

CHAPTER X.

Mrs. Gallilee was on her way to the breakfast-room, when her son entered the house. They met in the hall. "Is your packing done?" she asked.

He was in no humour to wait, and make his confession at that moment. "Not yet," was his only reply.

Mrs. Gallilee led the way into the room. "Ovid's luggage is not ready yet," she announced; "I believe he will lose his train."

They were all at the breakfast table, the children and the governess included. Carmina's worn face, telling its tale of a wakeful night, brightened again, as it had brightened at the bedroom window, when she saw Ovid. She took his hand frankly, and made light of her weary looks. "No, my cousin," she said, playfully; "I mean to be worthier of my pretty bed to-night; I am not going to be your patient yet." Mr. Gallilee (with this mouth full at the moment) offered good advice. "Eat and drink as I do, my dear," he said to Carmina; "and you will sleep as I do. Off I go when the light's out--flat on my back, as Mrs. Gallilee will tell you--and wake me if you can, till it's time to get up. Have some buttered eggs, Ovid. They're good, ain't they, Zo?" Zo looked up from her plate, and agreed with her father, in one emphatic word, "Jolly!" Miss Minerva, queen of governesses, instantly did her duty. "Zoe! how often must I tell you not to talk slang? Do you ever hear your sister say 'Jolly?'" That highly-cultivated child, Maria, strong in conscious virtue, added her authority in support of the protest. "No young lady who respects herself, Zoe, will ever talk slang." Mr. Gallilee was unworthy of such a daughter. He muttered under his breath, "Oh, bother!" Zo held out her plate for more. Mr. Gallilee was delighted. "My child all over!" he exclaimed. "We are both of us good feeders. Zo will grow up a fine woman." He appealed to his stepson to agree with him. "That's your medical opinion, Ovid, isn't it?"

Carmina's pretty smile passed like rippling light over her eyes and her lips. In her brief experience of England, Mr. Gallilee was the one exhilarating element in family life.

Mrs. Gallilee's mind still dwelt on her son's luggage, and on the rigorous punctuality of railway arrangements.

"What is your servant about?" she said to Ovid. "It's his business to see that you are ready in time."

It was useless to allow the false impression that prevailed to continue any longer. Ovid set them all right, in the plainest and fewest words.

"My servant is not to blame," he said. "I have written an apology to my friend--I am not going away."

For the moment, this astounding announcement was received in silent dismay--excepting the youngest member of the company. After her father, Ovid was the one other person in the world who held a place in Zo's odd little heart. Her sentiments were now expressed without hesitation and without reserve. She put down her spoon, and she cried, "Hooray!" Another exhibition of vulgarity. But even Miss Minerva was too completely preoccupied by the revelation which had burst on the family to administer the necessary reproof. Her eager eyes were riveted on Ovid. As for Mr. Gallilee, he held his bread and butter suspended in mid-air, and stared open-mouthed at his stepson, in helpless consternation.

Mrs. Gallilee always set the right example. Mrs. Gallilee was the first to demand an explanation.

"What does this extraordinary proceeding mean?" she asked.

Ovid was impenetrable to the tone in which that question was put. He had looked at his cousin, when he declared his change of plan--and he was looking at her still. Whatever the feeling of the moment might be, Carmina's sensitive face expressed it vividly. Who could mistake the faintly-rising colour in her cheeks, the sweet quickening of light in her eyes, when she met Ovid's look? Still hardly capable of estimating the influence that she exercised over him, her sense of the interest taken in her by Ovid was the proud sense that makes girls innocently bold. Whatever the others might think of his broken engagement, her artless eyes said plainly, "My feeling is happy surprise."

Mrs. Gallilee summoned her son to attend her, in no friendly voice. She, too, had looked at Carmina--and had registered the result of her observation privately.

"Are we to hear your reasons?" she inquired.

Ovid had made the one discovery in the world, on which his whole heart was set. He was so happy, that he kept his mother out of his secret, with a masterly composure worthy of herself.

"I don't think a sea-voyage is the right thing for me," he answered.

"Rather a sudden change of opinion," Mrs. Gallilee remarked.

Ovid coolly agreed with her. It was rather sudden, he said.

The governess still looked at him, wondering whether he would provoke an outbreak.

After a little pause, Mrs. Gallilee accepted her son's short answer--with a sudden submission which had a meaning of its own. She offered Ovid another cup of tea; and, more remarkable yet, she turned to her eldest daughter, and deliberately changed the subject. "What are your lessons, my dear, to-day?" she asked, with bland maternal interest.

By this time, bewildered Mr. Gallilee had finished his bread and butter. "Ovid knows best, my dear," he said cheerfully to his wife. Mrs. Gallilee's sudden recovery of her temper did not include her husband. If a look could have annihilated that worthy man, his corporal presence must have vanished into air, when he had delivered himself of his opinion. As it was, he only helped Zo to another spoonful of jam. "When Ovid first thought of that voyage," he went on, "I said, Suppose he's sick? A dreadful sensation isn't it, Miss Minerva? First you seem to sink into your shoes, and then it all comes up--eh? You're not sick at sea? I congratulate you! I most sincerely congratulate you! My dear Ovid, come and dine with me to-night at the club." He looked doubtfully at his wife, as he made that proposal. "Got the headache, my dear? I'll take you out with pleasure for a walk. What's the matter with her, Miss Minerva? Oh, I see! Hush! Maria's going to say grace.-- Amen! Amen!"

They all rose from the table.

Mr. Gallilee was the first to open the door. The smoking-room at Fairfield Gardens was over the kitchen; he preferred enjoying his cigar in the garden of the Square. He looked at Carmina and Ovid, as if he wanted one of them to accompany him. They were both at the aviary, admiring the birds, and absorbed in their own talk. Mr. Gallilee resigned himself to his fate; appealing, on his way out, to somebody to agree with him as usual. "Well!" he said with a little sigh, "a cigar keeps one company." Miss Minerva (absorbed in her own thoughts) passed near him, on her way to the school-room with her pupils. "You would find it so yourself, Miss Minerva--that is to say, if you smoked, which of course you don't. Be a good girl, Zo; attend to

your lessons."

Zo's perversity in the matter of lessons put its own crooked construction on this excellent advice. She answered in a whisper, "Give us a holiday."

The passing aspirations of idle minds, being subject to the law of chances, are sometimes fulfilled, and so exhibit poor human wishes in a consolatory light. Thanks to the conversation between Carmina and Ovid, Zo got her holiday after all.

Mrs. Gallilee, still as amiable as ever, had joined her son and her niece at the aviary. Ovid said to his mother, "Carmina is fond of birds. I have been telling her she may see all the races of birds assembled in the Zoological Gardens. It's a perfect day. Why shouldn't we go!"

The stupidest woman living would have understood what this proposal really meant. Mrs. Gallilee sanctioned it as composedly as if Ovid and Carmina had been brother and sister. "I wish I could go with you," she said, "but my household affairs fill my morning. And there is a lecture this afternoon, which I cannot possibly lose. I don't know, Carmina, whether you are interested in these things. We are to have the apparatus, which illustrates the conversion of radiant energy into sonorous vibrations. Have you ever heard, my dear, of the Diathermancy of Ebonite? Not in your way, perhaps?"

Carmina looked as unintelligent as Zo herself. Mrs. Gallilee's science seemed to frighten her. The Diathermancy of Ebonite, by some incomprehensible process, drove her bewildered mind back on her old companion. "I want to give Teresa a little pleasure before we part," she said timidly; "may she go with us?"

"Of course!" cried Mrs. Gallilee. "And, now I think of it, why shouldn't the children have a little pleasure too? I will give them a holiday. Don't be alarmed, Ovid; Miss Minerva will look after them. In the meantime, Carmina, tell your good old friend to get ready."

Carmina hastened away, and so helped Mrs. Gallilee to the immediate object which she had in view--a private interview with her son.

Ovid anticipated a searching inquiry into the motives which had led him to give up the sea voyage. His mother was far too clever a woman to waste her time in that way. Her first words told him that his motive was as plainly revealed to her as the sunlight shining in at the window.

"That's a charming girl," she said, when Carmina closed the door behind her. "Modest and natural--quite the sort of girl, Ovid, to attract a clever man like you."

Ovid was completely taken by surprise, and owned it by his silence. Mrs. Gallilee went on in a tone of innocent maternal pleasantry.

"You know you began young," she said; "your first love was that poor little wizen girl of Lady Northlake's who died. Child's play, you will tell me, and nothing more. But, my dear, I am afraid I shall require some persuasion, before I quite sympathize with this new--what shall I call it?--infatuation is too hard a word, and 'fancy' means nothing. We will leave it a blank. Marriages of cousins are debatable marriages, to say the least of them; and Protestant fathers and Papist mothers do occasionally involve difficulties with children. Not that I say, No. Far from it. But if this is to go on, I do hesitate."

Something in his mother's tone grated on Ovid's sensibilities. "I don't at all follow you," he said, rather sharply; "you are looking a little too far into the future."

"Then we will return to the present," Mrs. Gallilee replied--still with the readiest submission to the humour of her son.

On recent occasions, she had expressed the opinion that Ovid would do wisely--at his age, and with his professional prospects--to wait a few years before he thought of marrying. Having said enough in praise of her niece to satisfy him for the time being (without appearing to be meanly influenced, in modifying her opinion, by the question of money), her next object was to induce him to leave England immediately, for the recovery of his health. With Ovid absent, and with Carmina under her sole superintendence, Mrs. Gallilee could see her way to her own private ends.

"Really," she resumed, "you ought to think seriously of change of air and scene. You know you would not allow a patient, in your present state of health, to trifle with himself as you are trifling now. If you don't like the sea, try the Continent. Get away somewhere, my dear, for your own sake."

It was only possible to answer this, in one way. Ovid owned that his mother was right and asked for time to think. To his infinite relief, he was interrupted by a knock at the door. Miss Minerva entered the room--not in a very amiable temper, judging by appearances.

"I am afraid I disturb you," she began.

Ovid seized the opportunity of retreat. He had some letters to write--he hurried away to the library.

"Is there any mistake?" the governess asked, when she and Mrs. Gallilee were alone.

"In what respect, Miss Minerva?"

"I met your niece, ma'am, on the stairs. She says you wish the children to have a holiday."

"Yes, to go with my son and Miss Carmina to the Zoological Gardens."

"Miss Carmina said I was to go too."

"Miss Carmina was perfectly right."

The governess fixed her searching eyes on Mrs. Gallilee. "You really wish me to go with them?" she said.

"I do."

"I know why."

In the course of their experience, Mrs. Gallilee and Miss Minerva had once quarrelled fiercely--and Mrs. Gallilee had got the worst of it. She learnt her lesson. For the future she knew how to deal with her governess. When one said, "I know why," the other only answered, "Do you?"

"Let's have it out plainly, ma'am," Miss Minerva proceeded. "I am not to let Mr. Ovid" (she laid a bitterly strong emphasis on the name, and flushed angrily)--"I am not to let Mr. Ovid and Miss Carmina be alone together."

"You are a good guesser," Mrs. Gallilee remarked quietly.

"No," said Miss Minerva more quietly still; "I have only seen what you have seen."

"Did I tell you what I have seen?"

"Quite needless, ma'am. Your son is in love with his cousin. When am I to be

ready?"

The bland mistress mentioned the hour. The rude governess left the room.

Mrs. Gallilee looked at the closing door with a curious smile. She had already suspected Miss Minerva of being crossed in love. The suspicion was now confirmed, and the man was discovered.

"Soured by a hopeless passion," she said to herself. "And the object is--my son."