

CHAPTER XV.

Two days passed. In spite of the warnings that he had received, Ovid remained in London.

The indisputable authority of Benjulia had no more effect on him than the unanswerable arguments of Mrs. Gallilee. "Recent circumstances" (as his mother expressed it) "had strengthened his infatuated resistance to reason." The dreaded necessity for Teresa's departure had been hastened by a telegram from Italy: Ovid felt for Carmina's distress with sympathies which made her dearer to him than ever. On the second morning after the visit to the Zoological Gardens, her fortitude had been severely tried. She had found the telegram under her pillow, enclosed in a farewell letter. Teresa had gone.

"My Carmina,--I have kissed you, and cried over you, and I am writing good-bye as well as my poor eyes will let me. Oh, my heart's darling, I cannot be cruel enough to wake you, and see you suffer! Forgive me for going away, with only this dumb farewell. I am so fond of you--that is my only excuse. While he still lives, my helpless old man has his claim on me. Write by every post, and trust me to write back--and remember what I said when I spoke of Ovid. Love the good man who loves you; and try to make the best of the others. They cannot surely be cruel to the poor angel who depends on their kindness. Oh, how hard life is--"

The paper was blotted, and the rest was illegible.

The miserable day of Teresa's departure was passed by Carmina in the solitude of her room: gently and firmly, she refused to see anyone. This strange conduct added to Mrs. Gallilee's anxieties. Already absorbed in considering Ovid's obstinacy, and the means of overcoming it, she was now confronted by a resolute side in the character of her niece, which took her by surprise. There might be difficulties to come, in managing Carmina, which she had not foreseen. Meanwhile, she was left to act on her own unaided discretion in the serious matter of her son's failing health. Benjulia had refused to help her; he was too closely occupied in his laboratory to pay or receive visits. "I have already given my advice" (the doctor wrote). "Send him away. When he has had a month's change, let me see his letters; and then, if I have anything more to say, I will tell you what I think of your son."

Left in this position, Mrs. Gallilee's hard self-denial yielded to the one sound conclusion that lay before her. The only influence that could be now used

over Ovid, with the smallest chance of success, was the influence of Carmina. Three days after Teresa's departure, she invited her niece to take tea in her own boudoir. Carmina found her reading. "A charming book," she said, as she laid it down, "on a most interesting subject, Geographical Botany. The author divides the earth into twenty-five botanical regions--but, I forget; you are not like Maria; you don't care about these things."

"I am so ignorant," Carmina pleaded. "Perhaps, I may know better when I get older." A book on the table attracted her by its beautiful binding. She took it up. Mrs. Gallilee looked at her with compassionate good humour.

"Science again, my dear," she said facetiously, "inviting you in a pretty dress! You have taken up the 'Curiosities of Coprolites.' That book is one of my distinctions--a presentation copy from the author."

"What are Coprolites?" Carmina asked, trying to inform herself on the subject of her aunt's distinctions.

Still good-humoured, but with an effort that began to appear, Mrs. Gallilee lowered herself to the level of her niece.

"Coprolites," she explained, "are the fossilised indigestions of extinct reptiles. The great philosopher who has written that book has discovered scales, bones, teeth, and shells--the undigested food of those interesting Saurians. What a man! what a field for investigation! Tell me about your own reading. What have you found in the library?"

"Very interesting books--at least to me," Carmina answered. "I have found many volumes of poetry. Do you ever read poetry?"

Mrs. Gallilee laid herself back in her chair, and submitted patiently to her niece's simplicity. "Poetry?" she repeated, in accents of resignation. "Oh, good heavens!"

Unlucky Carmina tried a more promising topic. "What beautiful flowers you have in the drawing-room!" she said.

"Nothing remarkable, my dear. Everybody has flowers in their drawing-rooms--they are part of the furniture."

"Did you arrange them yourself, aunt?"

Mrs. Gallilee still endured it. "The florist's man," she said, "does all that. I

sometimes dissect flowers, but I never trouble myself to arrange them. What would be the use of the man if I did?" This view of the question struck Carmina dumb. Mrs. Gallilee went on. "By-the-by, talking of flowers reminds one of other superfluities. Have you tried the piano in your room? Will it do?"

"The tone is quite perfect!" Carmina answered with enthusiasm. "Did you choose it?" Mrs. Gallilee looked as if she was going to say "Good Heavens!" again, and perhaps to endure it no longer. Carmina was too simple to interpret these signs in the right way. Why should her aunt not choose a piano? "Don't you like music?" she asked.

Mrs. Gallilee made a last effort. "When you see a little more of society, my child, you will know that one must like music. So again with pictures--one must go to the Royal Academy Exhibition. So again--"

Before she could mention any more social sacrifices, the servant came in with a letter, and stopped her.

Mrs. Gallilee looked at the address. The weary indifference of her manner changed to vivid interest, the moment she saw the handwriting. "From the Professor!" she exclaimed. "Excuse me, for one minute." She read the letter, and closed it again with a sigh of relief. "I knew it!" she said to herself. "I have always maintained that the albuminoid substance of frog's eggs is insufficient (viewed as nourishment) to transform a tadpole into a frog--and, at last, the Professor owns that I am right. I beg your pardon, Carmina; I am carried away by a subject that I have been working at in my stolen intervals for weeks past. Let me give you some tea. I have asked Miss Minerva to join us. What is keeping her, I wonder? She is usually so punctual. I suppose Zoe has been behaving badly again."

In a few minutes more, the governess herself confirmed this maternal forewarning of the truth. Zo had declined to commit to memory "the political consequences of the granting of Magna Charta"--and now stood reserved for punishment, when her mother "had time to attend to it." Mrs. Gallilee at once disposed of this little responsibility. "Bread and water for tea," she said, and proceeded to the business of the evening.

"I wish to speak to you both," she began, "on the subject of my son."

The two persons addressed waited in silence to hear more. Carmina's head drooped: she looked down. Miss Minerva attentively observed Mrs. Gallilee. "Why am I invited to hear what she has to say about her son?" was the

question which occurred to the governess. "Is she afraid that Carmina might tell me about it, if I was not let into the family secrets?"

Admirably reasoned, and correctly guessed!

Mrs. Gallilee had latterly observed that the governess was insinuating herself into the confidence of her niece--that is to say, into the confidence of a young lady, whose father was generally reported to have died in possession of a handsome fortune. Personal influence, once obtained over an heiress, is not infrequently misused. To check the further growth of a friendship of this sort (without openly offending Miss Minerva) was an imperative duty. Mrs. Gallilee saw her way to the discreet accomplishment of that object. Her niece and her governess were interested--diversely interested--in Ovid. If she invited them both together, to consult with her on the delicate subject of her son, there would be every chance of exciting some difference of opinion, sufficiently irritating to begin the process of estrangement, by keeping them apart when they had left the tea-table.

"It is most important that there should be no misunderstanding among us," Mrs. Gallilee proceeded. "Let me set the example of speaking without reserve. We all three know that Ovid persists in remaining in London--"

She paused, on the point of finishing the sentence. Although she had converted a Professor, Mrs. Gallilee was still only a woman. There did enter into her other calculations, the possibility of exciting some accidental betrayal of her governess's passion for her son. On alluding to Ovid, she turned suddenly to Miss Minerva. "I am sure you will excuse my troubling you with family anxieties," she said--"especially when they are connected with the health of my son."

It was cleverly done, but it laboured under one disadvantage. Miss Minerva had no idea of what the needless apology meant, having no suspicion of the discovery of her secret by her employer. But to feel herself baffled in trying to penetrate Mrs. Gallilee's motives was enough, of itself, to put Mrs. Gallilee's governess on her guard for the rest of the evening.

"You honour me, madam, by admitting me to your confidence"--was what she said. "Trip me up, you cat, if you can!"--was what she thought.

Mrs. Gallilee resumed.

"We know that Ovid persists in remaining in London, when change of air and scene are absolutely necessary to the recovery of his health. And we

know why. Carmina, my child, don't think for a moment that I blame you! don't even suppose that I blame my son. You are too charming a person not to excuse, nay even to justify, any man's admiration. But let us (as we hard old people say) look the facts in the face. If Ovid had not seen you, he would be now on the health-giving sea, on his way to Spain and Italy. You are the innocent cause of his obstinate indifference, his most deplorable and dangerous disregard of the duty which he owes to himself. He refuses to listen to his mother, he sets the opinion of his skilled medical colleague at defiance. But one person has any influence over him now." She paused again, and tried to trip up the governess once more. "Miss Minerva, let me appeal to You. I regard you as a member of our family; I have the sincerest admiration of your tact and good sense. Am I exceeding the limits of delicacy, if I say plainly to my niece, Persuade Ovid to go?"

If Carmina had possessed an elder sister, with a plain personal appearance and an easy conscience, not even that sister could have matched the perfect composure with which Miss Minerva replied.

"I don't possess your happy faculty of expressing yourself, Mrs. Gallilee. But, if I had been in your place, I should have said to the best of my poor ability exactly what you have said now." She bent her head with a graceful gesture of respect, and looked at Carmina with a gentle sisterly interest while she stirred her tea.

At the very opening of the skirmish, Mrs. Gallilee was defeated. She had failed to provoke the slightest sign of jealousy, or even of ill-temper. Unquestionably the most crafty and most cruel woman of the two--possessing the most dangerously deceitful manner, and the most mischievous readiness of language--she was, nevertheless, Miss Minerva's inferior in the one supreme capacity of which they both stood in need, the capacity for self-restraint.

She showed this inferiority on expressing her thanks. The underlying malice broke through the smooth surface that was intended to hide it. "I am apt to doubt myself," she said; "and such sound encouragement as yours always relieves me. Of course I don't ask you for more than a word of advice. Of course I don't expect you to persuade Ovid."

"Of course not!" Miss Minerva agreed. "May I ask for a little more sugar in my tea?"

Mrs. Gallilee turned to Carmina.

"Well, my dear? I have spoken to you, as I might have spoken to one of my own daughters, if she had been of your age. Tell me frankly, in return, whether I may count on your help."

Still pale and downcast, Carmina obeyed. "I will do my best, if you wish it. But--"

"Yes? Go on."

She still hesitated. Mrs. Gallilee tried gentle remonstrance. "My child, surely you are not afraid of me?"

She was certainly afraid. But she controlled herself.

"You are Ovid's mother, and I am only his cousin," she resumed. "I don't like to hear you say that my influence over him is greater than yours."

It was far from the poor girl's intention; but there was an implied rebuke in this. In her present state of irritation, Mrs. Gallilee felt it.

"Come! come!" she said. "Don't affect to be ignorant, my dear, of what you know perfectly well."

Carmina lifted her head. For the first time in the experience of the two elder women, this gentle creature showed that she could resent an insult. The fine spirit that was in her fired her eyes, and fixed them firmly on her aunt.

"Do you accuse me of deceit?" she asked.

"Let us call it false modesty," Mrs. Gallilee retorted.

Carmina rose without another word--and walked out of the room.

In the extremity of her surprise, Mrs. Gallilee appealed to Miss Minerva. "Is she in a passion?"

"She didn't bang the door," the governess quietly remarked.

"I am not joking, Miss Minerva."

"I am not joking either, madam."

The tone of that answer implied an uncompromising assertion of equality.

You are not to suppose (it said) that a lady drops below your level, because she receives a salary and teaches your children. Mrs. Gallilee was so angry, by this time, that she forgot the importance of preventing a conference between Miss Minerva and her niece. For once, she was the creature of impulse--the overpowering impulse to dismiss her insolent governess from her hospitable table.

"May I offer you another cup of tea?"

"Thank you--no more. May I return to my pupils?"

"By all means!"

Carmina had not been five minutes in her own room before she heard a knock at the door. Had Mrs. Gallilee followed her? "Who is there?" she asked. And a voice outside answered,

"Only Miss Minerva!"