

A MYSTERIOUS DWELLING.

THIRTY years have rolled away since I established myself as a notary in the old maritime and commercial city of —, where my maternal grandfather and great-grandfather—influential merchants—had dwelt for the previous fifty years. The house I had selected for a residence was situated between two others, totally unlike each other. On one side stood a picturesque, cheery habitation, resounding with children's merry voices; on the other, a massive and gloomy dwelling, whose narrow, hermetically sealed windows displayed a goodly array of spiders' webs. The paint on its walls and on its entrance door had long since disappeared. The bronze handle and the lion's head knocker were covered with verdigris. Although situated in the centre of a bustling thoroughfare, this house remained silent as death. All through the day the stillness was unbroken, no signs of life were visible within; but at night, when all else was at rest, rumor said that something moved about its rooms.

At the back of the house a long building jutted out into the garden. The upper portion of this wing—the only part I could see, in consequence of an unusually high wall which divided the two properties—was pierced by a row of large windows. I made up my mind that this had once been a ballroom, for when the sun shone full upon the dusky windows, silken draperies, faded and threadbare, were distinctly visible.

It was commonly supposed that this mysterious dwelling was inhabited by a very old woman named Jansen, the widow of a wealthy merchant who had been dead many years. People believed in the existence of Madame Jansen, although no one had ever seen her. More than once in the early morning, before the work-day life had begun in the busy city, an old woman, who sold edibles at the street corner, had been seen to knock at the door of the deserted house. On these occasions the door opened on the chain, a wrinkled hand and arm protruded into the old woman's basket to take what was needed, and then the arm was withdrawn, the door closed softly, and all was silent as before.

These rumors served to heighten the mystery immensely. My vocation as notary often took me among people who professed to know a great deal about Sievart Jansen and his widow; and these stoutly maintained that Madame Jansen was dead, that she had only survived her husband a few months, and that she lay buried at his side. I once had occasion to search the archives of the Tribunal. In my search I stumbled across Madame Jansen's will, duly signed and sealed according to the legal formula. I saw at a glance by this document that my suspicions had been correct, and that Madame Jansen was not only still living, but had dealings with the outer world. It was only by idle gossip that she had been buried all these years.

According to custom, my wife and I called on a Monsieur and Madame Vorbist, who lived on our right. Our conversation seemed naturally to turn in the direction of the occupant of the house on my left; and after saying that I considered it unbecoming to avoid an uninviting

looking dwelling, both my wife and myself said that we intended to pay our respects in that direction also. At these words my friends laughed in our faces.

"You will never get in there," said Monsieur Vorbist; "for years, I believe, no one has crossed the threshold. The old lady keeps house all by herself, no one knows how; and even if you contrived to force an entrance, your politeness would be ill requited."

"But," I observed, "I am informed, on unimpeachable authority, that she gives a quarter of her fortune to the town and the remainder to a local charity. Such generosity raises her high in my esteem; she cannot be wholly unapproachable."

My neighbor shook his head dubiously.

"That may be true," said he, at length, "for she had her hands tied by her husband's will. But, after all, what is this charity? The object of her generosity is an institution which pauperizes and makes worthless those who might otherwise become useful citizens. This richly endowed charity is for old soldiers and sailors, and the institution is so shamefully managed that it benefits only the most idle and dissolute. Its foundation is due to a brother and sister who were both wealthy. The brother was a retired major, and I never heard much good of him; the sister was the widow of a sea captain. They had no children, and spent the last few years of their lives in a large house situated on an eminence beyond the North Gate. You may still see, in front of that house, groups of these pensioners, carousing with shameless impudence on the proceeds of a charity to which they have no just claim; and if you care to watch them, you will see them drink, and will hear them swear at harmless folk, in a manner which disgusts all respectable people. It is to such a crew that the bulk of your neighbor's fortune is devoted."

I felt indignant at this waste of precious bounty, and only hoped that the description was overdrawn. At the same time the mysterious benefactress became more and more interesting to me, and I resolved to make her acquaintance.

"The old lady must be a character indeed! I think we will risk a visit," said I, laughing.

"We wish you every success," said Monsieur and Madame Vorbist, and so we parted.

We were not admitted. In response to our knock the house door opened just far enough to insert a hand, but there it stopped, held fast by the chain on the inside. I tapped again, and heard the echoes die away in the long passages. Just as I was on the point of knocking for the third time, my wife checked me.

"Don't you see that everybody is laughing at us?"

And, in truth, so it was. The passers-by seemingly enjoyed our discomfiture, and had many pleasant things to say to each other at our expense.

The summer was drawing to a close. Autumn had begun to whisper of the dread things in store for us. One day my wife and I went down into the garden to col-