

CHAPTER XL.

When the morning lessons were over, Carmina showed the priest's letter to Miss Minerva. The governess read it, and handed it back in silence.

"Have you nothing to say?" Carmina asked.

"Nothing. You know my opinion already. That letter says what I have said--with greater authority."

"It has determined me to follow your advice, Frances."

"Then it has done well."

"And you see," Carmina continued, "that Father Patrizio speaks of obstacles in the way of my marriage. Teresa has evidently shown him my letters. Do you think he fears, as I do, that my aunt may find some means of separating us, even when Ovid comes back?"

"Very likely."

She spoke in faint weary tones--listlessly leaning back in her chair. Carmina asked if she had passed another sleepless night.

"Yes," she said, "another bad night, and the usual martyrdom in teaching the children. I don't know which disgusts me most--Zoe's impudent stupidity, or Maria's unendurable humbug."

She had never yet spoken of Maria in this way. Even her voice seemed to be changed. Instead of betraying the usual angry abruptness, her tones coldly indicated impenetrable contempt. In the silence that ensued, she looked up, and saw Carmina's eyes resting on her anxiously and kindly.

"Any other human being but you," she said, "would find me disagreeable and rude--and would be quite right, too. I haven't asked after your health. You look paler than usual. Have you, too, had a bad night?"

"I fell asleep towards the morning. And--oh, I had such a delightful dream! I could almost wish that I had never awakened from it."

"Who did you dream of?" She put the question mechanically--frowning, as if

at some repellent thought suggested to her by what she had just heard.

"I dreamed of my mother," Carmina answered.

Miss Minerva raised herself at once in the chair. Whatever that passing impression might have been, she was free from it now. There was some little life again in her eyes; some little spirit in her voice. "Take me out of myself," she said; "tell me your dream."

"It is nothing very remarkable, Frances. We all of us sometimes see our dear lost ones in sleep. I saw my mother again, as I used to see her in the nursery at bedtime--tall and beautiful, with her long dark hair falling over her white dressing-gown to the waist. She stooped over me, and kissed me; and she looked surprised. She said, 'My little angel, why are you here in a strange house? I have come to take you back to your own cot, by my bedside.' I wasn't surprised or frightened; I put my arms round her neck; and we floated away together through the cool starry night; and we were at home again. I saw my cot, with its pretty white curtains and pink ribbons. I heard my mother tell me an English fairy story, out of a book which my father had given to her--and her kind voice grew fainter and fainter, while I grew more and more sleepy--and it ended softly, just as it used to end in the happy old days. And I woke, crying. Do you ever dream of your mother now?"

"I? God forbid!"

"Oh, Frances, what a dreadful thing to say!"

"Is it? It was the thought in me, when you spoke. And with good reason, too. I was the last of a large family--the ugly one; the ill-tempered one; the encumbrance that made it harder than ever to find money enough to pay the household expenses. My father swore at my mother for being my mother. She reviled him just as bitterly in return; and vented the rest of her ill-temper on my wretched little body, with no sparing hand. Bedtime was her time for beating me. Talk of your mother--not of mine! You were very young, were you not, when she died?"

"Too young to feel my misfortune--but old enough to remember the sweetest woman that ever lived. Let me show you my father's portrait of her again. Doesn't that face tell you what an angel she was? There was some charm in her that all children felt. I can just remember some of my playfellows who used to come to our garden. Other good mothers were with us--but the children all crowded round my mother. They would have her in all their

games; they fought for places on her lap when she told them stories; some of them cried, and some of them screamed, when it was time to take them away from her. Oh, why do we live! why do we die! I have bitter thoughts sometimes, Frances, like you. I have read in poetry that death is a fearful thing. To me, death is a cruel thing,--and it has never seemed so cruel as in these later days, since I have known Ovid. If my mother had but lived till now, what happiness would have been added to my life and to hers! How Ovid would have loved her--how she would have loved Ovid!"

Miss Minerva listened in silence. It was the silence of true interest and sympathy, while Carmina was speaking of her mother. When her lover's name became mingled with the remembrances of her childhood--the change came. Once more, the tell-tale lines began to harden in the governess's face. She lay back again in her chair. Her fingers irritably platted and unplatted the edge of her black apron.

Carmina was too deeply absorbed in her thoughts, too eagerly bent on giving them expression, to notice these warning signs.

"I have all my mother's letters to my father," she went on, "when he was away from her on his sketching excursions, You have still a little time to spare--I should so like to read some of them to you. I was reading one, last night--which perhaps accounts for my dream? It is on a subject that interests everybody. In my father's absence, a very dear friend of his met with a misfortune; and my mother had to prepare his wife to hear the bad news--oh, that reminds me! There is something I want to say to you first."

"About yourself?" Miss Minerva asked.

"About Ovid. I want your advice."

Miss Minerva was silent. Carmina went on. "It's about writing to Ovid," she explained.

"Write, of course!"

The reply was suddenly and sharply given. "Surely, I have not offended you?" Carmina said.

"Nonsense! Let me hear your mother's letter."

"Yes--but I want you to hear the circumstances first."

"You have mentioned them already."

"No! no! I mean the circumstances, in my case." She drew her chair closer to Miss Minerva. "I want to whisper--for fear of somebody passing on the stairs. The more I think of it, the more I feel that I ought to prepare Ovid for seeing me, before I make my escape. You said when we talked of it--"

"Never mind what I said."

"Oh, but I do mind! You said I could go to Ovid's bankers at Quebec, and then write when I knew where he was. I have been thinking over it since-- and I see a serious risk. He might return from his inland journey, on the very day that I get there; he might even meet me in the street. In his delicate health--I daren't think of what the consequences of such a surprise might be! And then there is the dreadful necessity of telling him, that his mother has driven me into taking this desperate step. In my place, wouldn't you feel that you could do it more delicately in writing?"

"I dare say!"

"I might write to-morrow, for instance. To-morrow is one of the American mail days. My letter would get to Canada (remembering the roundabout way by which Teresa and I are to travel, for fear of discovery), days and days before we could arrive. I should shut myself up in an hotel at Quebec; and Teresa could go every day to the bank, to hear if Ovid was likely to send for his letters, or likely to call soon and ask for them. Then he would be prepared. Then, when we meet--!"

The governess left her chair, and pointed to the clock.

Carmina looked at her--and rose in alarm. "Are you in pain?" she asked.

"Yes--neuralgia, I think. I have the remedy in my room. Don't keep me, my dear. Mrs. Gallilee mustn't find me here again."

The paroxysm of pain which Carmina had noticed, passed over her face once more. She subdued it, and left the room. The pain mastered her again; a low cry broke from her when she closed the door. Carmina ran out: "Frances! what is it?" Frances looked over her shoulder, while she slowly ascended the stairs. "Never mind!" she said gently. "I have got my remedy."

Carmina advanced a step to follow her, and drew back.

Was that expression of suffering really caused by pain of the body? or was it attributable to anything that she had rashly said? She tried to recall what had passed between Frances and herself. The effort wearied her. Her thoughts turned self-reproachfully to Ovid. If he had been speaking to a friend whose secret sorrow was known to him, would he have mentioned the name of the woman whom they both loved? She looked at his portrait, and reviled herself as a selfish insensible wretch. "Will Ovid improve me?" she wondered. "Shall I be a little worthier of him, when I am his wife?"

Luncheon time came; and Mrs. Gallilee sent word that they were not to wait for her.

"She's studying," said Mr. Gallilee, with awe-struck looks. "She's going to make a speech at the Discussion to-morrow. The man who gives the lecture is the man she's going to pitch into. I don't know him; but how do you feel about it yourself, Carmina?--I wouldn't stand in his shoes for any sum of money you could offer me. Poor devil! I beg your pardon, my dear; let me give you a wing of the fowl. Boiled fowl--eh? and tongue--ha? Do you know the story of the foreigner? He dined out fifteen times with his English friends. And there was boiled fowl and tongue at every dinner. The fifteenth time, the foreigner couldn't stand it any longer. He slapped his forehead, and he said, 'Ah, merciful Heaven, cock and bacon again!' You won't mention it, will you?--and perhaps you think as I do?--I'm sick of cock and bacon, myself."

Mr. Null's medical orders still prescribed fresh air. The carriage came to the door at the regular hour; and Mr. Gallilee, with equal regularity, withdrew to his club.

Carmina was too uneasy to leave the house, without seeing Miss Minerva first. She went up to the schoolroom.

There was no sound of voices, when she opened the door. Miss Minerva was writing, and silence had been proclaimed. The girls were ready dressed for their walk. Industrious Maria had her book. Idle Zo, perched on a high chair, sat kicking her legs. "If you say a word," she whispered, as Carmina passed her, "you'll be called an Imp, and stuck up on a chair. I shall go to the boy."

"Are you better, Frances?"

"Much better, my dear."

Her face denied it; the look of suffering was there still. She tore up the letter which she had been writing, and threw the fragments into the waste-paper basket.

"That's the second letter you've torn up," Zo remarked.

"Say a word more--and you shall have bread and water for tea!" Miss Minerva was not free from irritation, although she might be free from pain. Even Zo noticed how angry the governess was.

"I wish you could drive with me in the carriage," said Carmina. "The air would do you so much good."

"Impossible! But you may soothe my irritable nerves in another way, if you like."

"How?"

"Relieve me of these girls. Take them out with you. Do you mind?"

Zo instantly jumped off her chair; and even Maria looked up from her book.

"I will take them with pleasure. Must we ask my aunt's permission?"

"We will dispense with your aunt's permission. She is shut up in her study--and we are all forbidden to disturb her. I will take it on myself." She turned to the girls with another outbreak of irritability. "Be off!"

Maria rose with dignity, and made one of her successful exits. "I am sorry, dear Miss Minerva, if I have done anything to make you angry." She pointed the emphasis on "I," by a side-look at her sister. Zo bounced out of the room, and performed the Italian boy's dance on the landing. "For shame!" said Maria. Zo burst into singing. "Yah yah-yah-bellah-vitah-yah! Jolly! jolly! jolly!--we are going out for a drive!"

Carmina waited, to say a friendly word, before she followed the girls.

"You didn't think me neglectful, Frances, when I let you go upstairs by yourself!" Miss Minerva answered sadly and kindly. "The best thing you could do was to leave me by myself."

Carmina's mind was still not quite at ease. "Yes--but you were in pain," she said.

"You curious child! I am not in pain now."

"Will you make me comfortable, Frances? Give me a kiss."

"Two, my dear--if you like."

She kissed Carmina on one cheek and on the other. "Now leave me to write," she said.

Carmina left her.

The drive ought to have been a pleasant one, with Zo in the carriage. To Marceline, it was a time of the heartiest enjoyment. Maria herself condescended to smile, now and then. There was only one dull person among them. "Miss Carmina was but poor company," the maid remarked when they got back.

Mrs. Gallilee herself received them in the hall.

"You will never take the children out again without my leave," she said to Carmina. "The person who is really responsible for what you have done, will mislead you no more." With those words she entered the library, and closed the door.

Maria and Zo, at the sight of their mother, had taken flight. Carmina stood alone in the hall. Mrs. Gallilee had turned her cold. After awhile, she followed the children as far as her own room. There, her resolution failed her. She called faintly upstairs--"Frances!" There was no answering voice. She went into her room. A small paper packet was on the table; sealed, and addressed to herself. She tore it open. A ring with a spinel ruby in it dropped out: she recognised the stone--it was Miss Minerva's ring.

Some blotted lines were traced on the paper inside.

"I have tried to pour out my heart to you in writing--and I have torn up the letters. The fewest words are the best. Look back at my confession--and you will know why I have left you. You shall hear from me, when I am more worthy of you than I am now. In the meantime, wear my ring. It will tell you how mean I once was. F. M."

Carmina looked at the ring. She remembered that Frances had tried to make her accept it as security, in return for the loan of thirty pounds.

She referred to the confession. Two passages in it were underlined: "The wickedness in me, on which Mrs. Gallilee calculated, may be in me still." And, again: "Even now, when you have found me out, I love him. Don't trust me."

Never had Carmina trusted her more faithfully than at that bitter moment!