

CHAPTER XXXIV.

"I don't know what is the matter with me. Sometimes I think I am going to be really ill."

It was the day after Mrs. Gallilee's interview with her lawyer--and this was Carmina's answer, when the governess entered her room, after the lessons of the morning, and asked if she felt better.

"Are you still taking medicine?" Miss Minerva inquired.

"Yes. Mr. Null says it's a tonic, and it's sure to do me good. It doesn't seem to have begun yet. I feel so dreadfully weak, Frances. The least thing makes me cry; and I put off doing what I ought to do, and want to do, without knowing why. You remember what I told you about Teresa? She may be with us in a few days more, for all I know to the contrary. I must find a nice lodging for her, poor dear--and here I am, thinking about it instead of doing it."

"Let me do it," Miss Minerva suggested.

Carmina's sad face brightened. "That's kind indeed!" she said.

"Nonsense! I shall take the children out, after dinner to-day. Looking over lodgings will be an amusement to me and to them."

"Where is Zo? Why haven't you brought her with you?"

"She is having her music lesson--and I must go back to keep her in order. About the lodging? A sitting-room and bedroom will be enough, I suppose? In this neighbourhood, I am afraid the terms will be rather high."

"Oh, never mind that! Let us have clean airy rooms--and a kind landlady. Teresa mustn't know it, if the terms are high."

"Will she allow you to pay her expenses?"

"Ah, you put it delicately! My aunt seemed to doubt if Teresa had any money of her own. I forgot, at the time, that my father had left her a little income. She told me so herself, and wondered, poor dear, how she was to spend it all. She mustn't be allowed to spend it all. We will tell her that the terms are

half what they may really be--and I will pay the other half. Isn't it cruel of my aunt not to let my old nurse live in the same house with me?"

At that moment, a message arrived from one of the persons of whom she was speaking. Mrs. Gallilee wished to see Miss Carmina immediately.

"My dear," said Miss Minerva, when the servant had withdrawn, "why do you tremble so?"

"There's something in me, Frances, that shudders at my aunt, ever since--"

She stopped.

Miss Minerva understood that sudden pause--the undesigned allusion to Carmina's guiltless knowledge of her feeling towards Ovid. By unexpressed consent, on either side, they still preserved their former relations as if Mrs. Gallilee had not spoken. Miss Minerva looked at Carmina sadly and kindly. "Good-bye for the present!" she said--and went upstairs again to the schoolroom.

In the hall, Carmina found the servant waiting for her. He opened the library door. The learned lady was at her studies.

"I have been speaking to Mr. Null about you," said Mrs. Gallilee.

On the previous evening, Carmina had kept her room. She had breakfasted in bed--and she now saw her aunt for the first time, since Mrs. Gallilee had left the house on her visit to Benjulia. The girl was instantly conscious of a change--to be felt rather than to be realised--a subtle change in her aunt's way of looking at her and speaking to her. Her heart beat fast. She took the nearest chair in silence.

"The doctor," Mrs. Gallilee proceeded, "thinks it of importance to your health to be as much as possible in the air. He wishes you to drive out every day, while the fine weather lasts. I have ordered the open carriage to be ready, after luncheon. Other engagements will prevent me from accompanying you. You will be under the care of my maid, and you will be out for two hours. Mr. Null hopes you will gain strength. Is there anything you want?"

"Nothing--thank you."

"Perhaps you wish for a new dress?"

"Oh, no!"

"You have no complaint to make of the servants?"

"The servants are always kind to me."

"I needn't detain you any longer--I have a person coming to speak to me."

Carmina had entered the room in doubt and fear. She left it with strangely-mingled feelings of perplexity and relief. Her sense of a mysterious change in her aunt had strengthened with every word that Mrs. Gallilee had said to her. She had heard of reformatory institutions, and of discreet persons called matrons who managed them. In her imaginary picture of such places, Mrs. Gallilee's tone and manner realised, in the strangest way, her idea of a matron speaking to a penitent.

As she crossed the hall, her thoughts took a new direction. Some indefinable distrust of the coming time got possession of her. An ugly model of the Colosseum, in cork, stood on the hall table. She looked at it absently. "I hope Teresa will come soon," she thought--and turned away to the stairs.

She ascended slowly; her head drooping, her mind still preoccupied. Arrived at the first landing, a sound of footsteps disturbed her. She looked up--and found herself face to face with Mr. Le Frank, leaving the schoolroom after his music lesson. At that sudden discovery, a cry of alarm escaped her--the common little scream of a startled woman. Mr. Le Frank made an elaborately formal bow: he apologised with sternly stupid emphasis. "I beg your pardon."

Moved by a natural impulse, penitently conscious of those few foolish words of hers which he had so unfortunately overheard, the poor girl made an effort to conciliate him. "I have very few friends, Mr. Le Frank," she said timidly. "May I still consider you as one of them? Will you forgive and forget? Will you shake hands?"

Mr. Le Frank made another magnificent bow. He was proud of his voice. In his most resonant and mellifluous tones, he said, "You do me honour--" and took the offered hand, and lifted it grandly, and touched it with his lips.

She held by the baluster with her free hand, and controlled the sickening sensation which that momentary contact with him produced. He might have detected the outward signs of the struggle, but for an interruption which preserved her from discovery. Mrs. Gallilee was standing at the open library

door. Mrs. Gallilee said, "I am waiting for you, Mr. Le Frank."

Carmina hurried up the stairs, pursued already by a sense of her own imprudence. In her first confusion and dismay, but one clear idea presented itself. "Oh!" she said, "have I made another mistake?"

Meanwhile, Mrs. Gallilee had received her music-master with the nearest approach to an indulgent welcome, of which a hardened nature is capable.

"Take the easy chair, Mr. Le Frank. You are not afraid of the open window?"

"Oh, dear no! I like it." He rapidly unrolled some leaves of music which he had brought downstairs. "With regard to the song that I had the honour of mentioning--"

Mrs. Gallilee pointed to the table. "Put the song there for the present. I have a word to say first. How came you to frighten my niece? I heard something like a scream, and naturally looked out. She was making an apology; she asked you to forgive and forget. What does all this mean?"

Mr. Le Frank exhausted his ingenuity in efforts of polite evasion without the slightest success. From first to last (if the expression may be permitted) Mrs. Gallilee had him under her thumb. He was not released, until he had literally reported Carmina's opinion of him as a man and a musician, and had exactly described the circumstances under which he had heard it. Mrs. Gallilee listened with an interest, which (under less embarrassing circumstances) would have even satisfied Mrs. Le Frank's vanity.

She was not for a moment deceived by the clumsy affectation of good humour with which he told his story. Her penetration discovered the vindictive feeling towards Carmina, which offered him, in case of necessity, as an instrument ready made to her hand. By fine degrees, she presented herself in the new character of a sympathising friend.

"I know now, Mr. Le Frank, why you declined to be my niece's music-master. Allow me to apologise for having ignorantly placed you in a false position. I appreciate the delicacy of your conduct--I understand, and admire you."

Mr. Le Frank's florid cheeks turned redder still. His cold blood began to simmer, heated by an all-pervading glow of flattered self-esteem.

"My niece's motives for concealment are plain enough," Mrs. Gallilee proceeded. "Let me hope that she was ashamed to confess the total want of

taste, delicacy, and good manners which has so justly offended you. Miss Minerva, however, has no excuse for keeping me in the dark. Her conduct, in this matter, offers, I regret to say, one more instance of her habitual neglect of the duties which attach to her position in my house. There seems to be some private understanding between my governess and my niece, of which I highly disapprove. However, the subject is too distasteful to dwell on. You were speaking of your song--the last effort of your genius, I think?"

His "genius"! The inner glow in Mr. Le Frank grew warmer and warmer. "I asked for the honour of an interview," he explained, "to make a request." He took up his leaves of music. "This is my last, and, I hope, my best effort at composition. May I dedicate it--?"

"To me!" Mrs. Gallilee exclaimed with a burst of enthusiasm.

Mr. Le Frank felt the compliment. He bowed gratefully.

"Need I say how gladly I accept the honour?" With this gracious answer Mrs. Gallilee rose.

Was the change of position a hint, suggesting that Mr. Le Frank might leave her to her studies, now that his object was gained? Or was it an act of homage offered by Science to Art? Mr. Le Frank was incapable of placing an unfavourable interpretation on any position which a woman--and such a woman--could assume in his presence. He felt the compliment again. "The first copy published shall be sent to you," he said--and snatched up his hat, eager to set the printers at work.

"And five-and-twenty copies more, for which I subscribe," cried his munificent patroness, cordially shaking hands with him.

Mr. Le Frank attempted to express his sense of obligation. Generous Mrs. Gallilee refused to hear him. He took his leave; he got as far as the hall; and then he was called back--softly, confidentially called back to the library.

"A thought has just struck me," said Mrs. Gallilee. "Please shut the door for a moment. About that meeting between you and my niece? Perhaps, I am taking a morbid view?"

She paused. Mr. Le Frank waited with breathless interest.

"Or is there something out of the common way, in that apology of hers?" Mrs. Gallilee proceeded. "Have you any idea what the motive might be?"

Mr. Le Frank's ready suspicion was instantly aroused. "Not the least idea," he answered. "Can you tell me?"

"I am as completely puzzled as you are," Mrs. Gallilee rejoined.

Mr. Le Frank considered. His suspicions made an imaginative effort, assisted by his vanity. "After my refusal to teach her," he suggested, "that proposal to shake hands may have a meaning--" There, his invention failed him. He stopped, and shook his head ominously.

Mrs. Gallilee's object being attained, she made no attempt to help him. "Perhaps, time will show," she answered discreetly. "Good-bye again--with best wishes for the success of the song."