

CHAPTER XXIII.

The mistress of the house, and the governess of the house, had their own special reasons for retiring to their own rooms. Carmina was in solitude as a matter of necessity. The only friends that the poor girl could gather round her now, were the absent and the dead.

She had written to Ovid--merely for the pleasure of thinking that her letter would accompany him, in the mail-steamer which took him to Quebec. She had written to Teresa. She had opened her piano, and had played the divinely beautiful music of Mozart, until its tenderness saddened her, and she closed the instrument with an aching heart. For a while she sat by the window, thinking of Ovid. The decline of day has its melancholy affinities with the decline of life. As the evening wore on, her loneliness had become harder and harder to endure. She rang for the maid, and asked if Miss Minerva was at leisure. Miss Minerva had been sent for by Mrs. Gallilee. Where was Zo? In the schoolroom, waiting until Mr. Le Frank had done with Maria, to take her turn at the piano. Left alone again, Carmina opened her locket, and put Ovid's portrait by it on the table. Her sad fancy revived her dead parents--imagined her lover being presented to them--saw him winning their hearts by his genial voice, his sweet smile, his wise and kindly words. Miss Minerva, entering the room, found her still absorbed in her own little melancholy daydream; recalling the absent, reviving the dead--as if she had been nearing the close of life. And only seventeen years old. Alas for Carmina, only seventeen!

"Mrs. Gallilee wishes to see you."

She started. "Is there anything wrong?" she asked.

"No. What makes you think so?"

"You speak in such a strange way. Oh, Frances, I have been longing for you to keep me company! And now you are here, you look at me as coldly as if I had offended you. Perhaps you are not well?"

"That's it. I am not well."

"Have some of my lavender water! Let me bathe your forehead, and then blow on it to cool you this hot weather. No? Sit down, dear, at any rate. What does my aunt want with me?"

"I think I had better not tell you."

"Why?"

"Your aunt is sure to ask you what I have said. I have tried her temper; you know what her temper is! She has sent me here instead of sending a maid, on the chance that I may commit some imprudence. I give you her message exactly as the servant might have given it--and you can tell her so with a safe conscience. No more questions!"

"One more, please. Is it anything about Ovid?"

"No."

"Then my aunt can wait a little. Do sit down! I want to speak to you."

"About what?"

"About Ovid, of course!"

Carmina's look and tone at once set Miss Minerva's mind at ease. Her conduct, on the day of Ovid's departure, had aroused no jealous suspicion in her innocent rival. She refused to take the offered chair.

"I have already told you your aunt is out of temper," she said. "Go to her at once."

Carmina rose unwillingly. "There were so many things I wanted to say to you," she began--and was interrupted by a rapid little series of knocks at the door. Was the person in a hurry? The person proved to be the discreet and accomplished Maria. She made her excuses to Carmina with sweetness, and turned to Miss Minerva with sorrow.

"I regret to say that you are wanted in the schoolroom. Mr. Le Frank can do nothing with Zoe. Oh, dear!" She sighed over her sister's wickedness, and waited for instructions.

To be called away, under any circumstances, was a relief to Miss Minerva. Carmina's affectionate welcome had irritated her in the most incomprehensible manner. She was angry with herself for being irritated; she felt inclined to abuse the girl for believing her. "You fool, why don't you see through me? Why don't you write to that other fool who is in love with

you, and tell him how I hate you both?" But for her self-command, she might have burst out with such mad words as those. Maria's appearance was inexpressibly welcome. "Say I will follow you directly," she answered.

Maria, in the language of the stage, made a capital exit. With a few hurried words of apology, Miss Minerva prepared to follow. Carmina stopped her at the door.

"Don't be hard on Zo!" she said.

"I must do my duty," Miss Minerva answered sternly.

"We were sometimes naughty ourselves when we were children," Carmina pleaded. "And only the other day she had bread and water for tea. I am so fond of Zo! And besides--" she looked doubtfully at Miss Minerva--"I don't think Mr. Le Frank is the sort of man to get on with children."

After what had just passed between Mrs. Gallilee and herself, this expression of opinion excited the governess's curiosity. "What makes you say that?" she asked.

"Well, my dear, for one thing Mr. Le Frank is so ugly. Don't you agree with me?"

"I think you had better keep your opinion to yourself. If he heard of it--"

"Is he vain? My poor father used to say that all bad musicians were vain."

"You don't call Mr. Le Frank a bad musician?"

"Oh, but I do! I heard him at his concert. Mere execution of the most mechanical kind. A musical box is as good as that man's playing. This is how he does it!"

Her girlish good spirits had revived in her friend's company. She turned gaily to the piano, and amused herself by imitating Mr. Le Frank.

Another knock at the door--a single peremptory knock this time--stopped the performance.

Miss Minerva had left the door ajar, when Carmina had prevented her from quitting the room. She looked through the open space, and discovered--Mr. Le Frank.

His bald head trembled, his florid complexion was livid with suppressed rage. "That little devil has run away!" he said--and hurried down the stairs again, as if he dare not trust himself to utter a word more.

"Has he heard me?" Carmina asked in dismay.

"He may only have heard you playing."

Offering this hopeful suggestion, Miss Minerva felt no doubt, in her own mind, that Mr. Le Frank was perfectly well acquainted with Carmina's opinion of him. It was easy enough to understand that he should himself inform the governess of an incident, so entirely beyond the reach of his own interference as the flight of Zo. But it was impossible to assume that the furious anger which his face betrayed, could have been excited by a child who had run away from a lesson. No: the vainest of men and musicians had heard that he was ugly, and that his pianoforte-playing resembled the performance of a musical box.

They left the room together--Carmina, ill at ease, to attend on her aunt; Miss Minerva, pondering on what had happened, to find the fugitive Zo.

The footman had already spared her the trouble of searching the house. He had seen Zo running out bare-headed into the Square, and had immediately followed her. The young rebel was locked up. "I don't care," said Zo; "I hate Mr. Le Frank!" Miss Minerva's mind was too seriously preoccupied to notice this aggravation of her pupil's offence. One subject absorbed her attention--the interview then in progress between Carmina and her aunt.

How would Mrs. Gallilee's scheme prosper now? Mr. Le Frank might, or might not, consent to be Carmina's teacher. Another result, however, was certain. Miss Minerva thoroughly well knew the vindictive nature of the man. He neither forgave nor forgot--he was Carmina's enemy for life.