

CHAPTER XVI.

"I am afraid I have startled you?" said the governess, carefully closing the door.

"I thought it was my aunt," Carmina answered, as simply as a child.

"Have you been crying?"

"I couldn't help it, Miss Minerva."

"Mrs. Gallilee spoke cruelly to you--I don't wonder at your feeling angry."

Carmina gently shook her head. "I have been crying," she explained, "because I am sorry and ashamed. How can I make it up with my aunt? Shall I go back at once and beg her pardon? I think you are my friend, Miss Minerva. Will you advise me?"

It was so prettily and innocently said that even the governess was touched--for a moment. "Shall I prove to you that I am your friend?" she proposed. "I advise you not to go back yet to your aunt--and I will tell you why. Mrs. Gallilee bears malice; she is a thoroughly unforgiving woman. And I should be the first to feel it, if she knew what I have just said to you."

"Oh, Miss Minerva! you don't think that I would betray your confidence?"

"No, my dear, I don't. I felt attracted towards you, when we first met. You didn't return the feeling--you (very naturally) disliked me. I am ugly and ill-tempered: and, if there is anything good in me, it doesn't show itself on the surface. Yes! yes! I believe you are beginning to understand me. If I can make your life here a little happier, as time goes on, I shall be only too glad to do it." She put her long yellow hands on either side of Carmina's head, and kissed her forehead.

The poor child threw her arms round Miss Minerva's neck, and cried her heart out on the bosom of the woman who was deceiving her. "I have nobody left, now Teresa has gone," she said. "Oh, do try to be kind to me--I feel so friendless and so lonely!"

Miss Minerva neither moved nor spoke. She waited, and let the girl cry.

Her heavy black eyebrows gathered into a frown; her sallow face deepened in colour. She was in a state of rebellion against herself. Through all the hardening influences of the woman's life--through the fortifications against good which watchful evil builds in human hearts--that innocent outburst of trust and grief had broken its way; and had purified for a while the fetid inner darkness with divine light. She had entered the room, with her own base interests to serve. In her small sordid way she, like her employer, was persecuted by debts--miserable debts to sellers of expensive washes, which might render her ugly complexion more passable in Ovid's eyes; to makers of costly gloves, which might show Ovid the shape of her hands, and hide their colour; to skilled workmen in fine leather, who could tempt Ovid to look at her high instep, and her fine ankle--the only beauties that she could reveal to the only man whom she cared to please. For the time, those importunate creditors ceased to threaten her. For the time, what she had heard in the conservatory, while they were reading the Will, lost its tempting influence. She remained in the room for half an hour more--and she left it without having borrowed a farthing.

"Are you easier now?"

"Yes, dear."

Carmina dried her eyes, and looked shyly at Miss Minerva. "I have been treating you as if I had a sister," she said; "you don't think me too familiar, I hope?"

"I wish I was your sister, God knows!"

The words were hardly out of her mouth before she was startled by her own fervour. "Shall I tell you what to do with Mrs. Gallilee?" she said abruptly. "Write her a little note."

"Yes! yes! and you will take it for me?"

Carmina's eyes brightened through her tears, the suggestion was such a relief! In a minute the note was written: "My dear Aunt, I have behaved very badly, and I am very much ashamed of it. May I trust to your kind indulgence to forgive me? I will try to be worthier of your kindness for the future; and I sincerely beg your pardon." She signed her name in breathless haste. "Please take it at once!" she said eagerly.

Miss Minerva smiled. "If I take it," she said, "I shall do harm instead of good--I shall be accused of interfering. Give it to one of the servants. Not yet!"

When Mrs. Gallilee is angry, she doesn't get over it so soon as you seem to think. Leave her to dabble in science first," said the governess in tones of immeasurable contempt. "When she has half stifled herself with some filthy smell, or dissected some wretched insect or flower, she may be in a better humour. Wait."

Carmina thought of the happy days at home in Italy, when her father used to laugh at her little outbreaks of temper, and good Teresa only shrugged her shoulders. What a change--oh, me, what a change for the worse! She drew from her bosom a locket, hung round her neck by a thin gold chain--and opened it, and kissed the glass over the miniature portraits inside. "Would you like to see them?" she said to Miss Minerva. "My mother's likeness was painted for me by my father; and then he had his photograph taken to match it. I open my portraits and look at them, while I say my prayers. It's almost like having them alive again, sometimes. Oh, if I only had my father to advise me now--!" Her heart swelled--but she kept back the tears: she was learning that self-restraint, poor soul, already! "Perhaps," she went on, "I ought not to want advice. After that fainting-fit in the Gardens, if I can persuade Ovid to leave us, I ought to do it--and I will do it!"

Miss Minerva crossed the room, and looked out of window. Carmina had roused the dormant jealousy; Carmina had fatally weakened the good influences which she had herself produced. The sudden silence of her new friend perplexed her. She too went to the window. "Do you think it would be taking a liberty?" she asked.

"No."

A short answer--and still looking out of window! Carmina tried again. "Besides, there are my aunt's wishes to consider. After my bad behaviour--"

Miss Minerva turned round from the window sharply. "Of course! There can't be a doubt of it." Her tone softened a little. "You are young, Carmina--I suppose I may call you by your name--you are young and simple. Do those innocent eyes of yours ever see below the surface?"

"I don't quite understand you."

"Do you think your aunt's only motive in wishing Mr. Ovid Vere to leave London is anxiety about his health? Do you feel no suspicion that she wants to keep him away from You?"

Carmina toyed with her locket, in an embarrassment which she was quite

unable to disguise. "Are you afraid to trust me?" Miss Minerva asked. That reproach opened the girl's lips instantly.

"I am afraid to tell you how foolish I am," she answered. "Perhaps, I still feel a little strangeness between us? It seems to be so formal to call you Miss Minerva. I don't know what your Christian name is. Will you tell me?"

Miss Minerva replied rather unwillingly. "My name is Frances. Don't call me Fanny!"

"Why not?"

"Because it's too absurd to be endured! What does the mere sound of Fanny suggest? A flirting, dancing creature--plump and fair, and playful and pretty!" She went to the looking-glass, and pointed disdainfully to the reflection of herself. "Sickening to think of," she said, "when you look at that. Call me Frances--a man's name, with only the difference between an i and an e. No sentiment in it; hard, like me. Well, what was it you didn't like to say of yourself?"

Carmina dropped her voice to a whisper. "It's no use asking me what I do see, or don't see, in my aunt," she answered. "I am afraid we shall never be--what we ought to be to each other. When she came to that concert, and sat by me and looked at me--" She stopped, and shuddered over the recollection of it.

Miss Minerva urged her to go on--first, by a gesture; then by a suggestion: "They said you fainted under the heat."

"I didn't feel the heat. I felt a horrid creeping all over me. Before I looked at her, mind!--when I only knew that somebody was sitting next to me. And then, I did look round. Her eyes and my eyes flashed into each other. In that one moment, I lost all sense of myself as if I was dead. I can only tell you of it in that way. It was a dreadful surprise to me to remember it--and a dreadful pain--when they brought me to myself again. Though I do look so little and so weak, I am stronger than people think; I never fainted before. My aunt is--how can I say it properly?--hard to get on with since that time. Is there something wicked in my nature? I do believe she feels in the same way towards me. Yes; I dare say it's imagination, but it's as bad as reality for all that. Oh, I am sure you are right--she does want to keep Ovid out of my way!"

"Because she doesn't like you?" said Miss Minerva. "Is that the only reason

you can think of?"

"What other reason can there be?"

The governess summoned her utmost power of self-restraint. She needed it, even to speak of the bare possibility of Carmina's marriage to Ovid, as if it was only a matter of speculative interest to herself.

"Some people object to marriages between cousins," she said. "You are cousins. Some people object to marriages between Catholics and Protestants. You are a Catholic--" No! She could not trust herself to refer to him directly; she went on to the next sentence. "And there might be some other reason," she resumed.

"Do you know what that is?" Carmina asked.

"No more than you do--thus far."

She spoke the plain truth. Thanks to the dog's interruption, and to the necessity of saving herself from discovery, the last clauses of the Will had been read in her absence.

"Can't you even guess what it is?" Carmina persisted.

"Mrs. Gallilee is very ambitious," the governess replied: "and her son has a fortune of his own. She may wish him to marry a lady of high rank. But--no--she is always in need of money. In some way, money may be concerned in it."

"In what way?" Carmina asked.

"I have already told you," Miss Minerva answered, "that I don't know."

Before the conversation could proceed, they were interrupted by the appearance of Mrs. Gallilee's maid, with a message from the schoolroom. Miss Maria wanted a little help in her Latin lesson. Noticing Carmina's letter, as she advanced to the door, it struck Miss Minerva that the woman might deliver it. "Is Mrs. Gallilee at home?" she asked. Mrs. Gallilee had just gone out. "One of her scientific lectures, I suppose," said Miss Minerva to Carmina. "Your note must wait till she comes back."

The door closed on the governess--and the lady's-maid took a liberty. She remained in the room; and produced a morsel of folded paper, hitherto

concealed from view. Smirking and smiling, she handed the paper to Carmina.

"From Mr. Ovid, Miss."