

### **CHAPTER III.**

A room of magnificent size; furnished with every conventional luxury that money can buy; lavishly provided with newspapers and books of reference; lighted by tall windows in the day-time, and by gorgeous chandeliers at night, may be nevertheless one of the dreariest places of rest and shelter that can be found on the civilised earth. Such places exist, by hundreds, in those hotels of monstrous proportions and pretensions, which now engulf the traveller who ends his journey on the pier or the platform. It may be that we feel ourselves to be strangers among strangers--it may be that there is something innately repellent in splendid carpets and curtains, chairs and tables, which have no social associations to recommend them--it may be that the mind loses its elasticity under the inevitable restraint on friendly communication, which expresses itself in lowered tones and instinctive distrust of our next neighbour; but this alone is certain: life, in the public drawing-room of a great hotel, is life with all its healthiest emanations perishing in an exhausted receiver.

On the same day, and nearly at the same hour, when Ovid had left his house, two women sat in a corner of the public room, in one of the largest of the railway hotels latterly built in London.

Without observing it themselves, they were objects of curiosity to their fellow-travellers. They spoke to each other in a foreign language. They were dressed in deep mourning--with an absence of fashion and a simplicity of material which attracted the notice of every other woman in the room. One of them wore a black veil over her gray hair. Her hands were brown, and knotty at the joints; her eyes looked unnaturally bright for her age; innumerable wrinkles crossed and re-crossed her skinny face; and her aquiline nose (as one of the ladies present took occasion to remark) was so disastrously like the nose of the great Duke of Wellington as to be an offensive feature in the face of a woman.

The lady's companion, being a man, took a more merciful view. "She can't help being ugly," he whispered. "But see how she looks at the girl with her. A good old creature, I say, if ever there was one yet." The lady eyed him, as only a jealous woman can eye her husband, and whispered back, "Of course you're in love with that slip of a girl!"

She was a slip of a girl--and not even a tall slip. At seventeen years of age, it was doubtful whether she would ever grow to a better height.

But a girl who is too thin, and not even so tall as the Venus de' Medici, may still be possessed of personal attractions. It was not altogether a matter of certainty, in this case, that the attractions were sufficiently remarkable to excite general admiration. The fine colour and the plump healthy cheeks, the broad smile, and the regular teeth, the well-developed mouth, and the promising bosom which form altogether the average type of beauty found in the purely bred English maiden, were not among the noticeable charms of the small creature in gloomy black, shrinking into a corner of the big room. She had very little colour of any sort to boast of. Her hair was of so light a brown that it just escaped being flaxen; but it had the negative merit of not being forced down to her eyebrows, and twisted into the hideous curly-wig which exhibits a liberal equality of ugliness on the heads of women in the present day. There was a delicacy of finish in her features--in the nose and the lips especially--a sensitive changefulness in the expression of her eyes (too dark in themselves to be quite in harmony with her light hair), and a subtle yet simple witchery in her rare smile, which atoned, in some degree at least, for want of complexion in the face and of flesh in the figure. Men might dispute her claims to beauty--but no one could deny that she was, in the common phrase, an interesting person. Grace and refinement; a quickness of apprehension and a vivacity of movement, suggestive of some foreign origin; a childish readiness of wonder, in the presence of new objects--and perhaps, under happier circumstances, a childish playfulness with persons whom she loved--were all characteristic attractions of the modest stranger who was in the charge of the ugly old woman, and who was palpably the object of that wrinkled duenna's devoted love.

A travelling writing-case stood open on a table near them. In an interval of silence the girl looked at it reluctantly. They had been talking of family affairs--and had spoken in Italian, so as to keep their domestic secrets from the ears of the strangers about them. The old woman was the first to resume the conversation.

"My Carmina, you really ought to write that letter," she said; "the illustrious Mrs. Gallilee is waiting to hear of our arrival in London."

Carmina took up the pen, and put it down again with a sigh. "We only arrived last night," she pleaded. "Dear old Teresa, let us have one day in London by ourselves!"

Teresa received this proposal with undisguised amazement and alarm,

"Jesu Maria! a day in London--and your aunt waiting for you all the time!

She is your second mother, my dear, by appointment; and her house is your new home. And you propose to stop a whole day at an hotel, instead of going home. Impossible! Write, my Carmina--write. See, here is the address on a card:--'Fairfield Gardens.' What a pretty place it must be to live in, with such a name as that! And a sweet lady, no doubt. Come! Come!"

But Carmina still resisted. "I have never even seen my aunt," she said. "It is dreadful to pass my life with a stranger. Remember, I was only a child when you came to us after my mother's death. It is hardly six months yet since I lost my father. I have no one but you, and, when I go to this new home, you will leave me. I only ask for one more day to be together, before we part."

The poor old duenna drew back out of sight, in the shadow of a curtain--and began to cry. Carmina took her hand, under cover of a tablecloth; Carmina knew how to console her. "We will go and see sights," she whispered "and, when dinner-time comes, you shall have a glass of the Porto-porto-wine."

Teresa looked round out of the shadow, as easily comforted as a child. "Sights!" she exclaimed--and dried her tears. "Porto-porto-wine!" she repeated--and smacked her withered lips at the relishing words. "Ah, my child, you have not forgotten the consolations I told you of, when I lived in London in my young days. To think of you, with an English father, and never in London till now! I used to go to museums and concerts sometimes, when my English mistress was pleased with me. That gracious lady often gave me a glass of the fine strong purple wine. The Holy Virgin grant that Aunt Gallilee may be as kind a woman! Such a head of hair as the other one she cannot hope to have. It was a joy to dress it. Do you think I wouldn't stay here in England with you if I could? What is to become of my old man in Italy, with his cursed asthma, and nobody to nurse him? Oh, but those were dull years in London! The black endless streets--the dreadful Sundays--the hundreds of thousands of people, always in a hurry; always with grim faces set on business, business, business! I was glad to go back and be married in Italy. And here I am in London again, after God knows how many years. No matter. We will enjoy ourselves to-day; and when we go to Madam Gallilee's to-morrow, we will tell a little lie, and say we only arrived on the evening that has not yet come."

The duenna's sense of humour was so tickled by this prospective view of the little lie, that she leaned back in her chair and laughed. Carmina's rare smile showed itself faintly. The terrible first interview with the unknown aunt still oppressed her. She took up a newspaper in despair. "Oh, my old dear!" she said, "let us get out of this dreadful room, and be reminded of Italy!" Teresa lifted her ugly hands in bewilderment. "Reminded of Italy--in

London?"

"Is there no Italian music in London?" Carmina asked suggestively.

The duenna's bright eyes answered this in their own language. She snatched up the nearest newspaper.

It was then the height of the London concert season. Morning performances of music were announced in rows. Reading the advertised programmes, Carmina found them, in one remarkable respect, all alike. They would have led an ignorant stranger to wonder whether any such persons as Italian composers, French composers, and English composers had ever existed. The music offered to the English public was music of exclusively German (and for the most part modern German) origin. Carmina held the opinion--in common with Mozart and Rossini, as well as other people--that music without melody is not music at all. She laid aside the newspaper.

The plan of going to a concert being thus abandoned, the idea occurred to them of seeing pictures. Teresa, in search of information, tried her luck at a great table in the middle of the room, on which useful books were liberally displayed. She returned with a catalogue of the Royal Academy Exhibition (which someone had left on the table), and with the most universally well-informed book, on a small scale, that has ever enlightened humanity--modestly described on the title-page as an Almanac.

Carmina opened the catalogue at the first page, and discovered a list of Royal Academicians. Were all these gentlemen celebrated painters? Out of nearly forty names, three only had made themselves generally known beyond the limits of England. She turned to the last page. The works of art on show numbered more than fifteen hundred. Teresa, looking over her shoulder, made the same discovery. "Our heads will ache, and our feet will ache," she remarked, "before we get out of that place." Carmina laid aside the catalogue.

Teresa opened the Almanac at hazard, and hit on the page devoted to Amusements. Her next discovery led her to the section inscribed "Museums." She scored an approving mark at that place with her thumbnail--and read the list in fluent broken English.

The British Museum? Teresa's memory of that magnificent building recalled it vividly in one respect. She shook her head. "More headache and footache, there!" Bethnal Green; Indian Museum; College of Surgeons; Practical Geology; South Kensington; Patent Museum--all unknown to Teresa. "The

saints preserve us! what headaches and footaches in all these, if they are as big as that other one!" She went on with the list--and astonished everybody in the room by suddenly clapping her hands. Sir John Soane's Museum, Lincoln's Inn Fields. "Ah, but I remember that! A nice little easy museum in a private house, and all sorts of pretty things to see. My dear love, trust your old Teresa. Come to Soane!"

In ten minutes more they were dressed, and on the steps of the hotel. The bright sunlight, the pleasant air, invited them to walk. On the same afternoon, when Ovid had set forth on foot for Lincoln's Inn Fields, Carmina and Teresa set forth on foot for Lincoln's Inn Fields. Trivial obstacles had kept the man away from the College. Would trivial obstacles keep the women away from the Museum?

They crossed the Strand, and entered a street which led out of it towards the North; Teresa's pride in her memory forbidding her thus far to ask their way.

Their talk--dwelling at first on Italy, and on the memory of Carmina's Italian mother--reverted to the formidable subject of Mrs. Gallilee. Teresa's hopeful view of the future turned to the cousins, and drew the picture of two charming little girls, eagerly waiting to give their innocent hearts to their young relative from Italy. "Are there only two?" she said. "Surely you told me there was a boy, besides the girls?" Carmina set her right. "My cousin Ovid is a great doctor," she continued with an air of importance. "Poor papa used to say that our family would have reason to be proud of him." "Does he live at home?" asked simple Teresa. "Oh, dear, no! He has a grand house of his own. Hundreds of sick people go there to be cured, and give hundreds of golden guineas." Hundreds of golden guineas gained by only curing sick people, represented to Teresa's mind something in the nature of a miracle: she solemnly raised her eyes to heaven. "What a cousin to have! Is he young? is he handsome? is he married?"

Instead of answering these questions, Carmina looked over her shoulder. "Is this poor creature following us?" she asked.

They had now turned to the right, and had entered a busy street leading directly to Covent Garden. The "creature" (who was undoubtedly following them) was one of the starved and vagabond dogs of London. Every now and then, the sympathies of their race lead these inveterate wanderers to attach themselves, for the time, to some human companion, whom their mysterious insight chooses from the crowd. Teresa, with the hard feeling towards animals which is one of the serious defects of the Italian character, cried, "Ah, the mangy beast!" and lifted her umbrella. The dog started back,

waited a moment, and followed them again as they went on.

Carmina's gentle heart gave its pity to this lost and hungry fellow-creature. "I must buy that poor dog something to eat," she said--and stopped suddenly as the idea struck her.

The dog, accustomed to kicks and curses, was ignorant of kindness. Following close behind her, when she checked herself, he darted away in terror into the road. A cab was driven by rapidly at the same moment. The wheel passed over the dog's neck. And there was an end, as a man remarked looking on, of the troubles of a cur.

This common accident struck the girl's sensitive nature with horror. Helpless and speechless, she trembled piteously. The nearest open door was the door of a music-seller's shop. Teresa led her in, and asked for a chair and a glass of water. The proprietor, feeling the interest in Carmina which she seldom failed to inspire among strangers, went the length of offering her a glass of wine. Preferring water, she soon recovered herself sufficiently to be able to leave her chair.

"May I change my mind about going to the museum?" she said to her companion. "After what has happened, I hardly feel equal to looking at curiosities."

Teresa's ready sympathy tried to find some acceptable alternative. "Music would be better, wouldn't it?" she suggested.

The so-called Italian Opera was open that night, and the printed announcement of the performance was in the shop. They both looked at it. Fortune was still against them. A German opera appeared on the bill. Carmina turned to the music-seller in despair. "Is there no music, sir, but German music to be heard in London?" she asked. The hospitable shopkeeper produced a concert programmed for that afternoon--the modest enterprise of an obscure piano-forte teacher, who could only venture to address pupils, patrons, and friends. What did he promise? Among other things, music from "Lucia," music from "Norma," music from "Ernani." Teresa made another approving mark with her thumb-nail; and Carmina purchased tickets.

The music-seller hurried to the door to stop the first empty cab that might pass. Carmina showed a deplorable ignorance of the law of chances. She shrank from the bare idea of getting into a cab. "We may run over some other poor creature," she said. "If it isn't a dog, it may be a child next time."

Teresa and the music-seller suggested a more reasonable view as gravely as they could. Carmina humbly submitted to the claims of common sense--without yielding, for all that. "I know I'm wrong," she confessed. "Don't spoil my pleasure; I can't do it!"

The strange parallel was now complete. Bound for the same destination, Carmina and Ovid had failed to reach it alike. And Carmina had stopped to look at the garden of the British Museum, before she overtook Ovid in the quiet square.