

CHAPTER XLI.

The ordinary aspect of the schoolroom was seen no more.

Installed in a position of temporary authority, the parlour-maid sat silently at her needlework. Maria stood by the window, in the new character of an idle girl--with her handkerchief in her hand, and her everlasting book dropped unnoticed on the floor. Zo lay flat on her back, on the hearth-rug, hugging the dog in her arms. At intervals, she rolled herself over slowly from side to side, and stared at the ceiling with wondering eyes. Miss Minerva's departure had struck the parlour-maid dumb, and had demoralized the pupils.

Maria broke the silence at last. "I wonder where Carmina is?" she said.

"In her room, most likely," the parlour-maid suggested.

"Had I better go and see after her?"

The cautious parlour-maid declined to offer advice. Maria's well-balanced mind was so completely unhinged, that she looked with languid curiosity at her sister. Zo still stared at the ceiling, and still rolled slowly from one side to the other. The dog on her breast, lulled by the regular motion, slept profoundly--not even troubled by a dream of fleas!

While Maria was still considering what it might be best to do, Carmina entered the room. She looked, as the servant afterwards described it, "like a person who had lost her way." Maria exhibited the feeling of the schoolroom, by raising her handkerchief in solemn silence to her eyes. Without taking notice of this demonstration, Carmina approached the parlour-maid, and said, "Did you see Miss Minerva before she went away?"

"I took her message, Miss."

"What message?"

"The message, saying she wished to see my mistress for a few minutes."

"Well?"

"Well, Miss, I was told to show the governess into the library. She went down

with her bonnet on, ready dressed to go out. Before she had been five minutes with my mistress she came out again, and rang the hall-bell, and spoke to Joseph. 'My boxes are packed and directed,' she says; 'I will send for them in an hour's time. Good day, Joseph.' And she stepped into the street, as quietly as if she was going out shopping round the corner."

"Have the boxes been sent for?"

"Yes, Miss."

Carmina lifted her head, and spoke in steadier tones.

"Where have they been taken to?"

"To the flower-shop at the back--to be kept till called for."

"No other address?"

"None."

The last faint hope of tracing Frances was at an end. Carmina turned wearily to leave the room. Zo called to her from the hearth-rug. Always kind to the child, she retraced her steps. "What is it?" she asked.

Zo got on her legs before she spoke, like a member of parliament. "I've been thinking about that governess," she announced. "Didn't I once tell you I was going to run away? And wasn't it because of Her? Hush! Here's the part of it I can't make out--She's run away from Me. I don't bear malice; I'm only glad in myself. No more dirty nails. No more bread and water for tea. That's all. Good morning." Zo laid herself down again on the rug; and the dog laid himself down again on Zo.

Carmina returned to her room--to reflect on what she had heard from the parlour-maid.

It was now plain that Mrs. Gallilee had not been allowed the opportunity of dismissing her governess at a moment's notice: Miss Minerva's sudden departure was unquestionably due to Miss Minerva herself.

Thus far, Carmina was able to think clearly--and no farther. The confused sense of helpless distress which she had felt, after reading the few farewell words that Frances had addressed to her, still oppressed her mind. There were moments when she vaguely understood, and bitterly lamented, the

motives which had animated her unhappy friend. Other moments followed, when she impulsively resented the act which had thrown her on her own resources, at the very time when she had most need of the encouragement that could be afforded by the sympathy of a firmer nature than her own. She began to doubt the steadiness of her resolution--without Frances to take leave of her, on the morning of the escape. For the first time, she was now tortured by distrust of Ovid's reception of her; by dread of his possible disapproval of her boldness; by morbid suspicion even of his taking his mother's part. Bewildered and reckless, she threw herself on the sofa--her heart embittered against Frances--indifferent whether she lived or died.

At dinner-time she sent a message, begging to be excused from appearing at the table. Mrs. Gallilee at once presented herself, harder and colder than ever, to inspect the invalid. Perceiving no immediate necessity for summoning Mr. Null, she said, "Ring, if you want anything," and left the room.

Mr. Gallilee followed, after an interval, with a little surreptitious offering of wine (hidden under his coat); and with a selection of tarts crammed into his pocket.

"Smuggled goods, my dear," he whispered, "picked up when nobody happened to be looking my way. When we are miserable--has the idea ever occurred to you?--it's a sign from kind Providence that we are intended to eat and drink. The sherry's old, and the pastry melts in your mouth. Shall I stay with you? You would rather not? Just my feeling! Remarkable similarity in our opinions--don't you think so yourself? I'm sorry for poor Miss Minerva. Suppose you go to bed?"

Carmina was in no mood to profit by this excellent advice.

She was still walking restlessly up and down her room, when the time came for shutting up the house. With the sound of closing locks and bolts, there was suddenly mingled a sharp ring at the bell; followed by another unexpected event. Mr. Gallilee paid her a second visit--in a state of transformation. His fat face was flushed: he positively looked as if he was capable of feeling strong emotion, unconnected with champagne and the club! He presented a telegram to Carmina--and, when he spoke, there were thrills of agitation in the tones of his piping voice.

"My dear, something very unpleasant has happened. I met Joseph taking this to my wife. Highly improper, in my opinion,--what do you say yourself?--to take it to Mrs. Gallilee, when it's addressed to you. It was no mistake; he

was so impudent as to say he had his orders. I have reproved Joseph." Mr. Gallilee looked astonished at himself, when he made this latter statement--then relapsed into his customary sweetness of temper. "No bad news?" he asked anxiously, when Carmina opened the telegram.

"Good news! the best of good news!" she answered impetuously.

Mr. Gallilee looked as happy as if the welcome telegram had been addressed to himself. On his way out of the room, he underwent another relapse. The footman's audacious breach of trust began to trouble him once more: this time in its relation to Mrs. Gallilee. The serious part of it was, that the man had acted under his mistress's orders. Mr. Gallilee said--he actually said, without appealing to anybody--"If this happens again, I shall be obliged to speak to my wife."

The telegram was from Teresa. It had been despatched from Paris that evening; and the message was thus expressed:

"Too tired to get on to England by to-night's mail. Shall leave by the early train to-morrow morning, and be with you by six o'clock."

Carmina's mind was exactly in the state to feel unmingled relief, at the prospect of seeing the dear old friend of her happiest days. She laid her head on the pillow that night, without a thought of what might follow the event of Teresa's return.