

## CHAPTER XVII.

"Pray come to me; I am waiting for you in the garden of the Square."

In those two lines, Ovid's note began and ended. Mrs. Gallilee's maid--deeply interested in an appointment which was not without precedent in her own experience--ventured on an expression of sympathy, before she returned to the servants' hall. "Please to excuse me, Miss; I hope Mr. Ovid isn't ill? He looked sadly pale, I thought. Allow me to give you your hat." Carmina thanked her, and hurried downstairs.

Ovid was waiting at the gate of the Square--and he did indeed look wretchedly ill.

It was useless to make inquiries; they only seemed to irritate him. "I am better already, now you have come to me." He said that, and led the way to a sheltered seat among the trees. In the later evening-time the Square was almost empty. Two middle-aged ladies, walking up and down (who considerately remembered their own youth, and kept out of the way), and a boy rigging a model yacht (who was too closely occupied to notice them), were the only persons in the enclosure besides themselves.

"Does my mother know that you have come here?" Ovid asked.

"Mrs. Gallilee has gone out. I didn't stop to think of it, when I got your letter. Am I doing wrong?"

Ovid took her hand. "Is it doing wrong to relieve me of anxieties that I have no courage to endure? When we meet in the house either my mother or her obedient servant, Miss Minerva, is sure to interrupt us. At last, my darling, I have got you to myself! You know that I love you. Why can't I look into your heart, and see what secrets it is keeping from me? I try to hope; but I want some little encouragement. Carmina! shall I ever hear you say that you love me?"

She trembled, and turned away her head. Her own words to the governess were in her mind; her own conviction of the want of all sympathy between his mother and herself made her shrink from answering him.

"I understand your silence." With those words he dropped her hand, and looked at her no more.

It was sadly, not bitterly spoken. She attempted to find excuses; she showed but too plainly how she pitied him. "If I only had myself to think of--" Her voice failed her. A new life came into his eyes, the colour rose in his haggard face: even those few faltering words had encouraged him!

She tried again to make him understand her. "I am so afraid of distressing you, Ovid; and I am so anxious not to make mischief between you and your mother--"

"What has my mother to do with it?"

She went on, without noticing the interruption. "You won't think me ungrateful? We had better speak of something else. Only this evening, your mother sent for me, and--don't be angry!--I am afraid she might be vexed if she knew what you have been saying to me. Perhaps I am wrong? Perhaps she only thinks I am too young. Oh, Ovid, how you look at me! Your mother hasn't said in so many words--"

"What has she said?"

In that question she saw the chance of speaking to him of other interests than the interests of love.

"You must go away to another climate," she said; "and your mother tells me I must persuade you to do it. I obey her with a heavy heart. Dear Ovid, you know how I shall miss you; you know what a loss it will be to me, when you say good-bye--but there is only one way to get well again. I entreat you to take that way! Your mother thinks I have some influence over you. Have I any influence?"

"Judge for yourself," he answered. "You wish me to leave you?"

"For your own sake. Only for your own sake."

"Do you wish me to come back again?"

"It's cruel to ask the question!"

"It rests with you, Carmina. Send me away when you like, and where you like. But, before I go, give me my one reason for making the sacrifice. No change will do anything for me, no climate will restore my health--unless you give me your love. I am old enough to know myself; I have thought of it

by day and by night. Am I cruel to press you in this way? I will only say one word more. It doesn't matter what becomes of me--if you refuse to be my wife."

Without experience, without advice--with her own heart protesting against her silence--the restraint that she had laid on herself grew harder and harder to endure. The tears rose in her eyes. He saw them; they embittered his mind against his mother. With a darkening face he rose, and walked up and down before her, struggling with himself.

"This is my mother's doing," he said.

His tone terrified her. The dread, present to her mind all through the interview, of making herself a cause of estrangement between mother and son, so completely overcame her that she even made an attempt to defend Mrs. Gallilee! At the first words, he sat down by her again. For a moment, he scrutinised her face without mercy--and then repented of his own severity.

"My poor child," he said, "you are afraid to tell me what has happened. I won't press you to speak against your own inclinations. It would be cruel and needless--I have got at the truth at last. In the one hope of my life, my mother is my enemy. She is bent on separating us; she shall not succeed. I won't leave you."

Carmina looked at him. His eyes dropped before her, in confusion and shame.

"Are you angry with me?" she asked.

No reproaches could have touched his heart as that question touched it. "Angry with you? Oh, my darling, if you only knew how angry I am with myself! It cuts me to the heart to see how I have distressed you. I am a miserable selfish wretch; I don't deserve your love. Forgive me, and forget me. I will make the best atonement I can, Carmina. I will go away tomorrow."

Under hard trial, she had preserved her self-control. She had resisted him; she had resisted herself. His sudden submission disarmed her in an instant. With a low cry of love and fear she threw her arms round his neck, and laid her burning cheek against his face. "I can't help it," she whispered; "oh, Ovid, don't despise me!" His arms closed round her; his lips were pressed to hers. "Kiss me," he said. She kissed him, trembling in his embrace. That innocent self-abandonment did not plead with him in vain. He released her--

and only held her hand. There was silence between them; long, happy silence.

He was the first to speak again. "How can I go away now?" he said.

She only smiled at that reckless forgetfulness of the promise, by which he had bound himself a few minutes since. "What did you tell me," she asked playfully, "when you called yourself by hard names, and said you didn't deserve my love?" Her smile vanished softly, and left only a look of tender entreaty in its place. "Set me an example of firmness, Ovid--don't leave it all to me! Remember what you have made me say. Remember"--she only hesitated for a moment--"remember what an interest I have in you now. I love you, Ovid. Say you will go."

He said it gratefully. "My life is yours; my will is yours. Decide for me, and I will begin my journey."

She was so impressed by her sense of this new responsibility, that she answered him as gravely as if she had been his wife. "I must give you time to pack up," she said.

"Say time to be with You!"

She fell into thought. He asked if she was still considering when to send him away. "No," she said; "it isn't that. I was wondering at myself. What is it that makes a great man like you so fond of me?"

His arm stole round her waist. He could just see her in the darkening twilight under the trees; the murmuring of the leaves was the only sound near them--his kisses lingered on her face. She sighed softly. "Don't make it too hard for me to send you away!" she whispered. He raised her, and put her arm in his. "Come," he said, "we will walk a little in the cool air."

They returned to the subject of his departure. It was still early in the week. She inquired if Saturday would be too soon to begin his journey. No: he felt it, too--the longer they delayed, the harder the parting would be.

"Have you thought yet where you will go?" she asked.

"I must begin with a sea-voyage," he replied. "Long railway journeys, in my present state, will only do me harm. The difficulty is where to go to. I have been to America; India is too hot; Australia is too far. Benjulia has suggested Canada."

As he mentioned the doctor's name, her hand mechanically pressed his arm.

"That strange man!" she said. "Even his name startles one; I hardly know what to think of him. He seemed to have more feeling for the monkey than for you or me. It was certainly kind of him to take the poor creature home, and try what he could do with it. Are you sure he is a great chemist?"

Ovid stopped. Such a question, from Carmina, sounded strange to him. "What makes you doubt it?" he said.

"You won't laugh at me, Ovid?"

"You know I won't!"

"Now you shall hear. We knew a famous Italian chemist at Rome--such a nice old man! He and my father used to play piquet; and I looked at them, and tried to learn--and I was too stupid. But I had plenty of opportunities of noticing our old friend's hands. They were covered with stains; and he caught me looking at them. He was not in the least offended; he told me his experiments had spotted his skin in that way, and nothing would clean off the stains. I saw Doctor Benjulia's great big hands, while he was giving you the brandy--and I remembered afterwards that there were no stains on them. I seem to surprise you."

"You do indeed surprise me. After knowing Benjulia for years, I have never noticed, what you have discovered on first seeing him."

"Perhaps he has some way of cleaning the stains off his hands."

Ovid agreed to this, as the readiest means of dismissing the subject. Carmina had really startled him. Some irrational connection between the great chemist's attention to the monkey, and the perplexing purity of his hands, persisted in vaguely asserting itself in Ovid's mind. His unacknowledged doubts of Benjulia troubled him as they had never troubled him yet. He turned to Carmina for relief.

"Still thinking, my love?"

"Thinking of you," she answered. "I want you to promise me something--and I am afraid to ask it."

"Afraid? You don't love me, after all!"

"Then I will say it at once! How long do you expect to be away?"

"For two or three months, perhaps."

"Promise to wait till you return, before you tell your mother--"

"That we are engaged?"

"Yes."

"You have my promise, Carmina; but you make me uneasy."

"Why?"

"In my absence, you will be under my mother's care. And you don't like my mother."

Few words and plain words--and they sorely troubled her.

If she owned that he was right, what would the consequence be? He might refuse to leave her. Even assuming that he controlled himself, he would take his departure harassed by anxieties, which might exercise the worst possible influence over the good effect of the journey. To prevaricate with herself or with him was out of the question. That very evening she had quarrelled with his mother; and she had yet to discover whether Mrs. Gallilee had forgiven her. In her heart of hearts she hated deceit--and in her heart of hearts she longed to set his mind at ease. In that embarrassing position, which was the right way out? Satan persuaded Eve; and Love persuaded Carmina. Love asked if she was cruel enough to make her heart's darling miserable when he was so fond of her? Before she could realise it, she had begun to deceive him. Poor humanity! poor Carmina!

"You are almost as hard on me as if you were Doctor Benjulia himself!" she said. "I feel your mother's superiority--and you tell me I don't like her. Haven't you seen how good she has been to me?"

She thought this way of putting it irresistible. Ovid resisted, nevertheless. Carmina plunged into lower depths of deceit immediately.

"Haven't you seen my pretty rooms--my piano--my pictures--my china--my flowers? I should be the most insensible creature living if I didn't feel grateful to your mother."

"And yet, you are afraid of her."

She shook his arm impatiently. "I say, No!"

He was as obstinate as ever. "I say, Yes! If you're not afraid, why do you wish to keep our engagement from my mother's knowledge?"

His reasoning was unanswerable. But where is the woman to be found who is not supple enough to slip through the stiff fingers of Reason? She sheltered herself from his logic behind his language.

"Must I remind you again of the time when you were angry?" she rejoined. "You said your mother was bent on separating us. If I don't want her to know of our engagement just yet--isn't that a good reason?" She rested her head caressingly on his shoulder. "Tell me," she went on, thinking of one of Miss Minerva's suggestions, "doesn't my aunt look to a higher marriage for you than a marriage with me?"

It was impossible to deny that Mrs. Gallilee's views might justify that inquiry. Had she not more than once advised him to wait a few years--in other words, to wait until he had won the highest honours of his profession--before he thought of marrying at all? But Carmina was too precious to him to be humiliated by comparisons with other women, no matter what their rank might be. He paid her a compliment, instead of giving her an answer.

"My mother can't look higher than you," he said. "I wish I could feel sure, Carmina--in leaving you with her--that I am leaving you with a friend whom you trust and love."

There was a sadness in his tone that grieved her. "Wait till you come back," she replied, speaking as gaily as she could. "You will be ashamed to remember your own misgivings. And don't forget, dear, that I have another friend besides your mother--the best and kindest of friends--to take care of me."

Ovid heard this with some surprise. "A friend in my mother's house?" he asked.

"Certainly!"

"Who is it?"

"Miss Minerva."

"What!" His tone expressed such immeasurable amazement, that Carmina's sense of justice was roused in defence of her new friend.

"If I began by wronging Miss Minerva, I had the excuse of being a stranger," she said, warmly. "You have known her for years, and you ought to have found out her good qualities long since! Are all men alike, I wonder? Even my kind dear father used to call ugly women the inexcusable mistakes of Nature. Poor Miss Minerva says herself she is ugly, and expects everybody to misjudge her accordingly. I don't misjudge her, for one. Teresa has left me; and you are going away next. A miserable prospect, Ovid, but not quite without hope. Frances--yes, I call her by her Christian name, and she calls me by mine!--Frances will console me, and make my life as happy as it can be till you come back."

Excepting bad temper, and merciless cultivation of the minds of children, Ovid knew of nothing that justified his prejudice against the governess. Still, Carmina's sudden conversion inspired him with something like alarm. "I suppose you have good reasons for what you tell me," he said.

"The best reasons," she replied, in the most positive manner.

He considered for a moment how he could most delicately inquire what those reasons might be. But valuable opportunities may be lost, even in a moment. "Will you help me to do justice to Miss Minerva?" he cautiously began.

"Hush!" Carmina interposed. "Surely, I heard somebody calling to me?"

They paused, and listened. A voice hailed them from the outer side of the garden. They started guiltily. It was the voice of Mrs. Gallilee.