

## **CHAPTER XLV.**

The clock on the mantelpiece struck six. Zo, turning suddenly from the window, ran to the sofa. "Here's the carriage!" she cried.

"Teresa!" Carmina exclaimed.

Zo crossed the room, on tiptoe, to the door of the bed-chamber. "It's mamma," she said. "Don't tell! I'm going to hide."

"Why, dear?"

The answer to this was given mysteriously in a whisper. "She said I wasn't to come to you. She's a quick one on her legs--she might catch me on the stairs." With that explanation, Zo slipped into the bedroom, and held the door ajar.

The minutes passed--and Mrs. Gallilee failed to justify the opinion expressed by her daughter. Not a sound was audible on the stairs. Not a word more was uttered in the room. Benjulia had taken the child's place at the window. He sat there thinking. Carmina had suggested to him some new ideas, relating to the intricate connection between human faith and human happiness. Slowly, slowly, the clock recorded the lapse of minutes. Carmina's nervous anxiety began to forecast disaster to the absent nurse. She took Teresa's telegram from her pocket, and consulted it again. There was no mistake; six o'clock was the time named for the traveller's arrival--and it was close on ten minutes past the hour. In her ignorance of railway arrangements, she took it for granted that trains were punctual. But her reading had told her that trains were subject to accident. "I suppose delays occur," she said to Benjulia, "without danger to the passengers?"

Before he could answer--Mrs. Gallilee suddenly entered the room.

She had opened the door so softly, that she took them both by surprise. To Carmina's excited imagination, she glided into their presence like a ghost. Her look and manner showed serious agitation, desperately suppressed. In certain places, the paint and powder on her face had cracked, and revealed the furrows and wrinkles beneath. Her hard eyes glittered; her laboured breathing was audible.

Indifferent to all demonstrations of emotion which did not scientifically

concern him, Benjulia quietly rose and advanced towards her. She seemed to be unconscious of his presence. He spoke--allowing her to ignore him without troubling himself to notice her temper. "When you are able to attend to me, I want to speak to you. Shall I wait downstairs?" He took his hat and stick--to leave the room; looked at Carmina as he passed her; and at once went back to his place at the window. Her aunt's silent and sinister entrance had frightened her. Benjulia waited, in the interests of physiology, to see how the new nervous excitement would end.

Thus far, Mrs. Gallilee had kept one of her hands hidden behind her. She advanced close to Carmina, and allowed her hand to be seen. It held an open letter. She shook the letter in her niece's face.

In the position which Mrs. Gallilee now occupied, Carmina was hidden, for the moment, from Benjulia's view. Biding his time at the window, he looked out.

A cab, with luggage on it, had just drawn up at the house.

Was this the old nurse who had been expected to arrive at six o'clock?

The footman came out to open the cab-door. He was followed by Mr. Gallilee, eager to help the person inside to alight. The traveller proved to be a grey-headed woman, shabbily dressed. Mr. Gallilee cordially shook hands with her--patted her on the shoulder--gave her his arm--led her into the house. The cab with the luggage on it remained at the door. The nurse had evidently not reached the end of her journey yet.

Carmina shrank back on the sofa, when the leaves of the letter touched her face. Mrs. Gallilee's first words were now spoken, in a whisper. The inner fury of her anger, struggling for a vent, began to get the better of her--she gasped for breath and speech.

"Do you know this letter?" she said.

Carmina looked at the writing. It was the letter to Ovid, which she had placed in the post-basket that afternoon; the letter which declared that she could no longer endure his mother's cold-blooded cruelty, and that she only waited Teresa's arrival to join him at Quebec.

After one dreadful moment of confusion, her mind realised the outrage implied in the stealing and reading of her letter.

In the earlier time of Carmina's sojourn in the house, Mrs. Gallilee had accused her of deliberate deceit. She had instantly resented the insult by leaving the room. The same spirit in her--the finely-strung spirit that vibrates unfelt in gentle natures, while they live in peace--steadied those quivering nerves, roused that failing courage. She met the furious eyes fixed on her, without shrinking; she spoke gravely and firmly. "The letter is mine," she said. "How did you come by it?"

"How dare you ask me?"

"How dare you steal my letter?"

Mrs. Gallilee tore open the fastening of her dress at the throat, to get breath. "You impudent bastard!" she burst out, in a frenzy of rage.

Waiting patiently at the window, Benjulia heard her. "Hold your damned tongue!" he cried. "She's your niece."

Mrs. Gallilee turned on him: her fury broke into a screaming laugh. "My niece?" she repeated. "You lie--and you know it! She's the child of an adulteress! She's the child of her mother's lover!"

The door opened as those horrible words passed her lips. The nurse and her husband entered the room.

She was in no position to see them: she was incapable of hearing them. The demon in her urged her on: she attempted to reiterate the detestable falsehood. Her first word died away in silence. The lean brown fingers of the Italian woman had her by the throat--held her as the claws of a tigress might have held her. Her eyes rolled in the mute agony of an appeal for help. In vain! in vain! Not a cry, not a sound, had drawn attention to the attack. Her husband's eyes were fixed, horror-struck, on the victim of her rage. Benjulia had crossed the room to the sofa, when Carmina heard the words spoken of her mother. From that moment, he was watching the case. Mr. Gallilee alone looked round--when the nurse tightened her hold in a last merciless grasp; dashed the insensible woman on the floor; and, turning back, fell on her knees at her darling's feet.

She looked up in Carmina's face.

A ghastly stare, through half-closed eyes, showed death in life, blankly returning her look. The shock had struck Carmina with a stony calm. She had not started, she had not swooned. Rigid, immovable, there she sat;

voiceless and tearless; insensible even to touch; her arms hanging down; her clenched hands resting on either side of her.

Teresa grovelled and groaned at her feet. Those ferocious hands that had laid the slanderer prostrate on the floor, feebly beat her bosom and her gray head. "Oh, Saints beloved of God! Oh, blessed Virgin, mother of Christ, spare my child, my sweet child!" She rose in wild despair--she seized Benjulia, and madly shook him. "Who are you? How dare you touch her? Give her to me, or I'll be the death of you. Oh, my Carmina, is it sleep that holds you? Wake! wake! wake!"

"Listen to me," said Benjulia, sternly.

She dropped on the sofa by Carmina's side, and lifted one of the cold clenched hands to her lips. The tears fell slowly over her haggard face. "I am very fond of her, sir," she said humbly. "I'm only an old woman. See what a dreadful welcome my child gives to me. It's hard on an old woman--hard on an old woman!"

His self-possession was not disturbed--even by this.

"Do you know what I am?" he asked. "I am a doctor. Leave her to me."

"He's a doctor. That's good. A doctor's good. Yes, yes. Does the old man know this doctor--the kind old man?" She looked vacantly for Mr. Gallilee. He was bending over his wife, sprinkling water on her deathly face.

Teresa got on her feet, and pointed to Mrs. Gallilee. "The breath of that She-Devil poisons the air," she said. "I must take my child out of it. To my place, sir, if you please. Only to my place."

She attempted to lift Carmina from the sofa--and drew back, breathlessly watching her. Her rigid face faintly relaxed; her eyelids closed, and quivered.

Mr. Gallilee looked up from his wife. "Will one of you help me?" he asked. His tone struck Benjulia. It was the hushed tone of sorrow--no more.

"I'll see to it directly." With that reply, Benjulia turned to Teresa. "Where is your place?" he said. "Far or near?"

"The message," she answered confusedly. "The message says." She signed to him to look in her hand-bag--dropped on the floor.

He found Carmina's telegram, containing the address of the lodgings. The house was close by. After some consideration, he sent the nurse into the bedroom, with instructions to bring him the blankets off the bed. In the minute that followed, he examined Mrs. Gallilee. "There's nothing to be frightened about. Let her maid attend to her."

Mr. Gallilee again surprised Benjulia. He turned from his wife, and looked at Carmina. "For God's sake, don't leave her here!" he broke out. "After what she has heard, this house is no place for her. Give her to the old nurse!"

Benjulia only answered, as he had answered already--"I'll see to it." Mr. Gallilee persisted. "Is there any risk in moving her?" he asked.

"It's the least of two risks. No more questions! Look to your wife."

Mr. Gallilee obeyed in silence.

When he lifted his head again, and rose to ring the bell for the maid, the room was silent and lonely. A little pale frightened face peeped out through the bedroom door. Zo ventured in. Her father caught her in his arms, and kissed her as he had never kissed her yet. His eyes were wet with tears. Zo noticed that he never said a word about mamma. The child saw the change in her father, as Benjulia had seen it. She shared one human feeling with her big friend--she, too, was surprised.