

## CHAPTER XXVI.

The answers to Ovid's questions were not to be found in Carmina's reply. She had reasons for not mentioning the conversazione; and she shrank from writing to him of his mother. Her true position in Mrs. Gallilee's house--growing, day by day, harder and harder to endure; threatening, more and more plainly, complications and perils to come--was revealed in her next letter to her old friend in Italy. She wrote to Teresa in these words:

"If you love me, forget the inhuman manner in which I have spoken of Miss Minerva!

"After I had written to you, I would have recalled my letter, if it could have been done. I began, that evening, to feel ashamed of what I had said in my anger. As the hours went on, and bedtime approached, I became so wretched that I ran the risk of another harsh reception, by intruding on her once more. It was a circumstance in my favour that she was, to all appearance, in bad spirits too. There was something in her voice, when she asked what I wanted, which made me think--though she looks like the last person in the world to be guilty of such weakness--that she had been crying.

"I gave the best expression I could to my feelings of repentance and regret. What I actually said to her, has slipped out of my memory; I was frightened and upset--and I am always stupid in that condition. My attempt at reconciliation may have been clumsy enough; but she might surely have seen that I had no intention to mystify and distress her. And yet, what else could she have imagined?--to judge by her own actions and words.

"Her bedroom candle was on the table behind me. She snatched it up and held it before my face, and looked at me as if I was some extraordinary object that she had never seen or heard of before! 'You are little better than a child,' she said; 'I have ten times your strength of will--what is there in you that I can't resist? Go away from me! Be on your guard against me! I am false; I am suspicious; I am cruel. You simpleton, have you no instincts to protect you? Is there nothing in you that shrinks from me?'

"She put down the candle, and burst into a wretched mocking laugh. 'There she stands,' cried this strange creature, 'and looks at me with the eyes of a baby that sees something new! I can't frighten her. I can't disgust her. What does it mean?' She dropped into a chair; her voice sank almost to a whisper--I should have thought she was afraid of me, if such a thing had been

possible. 'What do you know of me, that I don't know of myself?' she asked.

"It was quite beyond me to understand what she meant. I took a chair, and sat down by her. 'I only know what you said to me yesterday,' I answered.

"What did I say?"

"You told me you were miserable."

"I told you a lie! Believe what I have said to you to-day. In your own interests, believe it to be the truth!"

"Nothing would induce me to believe it. 'No,' I said. 'You were miserable yesterday, and you are miserable to-day. That is the truth!'"

"What put my next bold words into my head, I don't know. It doesn't matter; the thought was in me--and out it came.

"I think you have some burden on your mind,' I went on. 'If I can't relieve you of it, perhaps I can help you bear it. Come! tell me what it is.' I waited; but it was of no use--she never even looked at me. Because I am in love myself, do I think everybody else is like me? I thought she blushed. I don't know what else I thought. 'Are you in love?' I asked.

"She jumped up from her chair, so suddenly and so violently that she threw it on the floor. Still, not a word passed her lips. I found courage enough to go on--but not courage enough to look at her.

"I love Ovid, and Ovid loves me,' I said. 'There is my consolation, whatever my troubles may be. Are you not so fortunate?' A dreadful expression of pain passed over her face. How could I see it, and not feel the wish to sympathise with her? I ran the risk, and said, 'Do you love somebody, who doesn't love you?'"

"She turned her back on me, and went to the toilet-table. I think she looked at herself in the glass. 'Well,' she said, speaking to me at last, 'what else?'"

"Nothing else,' I answered--'except that I hope I have not offended you.'

"She left the glass as suddenly as she had approached it, and took up the candle again. Once more she held it so that it lit my face.

"Guess who he is,' she said.

"How can I do that?' I asked.

"She quietly put down the candle again. In some way, quite incomprehensible to myself, I seemed to have relieved her. She spoke to me in a changed voice, gently and sadly.

"You are the best of good girls, and you mean kindly. It's of no use--you can do nothing. Forgive my insolence yesterday; I was mad with envy of your happy marriage engagement. You don't understand such a nature as mine. So much the better! ah, so much the better! Good-night!"

"There was such hopeless submission, such patient suffering, in those words, that I could not find it in my heart to leave her. I thought of how I might have behaved, of the wild things I might have said, if Ovid had cared nothing for me. Had some cruel man forsaken her? That was her secret. I asked myself what I could do to encourage her. Your last letter, with our old priest's enclosure, was in my pocket. I took it out.

"Would you mind reading a short letter,' I said, 'before we wish each other goodnight?' I held out the priest's letter.

"She drew back with a dark look; she appeared to have some suspicion of it. 'Who is the writer?' she inquired sharply.

"A person who is a stranger to you.'

"Her face cleared directly. She took the letter from me, and waited to hear what I had to say next. 'The person,' I told her, 'is a wise and good old man--the priest who married my father and mother, and baptised me. We all of us used to consult Father Patrizio, when we wanted advice. My nurse Teresa felt anxious about me in Ovid's absence; she spoke to him about my marriage engagement, and of my exile--forgive me for using the word!--in this house. He said he would consider, before he gave her his opinion. The next day, he sent her the letter which you have got in your hand.'

"There, I came to a full stop; having something yet to say, but not knowing how to express myself with the necessary delicacy.

"Why do you wish me to read the letter?' she asked, quietly.

"I think there is something in it which might--'

"There, like a fool, I came to another full stop. She was as patient as ever; she only made a little sign to me to go on.

"I think Father Patrizio's letter might put you in a better frame of mind,' I said; 'it might keep you from despising yourself.'

"She went back to her chair, and read the letter. You have permitted me to keep the comforting words of the good Father, among my other treasures. I copy his letter for you in this place--so that you may read it again, and see what I had in my mind, and understand how it affected poor Miss Minerva.

"Teresa, my well-beloved friend,--I have considered the anxieties that trouble you, with this result: that I can do my best, conscientiously, to quiet your mind. I have had the experience of forty years in the duties of the priesthood. In that long time, the innermost secrets of thousands of men and women have been confided to me. From such means of observation, I have drawn many useful conclusions; and some of them may be also useful to you. I will put what I have to say, in the plainest and fewest words: consider them carefully, on your side. The growth of the better nature, in women, is perfected by one influence--and that influence is Love. Are you surprised that a priest should write in this way? Did you expect me to say, Religion? Love, my sister, is Religion, in women. It opens their hearts to all that is good for them; and it acts independently of the conditions of human happiness. A miserable woman, tormented by hopeless love, is still the better and the nobler for that love; and a time will surely come when she will show it. You have fears for Carmina--cast away, poor soul, among strangers with hard hearts! I tell you to have no fears. She may suffer under trials; she may sink under trials. But the strength to rise again is in her--and that strength is Love.'

"Having read our old friend's letter, Miss Minerva turned back, and read it again--and waited a little, repeating some part of it to herself.

"Does it encourage you?' I asked.

"She handed the letter back to me. 'I have got one sentence in it by heart,' she said.

"You will know what that sentence is, without my telling you. I felt so relieved, when I saw the change in her for the better--I was so inexpressibly happy in the conviction that we were as good friends again as ever--that I bent down to kiss her, on saying goodnight.

"She put up her hand and stopped me. 'No,' she said, 'not till I have done something to deserve it. You are more in need of help than you think. Stay here a little longer; I have a word to say to you about your aunt.'

"I returned to my chair, feeling a little startled. Her eyes rested on me absently--she was, as I imagined, considering with herself, before she spoke. I refrained from interrupting her thoughts. The night was still and dark. Not a sound reached our ears from without. In the house, the silence was softly broken by a rustling movement on the stairs. It came nearer. The door was opened suddenly. Mrs. Gallilee entered the room.

"What folly possessed me? Why was I frightened? I really could not help it--I screamed. My aunt walked straight up to me, without taking the smallest notice of Miss Minerva. 'What are you doing here, when you ought to be in your bed?' she asked.

"She spoke in such an imperative manner--with such authority and such contempt--that I looked at her in astonishment. Some suspicion seemed to be roused in her by finding me and Miss Minerva together.

"No more gossip!" she called out sternly. 'Do you hear me? Go to bed!'

"Was it not enough to rouse anybody? I felt my pride burning in my face. 'Am I a child, or a servant?' I said. 'I shall go to bed early or late as I please.'

"She took one step forward; she seized me by the arm, and forced me to my feet. Think of it, Teresa! In all my life I have never had a hand laid on me except in kindness. Who knows it better than you! I tried vainly to speak--I saw Miss Minerva rise to interfere--I heard her say, 'Mrs. Gallilee, you forget yourself!' Somehow, I got out of the room. On the landing, a dreadful fit of trembling shook me from head to foot. I sank down on the stairs. At first, I thought I was going to faint. No; I shook and shivered, but I kept my senses. I could hear their voices in the room.

"Mrs. Gallilee began. 'Did you tell me just now that I had forgotten myself?'

"Miss Minerva answered, 'Certainly, madam. You did forget yourself.'

"The next words escaped me. After that, they grew louder; and I heard them again--my aunt first.

"I am dissatisfied with your manner to me, Miss Minerva. It has latterly altered very much for the worse.'

"In what respect, Mrs. Gallilee?"

"In this respect. Your way of speaking to me implies an assertion of equality--"

"Stop a minute, madam! I am not so rich as you are. But I am at a loss to know in what other way I am not your equal. Did you assert your superiority--may I ask--when you came into my room without first knocking at the door?"

"Miss Minerva! Do you wish to remain in my service?"

"Say employment, Mrs. Gallilee--if you please. I am quite indifferent in the matter. I am equally ready, at your entire convenience, to stay or to go."

"Mrs. Gallilee's voice sounded nearer, as if she was approaching the door. 'I think we arranged,' she said, 'that there was to be a month's notice on either side, when I first engaged you?'"

"Yes--at my suggestion."

"Take your month's notice, if you please."

"Dating from to-morrow?"

"Of course!"

"My aunt came out, and found me on the stairs. I tried to rise. It was not to be done. My head turned giddy. She must have seen that I was quite prostrate--and yet she took no notice of the state I was in. Cruel, cruel creature! she accused me of listening."

"Can't you see that the poor girl is ill?"

"It was Miss Minerva's voice. I looked round at her, feeling fainter and fainter. She stooped; I felt her strong sinewy arms round me; she lifted me gently. 'I'll take care of you,' she whispered--and carried me downstairs to my room, as easily as if I had been a child."

"I must rest, Teresa. The remembrance of that dreadful night brings it all back again. Don't be anxious about me, my old dear! You shall hear more to-morrow."