

CHAPTER XXXVI.

The weather, to Carmina's infinite relief, changed for the worse the next day. Incessant rain made it impossible to send her out in the carriage again.

But it was an eventful day, nevertheless. On that rainy afternoon, Mr. Gallilee asserted himself as a free agent, in the terrible presence of his wife!

"It's an uncommonly dull day, my dear," he began. This passed without notice, which was a great encouragement to go on. "If you will allow me to say so, Carmina wants a little amusement." Mrs. Gallilee looked up from her book. Fearing that he might stop altogether if he took his time as usual, Mr. Gallilee proceeded in a hurry. "There's an afternoon performance of conjuring tricks; and, do you know, I really think I might take Carmina to see it. We shall be delighted if you will accompany us, my dear; and they do say--perhaps you have heard of it yourself--that there's a good deal of science in this exhibition." His eyes rolled in uneasy expectation, as he waited to hear what his wife might decide. She waved her hand contemptuously in the direction of the door. Mr. Gallilee retired with the alacrity of a young man. "Now we shall enjoy ourselves!" he thought as he went up to Carmina's room.

They were just leaving the house, when the music-master arrived at the door to give his lesson.

Mr. Gallilee immediately put his head out of the cab window. "We are going to see the conjuring!" he shouted cheerfully. "Carmina! don't you see Mr. Le Frank? He is bowing to you. Do you like conjuring, Mr. Le Frank? Don't tell the children where we are going! They would be disappointed, poor things--but they must have their lessons, mustn't they? Good-bye! I say! stop a minute. If you ever want your umbrella mended, I know a man who will do it cheap and well. Nasty day, isn't it? Go on! go on!"

The general opinion which ranks vanity among the lighter failings of humanity, commits a serious mistake. Vanity wants nothing but the motive power to develop into absolute wickedness. Vanity can be savagely suspicious and diabolically cruel. What are the two typical names which stand revealed in history as the names of the two vainest men that ever lived? Nero and Robespierre.

In his obscure sphere, and within his restricted means, the vanity of Mrs.

Gallilee's music-master had developed its inherent qualities, under her cunning and guarded instigation. Once set in action, his suspicion of Carmina passed beyond all limits. There could be no reason but a bad reason for that barefaced attempt to entrap him into a reconciliation. Every evil motive which it was possible to attribute to a girl of her age, no matter how monstrously improbable it might be, occurred to him when he recalled her words, her look, and her manner at their meeting on the stairs. His paltry little mind, at other times preoccupied in contemplating himself and his abilities, was now so completely absorbed in imagining every variety of conspiracy against his social and professional position, that he was not even capable of giving his customary lesson to two children. Before the appointed hour had expired, Miss Minerva remarked that his mind did not appear to be at ease, and suggested that he had better renew the lesson on the next day. After a futile attempt to assume an appearance of tranquillity--he thanked her and took his leave.

On his way downstairs, he found the door of Carmina's room left half open.

She was absent with Mr. Gallilee. Miss Minerva remained upstairs with the children. Mrs. Gallilee was engaged in scientific research. At that hour of the afternoon, there were no duties which called the servants to the upper part of the house. He listened--he hesitated--he went into the room.

It was possible that she might keep a journal: it was certain that she wrote and received letters. If he could only find her desk unlocked and her drawers open, the inmost secrets of her life would be at his mercy.

He tried her desk; he tried the cupboard under the bookcase. They were both locked. The cabinet between the windows and the drawer of the table were left unguarded. No discovery rewarded the careful search that he pursued in these two repositories. He opened the books that she had left on the table, and shook them. No forgotten letter, no private memorandum (used as marks) dropped out. He looked all round him; he peeped into the bedroom; he listened, to make sure that nobody was outside; he entered the bedroom, and examined the toilet-table, and opened the doors of the wardrobe--and still the search was fruitless, persevere as he might.

Returning to the sitting-room, he shook his fist at the writing-desk. "You wouldn't be locked," he thought, "unless you had some shameful secrets to keep! I shall have other opportunities; and she may not always remember to turn the key." He stole quietly down the stairs, and met no one on his way out.

The bad weather continued on the next day. The object of Mr. Le Frank's suspicion remained in the house--and the second opportunity failed to offer itself as yet.

The visit to the exhibition of conjuring had done Carmina harm instead of good. Her head ached, in the close atmosphere--she was too fatigued to be able to stay in the room until the performance came to an end. Poor Mr. Gallilee retired in disgrace to the shelter of his club. At dinner, even his perfect temper failed him for the moment. He found fault with the champagne--and then apologised to the waiter. "I'm sorry I was a little hard on you just now. The fact is, I'm out of sorts--you have felt in that way yourself, haven't you? The wine's first-rate; and, really the weather is so discouraging, I think I'll try another pint."

But Carmina's buoyant heart defied the languor of illness and the gloomy day. The post had brought her a letter from Ovid--enclosing a photograph, taken at Montreal, which presented him in his travelling costume.

He wrote in a tone of cheerfulness, which revived Carmina's sinking courage, and renewed for a time at least the happiness of other days. The air of the plains of Canada he declared to be literally intoxicating. Every hour seemed to be giving him back the vital energy that he had lost in his London life. He slept on the ground, in the open air, more soundly than he had ever slept in a bed. But one anxiety troubled his mind. In the roving life which he now enjoyed, it was impossible that his letters could follow him--and yet, every day that passed made him more unreasonably eager to hear that Carmina was not weary of waiting for him, and that all was well at home.

"And how have these vain aspirations of mine ended?"--the letter went on. "They have ended, my darling, in a journey for one of my guides--an Indian, whose fidelity I have put to the proof, and whose zeal I have stimulated by a promise of reward.

"The Indian takes these lines to be posted at Quebec. He is also provided with an order, authorising my bankers to trust him with the letters that are waiting for me. I begin a canoe voyage to-morrow; and, after due consultation with the crew, we have arranged a date and a place at which my messenger will find me on his return. Shall I confess my own amiable weakness? or do you know me well enough already to suspect the truth? My love, I am sorely tempted to be false to my plans and arrangements to go back with the Indian to Quebec--and to take a berth in the first steamer that returns to England.

"Don't suppose that I am troubled by any misgivings about what is going on in my absence! It is one of the good signs of my returning health that I take the brightest view of our present lives, and of our lives to come. I feel tempted to go back, for the same reason that makes me anxious for letters. I want to hear from you, because I love you--I want to return at once, because I love you. There is longing, unutterable longing, in my heart. No doubts, my sweet one, and no fears!

"But I was a doctor, before I became a lover. My medical knowledge tells me that this is an opportunity of thoroughly fortifying my constitution, and (with God's blessing) of securing to myself reserves of health and strength which will take us together happily on the way to old age. Dear love, you must be my wife--not my nurse! There is the thought that gives me self-denial enough to let the Indian go away by himself."

Carmina answered this letter as soon as she had read it.

Before the mail could carry her reply to its destination, she well knew that the Indian messenger would be on the way back to his master. But Ovid had made her so happy that she felt the impulse to write to him at once, as she might have felt the impulse to answer him at once if he had been present and speaking to her. When the pages were filled, and the letter had been closed and addressed, the effort produced its depressing effect on her spirits.

There now appeared to her a certain wisdom in the loving rapidity of her reply.

Even in the fullness of her joy, she was conscious of an underlying distrust of herself. Although he refused to admit it, Mr. Null had betrayed a want of faith in the remedy from which he had anticipated such speedy results, by writing another prescription. He had also added a glass to the daily allowance of wine, which he had thought sufficient thus far. Without despairing of herself, Carmina felt that she had done wisely in writing her answer, while she was still well enough to rival the cheerful tone of Ovid's letter.

She laid down to rest on the sofa, with the photograph in her hand. No sense of loneliness oppressed her now; the portrait was the best of all companions. Outside, the heavy rain pattered; in the room, the busy clock ticked. She listened lazily, and looked at her lover, and kissed the faithful image of him--peacefully happy.

The opening of the door was the first little event that disturbed her. Zo peeped in. Her face was red, her hair was tousled, her fingers presented inky signs of a recent writing lesson.

"I'm in a rage," she announced; "and so is the Other One."

Carmina called her to the sofa, and tried to find out who this second angry person might be. "Oh, you know!" Zo answered doggedly. "She rapped my knuckles. I call her a Beast."

"Hush! you mustn't talk in that way."

"She'll be here directly," Zo proceeded. "You look out! She'd rap your knuckles--only you're too big. If it wasn't raining, I'd run away." Carmina assumed an air of severity, and entered a serious protest adapted to her young friend's intelligence. She might as well have spoken in a foreign language. Zo had another reason to give, besides the rap on the knuckles, for running away.

"I say!" she resumed--"you know the boy?"

"What boy, dear?"

"He comes round sometimes. He's got a hurdy-gurdy. He's got a monkey. He grins. He says, Aha--gimmee--haypenny. I mean to go to that boy!"

As a confession of Zo's first love, this was irresistible. Carmina burst out laughing. Zo indignantly claimed a hearing. "I haven't done yet!" she burst out. "The boy dances. Like this." She cocked her head, and slapped her thigh, and imitated the boy. "And sometimes he sings!" she cried with another outburst of admiration.

"Yah-yah-yah-bellah-vitah-yah! That's Italian, Carmina." The door opened again while the performer was in full vigour--and Miss Minerva appeared.

When she entered the room, Carmina at once saw that Zo had correctly observed her governess. Miss Minerva's heavy eyebrows lowered; her lips were pale; her head was held angrily erect, "Carmina!" she said sharply, "you shouldn't encourage that child." She turned round, in search of the truant pupil. Incurably stupid at her lessons, Zo's mind had its gleams of intelligence, in a state of liberty. One of those gleams had shone propitiously, and had lighted her out of the room.

Miss Minerva took a chair: she dropped into it like a person worn out with fatigue. Carmina spoke to her gently. Words of sympathy were thrown away on that self-tormenting nature.

"No; I'm not ill," she said. "A night without sleep; a perverse child to teach in the morning; and a detestable temper at all times--that's what is the matter with me." She looked at Carmina. "You seem to be wonderfully better to-day. Has stupid Mr. Null really done you some good at last?" She noticed the open writing-desk, and discovered the letter. "Or is it good news?"

"I have heard from Ovid," Carmina answered. The photograph was still in her hand; but her inbred delicacy of feeling kept the portrait hidden.

The governess's sallow complexion turned little by little to a dull greyish white. Her hands, loosely clasped in her lap, tightened when she heard Ovid's name. That slight movement over, she stirred no more. After waiting a little, Carmina ventured to speak. "Frances," she said, "you have not shaken hands with me yet." Miss Minerva slowly looked up, keeping her hands still clasped on her lap.

"When is he coming back?" she asked. It was said quietly.

Carmina quietly replied, "Not yet--I am sorry to say."

"I am sorry too."

"It's good of you, Frances, to say that."

"No: it's not good of me. I'm thinking of myself--not of you." She suddenly lowered her tone. "I wish you were married to him," she said.

There was a pause. Miss Minerva was the first to speak again.

"Do you understand me?" she asked.

"Perhaps you will help me to understand," Carmina answered.

"If you were married to him, even my restless spirit might be at peace. The struggle would be over."

She left her chair, and walked restlessly up and down the room. The passionate emotion which she had resolutely suppressed began to get beyond her control.

"I was thinking about you last night," she abruptly resumed. "You are a gentle little creature--but I have seen you show some spirit, when your aunt's cold-blooded insolence roused you. Do you know what I would do, if I were in your place? I wouldn't wait tamely till he came back to me--I would go to him. Carmina! Carmina! leave this horrible house!" She stopped, close by the sofa. "Let me look at you. Ha! I believe you have thought of it yourself?"

"I have thought of it."

"What did I say? You poor little prisoner, you have the right spirit in you! I wish I could give you some of my strength." The half-mocking tone in which she spoke, suddenly failed her. Her piercing eyes grew dim; the hard lines in her face softened. She dropped on her knees, and wound her lithe arms round Carmina, and kissed her. "You sweet child!" she said--and burst passionately into tears.

Even then, the woman's fiercely self-dependent nature asserted itself. She pushed Carmina back on the sofa. "Don't look at me! don't speak to me!" she gasped. "Leave me to get over it."

She stifled the sobs that broke from her. Still on her knees, she looked up, shuddering. A ghastly smile distorted her lips. "Ah, what fools we are!" she said. "Where is that lavender water, my dear--your favourite remedy for a burning head?" She found the bottle before Carmina could help her, and soaked her handkerchief in the lavender water, and tied it round her head. "Yes," she went on, as if they had been gossiping on the most commonplace subjects, "I think you're right: this is the best of all perfumes." She looked at the clock. "The children's dinner will be ready in ten minutes. I must, and will, say what I have to say to you. It may be the last poor return I can make, Carmina, for all your kindness."

She returned to her chair.

"I can't help it if I frighten you," she resumed; "I must tell you plainly that I don't like the prospect. In the first place, the sooner we two are parted--oh, only for a while!--the better for you. After what I went through, last night--no, I am not going to enter into any particulars; I am only going to repeat, what I have said already--don't trust me. I mean it, Carmina! Your generous nature shall not mislead you, if I can help it. When you are a happy married woman--when he is farther removed from me than he is even now--remember your ugly, ill-tempered friend, and let me come to you. Enough of

this! I have other misgivings that are waiting to be confessed. You know that old nurse of yours intimately--while I only speak from a day or two's experience of her. To my judgment, she is a woman whose fondness for you might be turned into a tigerish fondness, on very small provocation. You write to her constantly. Does she know what you have suffered? Have you told her the truth?"

"Yes."

"Without reserve?"

"Entirely without reserve."

"When that old woman comes to London, Carmina--and sees you, and sees Mrs. Gallilee--don't you think the consequences may be serious? and your position between them something (if you were ten times stronger than you are) that no fortitude can endure?"

Carmina started up on the sofa. She was not able to speak. Miss Minerva gave her time to recover herself--after another look at the clock.

"I am not alarming you for nothing," she proceeded; "I have something hopeful to propose. Your friend Teresa has energies--wild energies. Make a good use of them. She will do anything you ask or her. Take her with you to Canada!"

"Oh, Frances!"

Miss Minerva pointed to the letter on the desk. "Does he tell you when he will be back?"

"No. He feels the importance of completely restoring his health--he is going farther and farther away--he has sent to Quebec for his letters."

"Then there is no fear of your crossing each other on the voyage. Go to Quebec, and wait for him there."

"I should frighten him."

"Not you!"

"What can I say to him?"

"What you must say, if you are weak enough to wait for him here. Do you think his mother will consider his feelings, when he comes back to marry you? I tell you again I am not talking at random. I have thought it all out: I know how you can make your escape, and defy pursuit. You have plenty of money; you have Teresa to take care of you. Go! For your own sake, for his sake, go!"

The clock struck the hour. She rose and removed the handkerchief from her head. "Hush!" she said, "Do I hear the rustling of a dress on the landing below?" She snatched up a bottle of Mr. Null's medicine--as a reason for being in the room. The sound of the rustling dress came nearer and nearer. Mrs. Gallilee (on her way to the schoolroom dinner) opened the door. She instantly understood the purpose which the bottle was intended to answer.

"It is my business to give Carmina her medicine," she said. "Your business is at the schoolroom table."

She took possession of the bottle, and advanced to Carmina. There were two looking-glasses in the room. One, in the usual position, over the fireplace; the other opposite, on the wall behind the sofa. Turning back, before she left the room, Miss Minerva saw Mrs. Gallilee's face, when she and Carmina looked at each other, reflected in the glass.

The girls were waiting for their dinner. Maria received the unpunctual governess with her ready smile, and her appropriate speech. "Dear Miss Minerva, we were really almost getting alarmed about you. Pardon me for noticing it, you look--" She caught the eye of the governess, and stopped confusedly.

"Well?" said Miss Minerva. "How do I look?"

Maria still hesitated. Zo spoke out as usual. "You look as if somebody had frightened you."