyes and made the lines of earth and sky blend into a shapeless mass. Like grain cast far and wide by the sower's hand, long shafts of crimson and golden light streamed from the sinking sun, tingeing the tops of the forests, clothing the mountains and the blossoming trees in the valley. Certain portions of the scene stood forth in remarkably clear, distinct outlines, like a new thought in the human mind. The little village, whose last cottages boldly climbed the mountain slope, were no longer touched by the light, but the top of the high church-tower sparkled brightly, the open doors of the houses showed the red fire-light on the hearths, where the potatoes for the simple evening meal were cooking. The sweet repose of the evening brooded over the whole region, and up here the flowers poured forth an intoxicating fragrance; not a breath of air was stirring to bear it away or to lift the leaves and branches still drooping from the heat of the sun. Often a clumsy beetle fell clattering on the balcony, or a pair of swallows, intent on fulfilling their parental duties, whirred by; there was no other sound to disturb the solemn stillness. The notes of Beethoven's funeral march floated out into the balcony with a weird melody, but after a few bars Felicitas raised her drooping head and glanced anxiously into the room—there was no more music. A whisper, faint and spectral, fell upon the young girl's ear with the might of an incomprehensible warning. The hands gliding over the keys were weary, mortally weary, and the notes that echoed beneath their touch were the fluttering pinions of a soul that longed to escape from this world forever.

CHAPTER XV.

The baptism by fire and flood was attended by serious consequences to both participants. The child was violently attacked during the night with catarrhic fever, and Felicitas woke the next morning with a severe headache. Nevertheless, she attended to the household duties intrusted to her charge with her usual care; her wounded arm gave her little trouble—the healing ointment had done its work during the night.

The professor came home in the afternoon. He had just successfully performed an operation on the eyes of one of his patients which no physician had yet ventured to undertake. His gait and bearing showed the same quiet, cool indifference, which nothing could apparently disturb, the color in his face was not a shade deeper than usual, but any one who was familiar with the

expression of his eyes could not have failed to notice the unwonted luster that blazed beneath his bushy brows. So those cold, steel-gray eyes, which seemed made only to search and probe the souls of others, could at certain moments glow with warmth and pleasure.

He stopped at the door of the courtyard and asked Frederica, who was just coming into the house with a pail of water, how she felt after her illness.

"Oh, I'm perfectly well again, Herr Professor," she replied, putting down the bucket, "but the girl over there"—she pointed across the courtyard to a window on the ground floor—"Caroline must have got some hurt yesterday. I could hardly sleep a bit last night, she talked so fast in her dreams all night long, and to-day she is going about with a face like scarlet, and—"

"You ought to have told me of this before, Frederica," interrupted the professor, sternly.

"I did tell my mistress, but she said it would soon pass away. She has never had a doctor since she came here, and she is all right—ill weeds grow apace. It's no use to try to treat her kindly," she added, apologetically, noticing the cloud gathering on his face; "from the time she was a little child she was always an obstinate thing, holding herself aloof as though she were a princess—she, Lord preserve us, a player's daughter! Often when I've cooked or baked something especially nice for your mother, I have set aside some of it for her—dear me, we all have kind feelings! But do you suppose she would touch it? No, indeed. I always had to put it away again. You see, Herr Professor, she has behaved just so ever since she was a child. She has never eaten half enough since our master died; it's a wonder that she ever grew up so tall. And it's nothing but sheer obstinacy and sinful pride—she doesn't want to accept anything. I heard her with my own ears tell Heinrich that, when she had once left this horrible house, she would work her fingers to the bone, and send every penny she earned to Frau Hellwig until every mouthful she had eaten under this roof was paid for."

The old cook had not noticed how, while she was pouring out her heart, her listener's face had become more and more deeply flushed. She had scarcely finished speaking ere, without a word, he strode across the courtyard to the window she had pointed out. It was a large bow-window cased in stone, belonging to the room where Felicitas and Frederica slept, and now stood open, revealing the bare, whitewashed walls and scanty furniture. It was the same small, desolate chamber in which the little girl only four years old had endured her first agony of loneliness. There she was now—the obstinate, forsaken girl, who would not eat the bread of charity, who would work her fingers to the bone to rid herself of every obligation—there was pride which she had preserved with masculine determination in the midst of the deepest humiliations, an energetic will, all living in the young creature, nestling in an attitude of child-like grace, apparently asleep. Her head was supported by her arm, which rested on the window-sill, the satin-like smoothness of her complexion and the glittering radiance of her hair forming a strong contrast to the moldering gray stone. Innocence and grief were expressed in the pure profile, with its softly closed lips and the sorrowful droop at the corners of the mouth—the dark lashes still lay heavily on the pale cheeks, concealing the eyes which so often flashed defiant wrath.

The professor noiselessly approached, stood watching her a moment, and then bent over her.

"Felicitas!" fell from his lips in tones full of gentleness and sympathy. She started up and gazed incredulously into the eyes bent upon her—her

name uttered by his lips had acted upon her like an electric shock. She drew up her tall figure, which had just taken an attitude suggestive of the careless ease of childhood, and, with every muscle tense, stood as if ready to repel some anticipated attack.

The professor entirely ignored his transformation.

"I learn from Frederica that you are ill," he said, in the friendly tone generally used by a physician.

"I feel quite well again," she answered, coldly. "Undisturbed rest restores me."

"H'm—yet your appearance—" he did not finish the sentence, but put out his hand to clasp her wrist. She retreated several paces into the room.

"Be sensible, Felicitas!" he said, still maintaining the same kindness of tone, but his brow darkened gloomily as the girl stood motionless, folding her arms almost convulsively across her waist. Spite of his thick beard, his angry compression of the lips was plainly visible.

"Well, then, I no longer speak as your physician, but as your guardian," he said, sternly, "and by that authority I command you to come here."

She did not look up, her lashes drooped even lower on her cheeks, now crimsoned by a burning blush, and her chest heaved as though she was undergoing some severe conflict, but she slowly advanced and, with averted face, silently held out her hand, which he clasped gently in his own. The slender little hand, hardened by toil, trembled so violently that an expression of deep pity crossed the professor's grave features.

"Foolish, obstinate child, you have compelled me again to treat you harshly," he said, with gentle earnestness. "And I hoped that we might part without another unkind word. Have you no look for me or for my mother save one of quenchless hate?"

"We can reap nothing that we have not sown!" she replied, in a half-stifled tone, trying to withdraw her hand from his hold, and gazing with as much horror at the fingers that grasped her wrist in a gentle, yet powerful clasp, as though they had been red hot iron.

He hurriedly dropped her hand. Gentleness and pity vanished from his face, he struck angrily with his cane at some innocent blades of grass growing in the chinks between the stones. Felicitas breathed more freely; this harsh, stern manner suited him; his tone of pity was horrible to her.

"Always the same reproach," he said, coldly, at last. "Your overweening pride may have been often wounded, but it was our duty to bring you up with moderate views. I can accept your hatred calmly, for I acted solely for your best good. As to my mother—well, her love may be hard to win, I will not dispute that, but she is incorruptibly just, and her fear of God would never have allowed her to let any real harm or injustice befall you. You are about to go out into the world and take care of yourself. A yielding disposition is especially needful in your position. How will it be possible for you to associate with others while you so obstinately cling to your false views of life? How can you ever win affection with those defiant eyes?" Felicitas raised her long lashes and looked at him with a calm, firm gaze.

"If any one can show me that my opinions are opposed to morality and reason, I will willingly resign them," she answered, in her low, expressive voice. "But I know that I do not stand alone in the belief that no person, whoever he may be, possesses the right to condemn another to intellectual death, I know that thousands feel, with me, how unjust and culpable it is to deny any human soul the gratification of its inmost yearnings, merely because it swells in the body of one of humble birth. I shall go out into the world with confidence, for I have faith