

CHAPTER XXVII.

On the next day events happened, the influence of which upon Carmina's excitable nature urged her to complete her unfinished letter, without taking the rest that she needed. Once more--and, as the result proved, for the last time--she wrote to her faithful old friend in these words:

"Don't ask me to tell you how the night passed! Miss Minerva was the first person who came to me in the morning.

"She had barely said a few kind words, when Maria interrupted us, reminding her governess of the morning's lessons. 'Mrs. Gallilee has sent her,' Miss Minerva whispered; 'I will return to you in the hour before the children's dinner.'

"The next person who appeared was, as we had both anticipated, Mrs. Gallilee herself.

"She brought me a cup of tea; and the first words she spoke were words of apology for her conduct on the previous night. Her excuse was that she had been 'harassed by anxieties which completely upset her.' And--can you believe it?--she implored me not to mention 'the little misunderstanding between us when I next wrote to her son!' Is this woman made of iron and stone, instead of flesh and blood? Does she really think me such a wretch as to cause Ovid, under any provocation, a moment's anxiety while he is away? The fewest words that would satisfy her, and so send her out of my room, were the only words I said.

"After this, an agreeable surprise was in store for me. The familiar voice of good Mr. Gallilee applied for admission--through the keyhole!

"'Are you asleep, my dear? May I come in?' His kind, fat old face peeped round the door when I said Yes--and reminded me of Zo, at dinner, when she asks for more pudding, and doesn't think she will get it. Mr. Gallilee had something to ask for, and some doubt of getting it, which accounted for the resemblance. 'I've taken the liberty, Carmina, of sending for our doctor. You're a delicate plant, my dear--' (Here, his face disappeared and he spoke to somebody outside)--'You think so yourself, don't you, Mr. Null? And you have a family of daughters, haven't you?' (His face appeared again; more like Zo than ever.) 'Do please see him, my child; I'm not easy about you. I was on the stairs last night--nobody ever notices me, do they, Mr. Null?--and I saw

Miss Minerva--good creature, and, Lord, how strong!--carrying you to your bed. Mr. Null's waiting outside. Don't distress me by saying No!

"Is there anybody cruel enough to distress Mr. Gallilee? The doctor came in--looking like a clergyman; dressed all in black, with a beautiful frill to his shirt, and a spotless white cravat. He stared hard at me; he produced a little glass-tube; he gave it a shake, and put it under my arm; he took it away again, and consulted it; he said, 'Aha!' he approved of my tongue; he disliked my pulse; he gave his opinion at last. 'Perfect quiet. I must see Mrs. Gallilee.' And there was an end of it.

"Mr. Gallilee observed the medical proceedings with awe. 'Mr. Null is a wonderful man,' he whispered, before he followed the doctor out. Ill and wretched as I was, this little interruption amused me. I wonder why I write about it here? There are serious things waiting to be told--am I weakly putting them off?

"Miss Minerva came back to me as she had promised. 'It is well,' she said gravely, 'that the doctor has been to see you.'

"I asked if the doctor thought me very ill.

"He thinks you have narrowly escaped a nervous fever; and he has given some positive orders. One of them is that your slightest wishes are to be humoured. If he had not said that, Mrs. Gallilee would have prevented me from seeing you. She has been obliged to give way; and she hates me--almost as bitterly, Carmina, as she hates you.'

"This called to my mind the interruption of the previous night, when Miss Minerva had something important to tell me. When I asked what it was, she shook her head, and said painful subjects of conversation were not fit subjects in my present state.

"Need I add that I insisted on hearing what she had to say? Oh, how completely my poor father must have been deceived, when he made his horrible sister my guardian! If I had not fortunately offended the music-master, she would have used Mr. Le Frank as a means of making Ovid jealous, and of sowing the seeds of dissension between us. Having failed so far, she is (as Miss Minerva thinks) at a loss to discover any other means of gaining her wicked ends. Her rage at finding herself baffled seems to account for her furious conduct, when she discovered me in Miss Minerva's room.

"You will ask, as I did, what has she to gain by this wicked plotting and contriving, with its shocking accompaniments of malice and anger?"

"Miss Minerva answered, 'I still believe that money is the motive. Her son is mistaken about her; her friends are mistaken; they think she is fond of money--the truer conclusion is, she is short of money. There is the secret of the hard bargains she drives, and the mercenary opinions she holds. I don't doubt that her income would be enough for most other women in her position. It is not enough for a woman who is jealous of her rich sister's place in the world. Wait a little, and you will see that I am not talking at random. You were present at the grand party she gave some week's since?'"

"'I wish I had stayed in my own room,' I said. 'Mrs. Gallilee was offended with me for not admiring her scientific friends. With one or two exceptions, they talked of nothing but themselves and their discoveries--and, oh, dear, how ugly they were!'"

"'Never mind that now, Carmina. Did you notice the profusion of splendid flowers, in the hall and on the staircase, as well as in the reception-rooms?'"

"'Yes.'"

"'Did you observe--no, you are a young girl--did you hear any of the gentlemen, in the supper-room, expressing their admiration of the luxuries provided for the guests, the exquisite French cookery and the delicious wine? Why was all the money which these things cost spent in one evening? Because Lady Northlake's parties must be matched by Mrs. Gallilee's parties. Lady Northlake lives in a fashionable neighbourhood in London, and has splendid carriages and horses. This is a fashionable neighbourhood. Judge what this house costs, and the carriages and horses, when I tell you that the rent of the stables alone is over a hundred pounds a year. Lady Northlake has a superb place in Scotland. Mrs. Gallilee is not able to rival her sister in that respect--but she has her marine villa in the Isle of Wight. When Mr. Gallilee said you should have some sailing this autumn, did you think he meant that he would hire a boat? He referred to the yacht, which is part of the establishment at the sea-side. Lady Northlake goes yachting with her husband; and Mrs. Gallilee goes yachting with her husband. Do you know what it costs, when the first milliner in Paris supplies English ladies with dresses? That milliner's lowest charge for a dress which Mrs. Gallilee would despise--ordinary material, my dear, and imitation lace--is forty pounds. Think a little--and even your inexperience will see that the mistress of this house is spending more than she can afford, and is likely (unless she has resources that we know nothing about) to be, sooner or later, in serious

need of money.'

"This was a new revelation to me, and it altered my opinion of course. But I still failed to see what Mrs. Gallilee's extravagances had to do with her wicked resolution to prevent Ovid from marrying me. Miss Minerva's only answer to this was to tell me to write to Mr. Mool, while I had the chance, and ask for a copy of my father's Will. 'I will take the letter to him,' she said, 'and bring the reply myself. It will save time, if it does nothing else.' The letter was written in a minute. Just as she took it from me, the parlour-maid announced that the early dinner was ready.

"Two hours later, the reply was in my hands. The old father had taken Maria and Zo for their walk; and Miss Minerva had left the house by herself-- sending word to Mrs. Gallilee that she was obliged to go out on business of her own.

"'Did Mrs. Gallilee see you come in?' I asked.

"'Yes. She was watching for me, no doubt.'

"'Did she see you go upstairs to my room?'

"'Yes.'

"'And said nothing?'

"'Nothing.'

"We looked at each other; both of us feeling the same doubt of how the day would end. Miss Minerva pointed impatiently to the lawyer's reply. I opened it.

"Mr. Mool's letter was very kind, but quite incomprehensible in the latter part of it. After referring me to his private residence, in case I wished to consult him personally later in the day, he mentioned some proceeding, called 'proving the Will,' and some strange place called 'Doctors' Commons.' However, there was the copy of the Will, and that was all we wanted.

"I began reading it. How I pitied the unfortunate men who have to learn the law! My dear Teresa, I might as well have tried to read an unknown tongue. The strange words, the perpetual repetitions, the absence of stops, utterly bewildered me. I handed the copy to Miss Minerva. Instead of beginning on the first page, as I had done, she turned to the last. With what breathless

interest I watched her face! First, I saw that she understood what she was reading. Then, after a while, she turned pale. And then, she lifted her eyes to me. 'Don't be frightened,' she said.

"But I was frightened. My ignorant imagination pictured some dreadful unknown power given to Mrs. Gallilee by the Will. 'What can my aunt do to me?' I asked.

"Miss Minerva composed me--without concealing the truth. 'In her position, Carmina, and with her intensely cold and selfish nature, there is no fear of her attempting to reach her ends by violent means. Your happiness may be in danger--and that prospect, God knows, is bad enough.'

"When she talked of my happiness, I naturally thought of Ovid. I asked if there was anything about him in the Will.

"It was no doubt a stupid thing to say at such a time; and it seemed to annoy her. 'You are the only person concerned,' she answered sharply. 'It is Mrs. Gallilee's interest that you shall never be her son's wife, or any man's wife. If she can have her way, you will live and die an unmarried woman.'

"This did me good: it made me angry. I began to feel like myself again. I said, 'Please let me hear the rest of it.'

"Miss Minerva first patiently explained to me what she had read in the Will. She then returned to the subject of my aunt's extravagance; speaking from experience of what had happened in her own family. 'If Mrs. Gallilee borrows money,' she said, 'her husband will, in all probability, have to repay the loan. And, if borrowings go on in that way, Maria and Zoe will be left wretchedly provided for, in comparison with Lady Northlake's daughters. A fine large fortune would wonderfully improve these doubtful prospects--can you guess, Carmina, where it is to come from?' I could easily guess, now I understood the Will. My good Teresa, if I die without leaving children, the fine large fortune comes from Me.

"You see it all now--don't you? After I had thanked Miss Minerva, turned away my head on the pillow overpowered by disgust.

"The clock in the hall struck the hour of the children's tea. Miss Minerva would be wanted immediately. At parting, she kissed me. 'There is the kiss that you meant to give me last night,' she said. 'Don't despair of yourself. I am to be in the house for a month longer; and I am a match for Mrs. Gallilee. We will say no more now. Compose yourself, and try to sleep.'

"She went away to her duties. Sleep was out of the question. My attention wandered when I tried to read. Doing nothing meant, in other words, thinking of what had happened. If you had come into my room, I should have told you all about it. The next best thing was to talk to you in this way. You don't know what a relief it has been to me to write these lines."

"The night has come, and Mrs. Gallilee's cruelty has at last proved too much even for my endurance.

"Try not to be surprised; try not to be alarmed. If my mind to-morrow is the same as my mind to-night, I shall attempt to make my escape. I shall take refuge with Lady Northlake.

"Oh, if I could go to Ovid! But he is travelling in the deserts of Canada. Until his return to the coast, I can only write to him to the care of his bankers at Quebec. I should not know where to find him, when I arrived; and what a dreadful meeting--if I did find him--to be obliged to acknowledge that it is his mother who has driven me away! There will be nothing to alarm him, if I go to his mother's sister. If you could see Lady Northlake, you would feel as sure as I do that she will take my part.

"After writing to you, I must have fallen asleep. It was quite dark, when I was awakened by the striking of a match in my room. I looked round, expecting to see Miss Minerva. The person lighting my candle was Mrs. Gallilee.

"She poured out the composing medicine which Mr. Null had ordered for me. I took it in silence. She sat down by the bedside.

"My child,' she began, 'we are friends again now. You bear no malice, I am sure.'

"Distrust still kept me silent. I remembered that she had watched for Miss Minerva's return, and that she had seen Miss Minerva go up to my room. The idea that she meant to be revenged on us both for having our secrets, and keeping them from her knowledge, took complete possession of my mind.

"Are you feeling better?' she asked.

"Yes.'

"Is there anything I can get for you?"

"Not now--thank you."

"Would you like to see Mr. Null again, before to-morrow?"

"Oh, no!"

"These were ungraciously short replies--but it cost me an effort to speak to her at all. She showed no signs of taking offence; she proceeded as smoothly as ever.

"My dear Carmina, I have my faults of temper; and, with such pursuits as mine, I am not perhaps a sympathetic companion for a young girl. But I hope you believe that it is my duty and my pleasure to be a second mother to you?"

"Yes; she did really say that! Whether I was only angry, or whether I was getting hysterical, I don't know. I began to feel an oppression in my breathing that almost choked me. There are two windows in my room, and one of them only was open. I was obliged to ask her to open the other.

"She did it; she came back, and fanned me. I submitted as long as I could--and then I begged her not to trouble herself any longer. She put down the fan, and went on with what she had to say.

"I wish to speak to you about Miss Minerva. You are aware that I gave her notice, last night, to leave her situation. For your sake, I regret that I did not take this step before you came to England."

"My confidence in myself returned when I heard Miss Minerva spoken of in this way. I said at once that I considered her to be one of my best and truest friends.

"My dear child, that is exactly what I lament! This person has insinuated herself into your confidence--and she is utterly unworthy of it."

"Could I let those abominable words pass in silence? 'Mrs. Gallilee!' I said, 'you are cruelly wronging a woman whom I love and respect!'

"Mrs. Gallilee?' she repeated. 'Do I owe it to Miss Minerva that you have left off calling me Aunt? Your obstinacy, Carmina, leaves me no alternative but to speak out. If I had done my duty, I ought to have said long since, what I

am going to say now. You are putting your trust in the bitterest enemy you have; an enemy who secretly hates you with the unforgiving hatred of a rival!

"Look back at my letter, describing what passed between Miss Minerva and me, when I went to her room; and you will know what I felt on hearing her spoken of as 'a rival.' My sense of justice refused to believe it. But, oh, my dear old nurse, there was some deeper sense in me that said, as if in words, It is true!

"Mrs. Gallilee went on, without mercy.

"I know her thoroughly; I have looked into her false heart. Nobody has discovered her but me. Charge her with it, if you like; and let her deny it if she dare. Miss Minerva is secretly in love with my son.'

"She got up. Her object was gained: she was even with me, and with the woman who had befriended me, at last.

"Lie down in your bed again,' she said, 'and think over what I have told you. In your own interests, think over it well.'

"I was left alone.

"Shall I tell you what saved me from sinking under the shock? Ovid-- thousands and thousands of miles away--Ovid saved me.

"I love him with all my heart and soul; and I do firmly believe that I know him better than I know myself. If his mother had betrayed Miss Minerva to him, as she has betrayed her to me, that unhappy woman would have had his truest pity. I am as certain of this, as I am that I see the moon, while I write, shining on my bed. Ovid would have pitied her. And I pitied her.

"I wrote the lines that follow, and sent them to her by the maid. In the fear that she might mistake my motives, and think me angry and jealous, I addressed her with my former familiarity by her christian name:--"Last night, Frances, I ventured to ask if you loved some one who did not love you. And you answered by saying to me, Guess who he is. My aunt has just told me that he is her son. Has she spoken the truth?"

"I am now waiting to receive Miss Minerva's reply.

"For the first time since I have been in the house, my door is locked. I

cannot, and will not, see Mrs. Gallilee again. All her former cruelties are, as I feel it, nothing to the cruelty of her coming here when I am ill, and saying to me what she has said.

"The weary time passes, and still there is no reply. Is Frances angry? or is she hesitating how to answer me--personally or by writing? No! she has too much delicacy of feeling to answer in her own person.

"I have only done her justice. The maid has just asked me to open the door. I have got my answer. Read it."

"Mrs. Gallilee has spoken the truth.

"How I can have betrayed myself so that she has discovered my miserable secret is more than I can tell I will not own it to her or to any living creature but yourself. Undeserving as I am, I know that I can trust you.

"It is needless to dwell at any length on this confession. Many things in my conduct, which must have perplexed you, will explain themselves flow. There has been, however, one concealment on my part, which it is due to you that I should acknowledge.

"If Mrs. Gallilee had taken me into her confidence, I confess that my jealousy would have degraded me into becoming her accomplice. As things were, I was too angry and too cunning to let her make use of me without trusting me.

"There are other acts of deceit which I ought to acknowledge--if I could summon composure enough to write about them. Better to say at once--I am not worthy of your pardon, not worthy even of your pity.

"With the same sincerity, I warn you that the wickedness in me, on which Mrs. Gallilee calculated, may be in me still. The influence of your higher and better nature--helped perhaps by that other influence of which the old priest spoke in his letter--has opened my heart to tenderness and penitence of which I never believed myself capable: has brought the burning tears into my eyes which make it a hard task to write to you. All this I know, and yet I dare not believe in myself. It is useless to deny it, Carmina--I love him. Even now, when you have found me out, I love him. Don't trust me. Oh, God, what torture it is to write it--but I do write it, I will write it--don't trust me!

"One thing I may say for myself. I know the utter hopelessness of that love which I have acknowledged. I know that he returns your love, and will never

return mine. So let it be.

"I am not young; I have no right to comfort myself with hopes that I know to be vain. If one of us is to suffer, let it be that one who is used to suffering. I have never been the darling of my parents, like you; I have not been used at home to the kindness and the love that you remember. A life without sweetness and joy has well fitted me for a loveless future. And, besides, you are worthy of him, and I am not. Mrs. Gallilee is wrong, Carmina, if she thinks I am your rival. I am not your rival; I never can be your rival. Believe nothing else, but, for God's sake, believe that!

"I have no more to say--at least no more that I can remember now. Perhaps, you shrink from remaining in the same house with me? Let me know it, and I shall be ready--I might almost say, glad--to go."

"Have you read her letter, Teresa? Am I wrong in feeling that this poor wounded heart has surely some claim on me? If I am wrong, oh, what am I to do? what am I to do?"