

VOLUME THREE

CHAPTER XLII.

The next day--the important Tuesday of the lecture on Matter; the delightful Tuesday of Teresa's arrival--brought with it special demands on Carmina's pen.

Her first letter was addressed to Frances. It was frankly and earnestly written; entreating Miss Minerva to appoint a place at which they might meet, and assuring her, in the most affectionate terms, that she was still loved, trusted, and admired by her faithful friend. Helped by her steadier flow of spirits, Carmina could now see all that was worthiest of sympathy and admiration, all that claimed loving submission and allowance from herself, in the sacrifice to which Miss Minerva had submitted. How bravely the poor governess had controlled the jealous misery that tortured her! How nobly she had pronounced Carmina's friendship for Carmina's sake!

Later in the day, Marceline took the letter to the flower shop, and placed it herself under the cord of one of the boxes still waiting to be claimed.

The second letter filled many pages, and occupied the remainder of the morning.

With the utmost delicacy, but with perfect truthfulness at the same time, Carmina revealed to her betrothed husband the serious reasons which had forced her to withdraw herself from his mother's care. Bound to speak at last in her own defence, she felt that concealments and compromises would be alike unworthy of Ovid and of herself. What she had already written to Teresa, she now wrote again--with but one modification. She expressed herself forbearingly towards Ovid's mother. The closing words of the letter were worthy of Carmina's gentle, just, and generous nature.

"You will perhaps say, Why do I only hear now of all that you have suffered? My love, I have longed to tell you of it! I have even taken up my pen to begin. But I thought of you, and put it down again. How selfish, how cruel, to hinder your recovery by causing you sorrow and suspense to bring you back

perhaps to England before your health was restored! I don't regret the effort that it has cost me to keep silence. My only sorrow in writing to you is, that I must speak of your mother in terms which may lower her in her son's estimation."

Joseph brought the luncheon up to Carmina's room.

The mistress was still at her studies; the master had gone to his club. As for the girls, their only teacher for the present was the teacher of music. When the ordeal of the lecture and the discussion had been passed, Mrs. Gallilee threatened to take Miss Minerva's place herself, until a new governess could be found. For once, Maria and Zo showed a sisterly similarity in their feelings. It was hard to say which of the two looked forward to her learned mother's instruction with the greatest terror.

Carmina heard the pupils at the piano, while she was eating her luncheon. The profanation of music ceased, when she went into the bedroom to get ready for her daily drive.

She took her letter, duly closed and stamped, downstairs with her--to be sent to the post with the other letters of the day, placed in the hall-basket. In the weakened state of her nerves, the effort that she had made in writing to Ovid had shaken her. Her heart beat uneasily; her knees trembled, as she descended the stairs.

Arrived in sight of the hall, she discovered a man walking slowly to and fro. He turned towards her as she advanced, and disclosed the detestable face of Mr. Le Frank.

The music-master's last reserves of patience had come to an end. Watch for them as he might, no opportunities had presented themselves of renewing his investigation in Carmina's room. In the interval that had passed, his hungry suspicion of her had been left to feed on itself. The motives for that incomprehensible attempt to make a friend of him remained hidden in as thick a darkness as ever. Victim of adverse circumstances, he had determined (with the greatest reluctance) to take the straightforward course. Instead of secretly getting his information from Carmina's journals and letters, he was now reduced to openly applying for enlightenment to Carmina herself.

Occupying, for the time being, the position of an honourable man, he presented himself at cruel disadvantage. He was not master of his own glorious voice; he was without the self-possession indispensable to the

perfect performance of his magnificent bow. "I have waited to have a word with you," he began abruptly, "before you go out for your drive."

Already unnerved, even before she had seen him--painfully conscious that she had committed a serious error, on the last occasion when they had met, in speaking at all--Carmina neither answered him nor looked at him. She bent her head confusedly, and advanced a little nearer to the house door.

He at once moved so as to place himself in her way.

"I must request you to call to mind what passed between us," he resumed, "when we met by accident some little time since."

He had speculated on frightening her. His insolence stirred her spirit into asserting itself. "Let me by, if you please," she said; "the carriage is waiting for me."

"The carriage can wait a little longer," he answered coarsely. "On the occasion to which I have referred, you were so good as to make advances, to which I cannot consider myself as having any claim. Perhaps you will favour me by stating your motives?"

"I don't understand you, sir."

"Oh, yes--you do!"

She stepped back, and laid her hand on the bell which rang below stairs, in the pantry. "Must I ring?" she said.

It was plain that she would do it, if he moved a step nearer to her. He drew aside--with a look which made her tremble. On passing the hall table, she placed her letter in the post-basket. His eye followed it, as it left her hand: he became suddenly penitent and polite. "I am sorry if I have alarmed you," he said, and opened the house-door for her--without showing himself to Marceline and the coachman outside.

The carriage having been driven away, he softly closed the door again, and returned to the hall-table. He looked into the post-basket.

Was there any danger of discovery by the servants? The footman was absent, attending his mistress on her way to the lecture. None of the female servants were on the stairs. He took up Carmina's letter, and looked at the address: To Ovid Vere, Esq.

His eyes twinkled furtively; his excellent memory for injuries reminded him that Ovid Vere had formerly endeavoured (without even caring to conceal it) to prevent Mrs. Gallilee from engaging him as her music-master. By subtle links of its own forging, his vindictive nature now connected his hatred of the person to whom the letter was addressed, with his interest in stealing the letter itself for the possible discovery of Carmina's secrets. The clock told him that there was plenty of time to open the envelope, and (if the contents proved to be of no importance) to close it again, and take it himself to the post. After a last look round, he withdrew undiscovered, with the letter in his pocket.

On its way back to the house, the carriage was passed by a cab, with a man in it, driven at such a furious rate that there was a narrow escape of collision. The maid screamed; Carmina turned pale; the coachman wondered why the man in the cab was in such a hurry. The man was Mr. Mool's head clerk, charged with news for Doctor Benjulia.