

CHAPTER L.

Towards seven o'clock on the evening of Thursday, Carmina recognised Teresa for the first time.

Her half-closed eyes opened, as if from a long sleep: they rested on the old nurse without any appearance of surprise. "I am so glad to see you, my dear," she said faintly. "Are you very tired after your journey?" None of the inquiries which might have been anticipated followed those first words. Not the slightest allusion to Mrs. Gallilee escaped her; she expressed no anxiety about Miss Minerva; no sign of uneasiness at finding herself in a strange room, disturbed her quiet face. Contentedly reposing, she looked at Teresa from time to time and said, "You will stay with me, won't you?" Now and then, she confessed that her head felt dull and heavy, and asked Teresa to take her hand. "I feel as if I was sinking away from you," she said; "keep hold of my hand and I shan't be afraid to go to sleep." The words were hardly spoken, before she sank into slumber. Occasionally, Teresa felt her hand tremble and kissed it. She seemed to be conscious of the kiss, without waking--she smiled in her sleep.

But, when the first hours of the morning came, this state of passive repose was disturbed. A violent attack of sickness came on. It was repeated again and again. Teresa sent for Mr. Null. He did what he could to relieve the new symptom; and he despatched a messenger to his illustrious colleague.

Benjulia lost no time in answering personally the appeal that had been made to him.

Mr. Null said, "Serious derangement of the stomach, sir." Benjulia agreed with him. Mr. Null showed his prescription. Benjulia sanctioned the prescription. Mr. Null said, "Is there anything you wish to suggest, sir?" Benjulia had nothing to suggest.

He waited, nevertheless, until Carmina was able to speak to him. Teresa and Mr. Null wondered what he would say to her. He only said, "Do you remember when you last saw me?" After a little consideration, she answered, "Yes, Zo was with us; Zo brought in your big stick; and we talked--" She tried to rouse her memory. "What did we talk about?" she asked. A momentary agitation brought a flush to her face. "I can't remember it," she said; "I can't remember when you went away: does it matter?" Benjulia replied, "Not the least in the world. Go to sleep."

But he still remained in the room--watching her as she grew drowsy. "Great weakness," Mr. Null whispered. And Benjulia answered, "Yes; I'll call again."

On his way out, he took Teresa aside.

"No more questions," he said--"and don't help her memory if she asks you."

"Will she remember, when she gets better?" Teresa inquired.

"Impossible to say, yet. Wait and see."

He left her in a hurry; his experiments were waiting for him. On the way home, his mind dwelt on Carmina's case. Some hidden process was at work there: give it time--and it would show itself. "I hope that ass won't want me," he said, thinking of his medical colleague, "for at least a week to come."

The week passed--and the physiologist was not disturbed.

During that interval, Mr. Null succeeded in partially overcoming the attacks of sickness: they were less violent, and they were succeeded by longer intervals of repose. In other respects, there seemed (as Teresa persisted in thinking) to be some little promise of improvement. A certain mental advance was unquestionably noticeable in Carmina. It first showed itself in an interesting way: she began to speak of Ovid.

Her great anxiety was, that he should know nothing of her illness. She forbade Teresa to write to him; she sent messages to Mr. and Mrs. Gallilee, and even to Mr. Mool, entreating them to preserve silence.

The nurse engaged to deliver the messages--and failed to keep her word. This breach of promise (as events had ordered it) proved to be harmless. Mrs. Gallilee had good reasons for not writing. Her husband and Mr. Mool had decided on sending their telegram to the bankers. As for Teresa herself, she had no desire to communicate with Ovid. His absence remained inexcusable, from her point of view. Well or ill, with or without reason, it was the nurse's opinion that he ought to have remained at home, in Carmina's interests. No other persons were in the least likely to write to Ovid--nobody thought of Zo as a correspondent--Carmina was pacified.

Once or twice, at this later time, the languid efforts of her memory took a wider range.

She wondered why Mrs. Gallilee never came near her; owning that her aunt's absence was a relief to her, but not feeling interest enough in the subject to ask for information. She also mentioned Miss Minerva. "Do you know where she has gone? Don't you think she ought to write to me?" Teresa offered to make inquiries. She turned her head wearily on the pillow, and said, "Never mind!" On another occasion, she asked for Zo, and said it would be pleasant if Mr. Gallilee would call and bring her with him. But she soon dropped the subject, not to return to it again.

The only remembrance which seemed to dwell on her mind for more than a few minutes, was her remembrance of the last letter which she had written to Ovid.

She pleased herself with imagining his surprise, when he received it; she grew impatient under her continued illness, because it delayed her in escaping to Canada; she talked to Teresa of the clever manner in which the flight had been planned--with this strange failure of memory, that she attributed the various arrangements for setting discovery at defiance, not to Miss Minerva, but to the nurse.

Here, for the first time, her mind was approaching dangerous ground. The stealing of the letter, and the events that had followed it, stood next in the order of remembrance--if she was capable of a continued effort. Her weakness saved her. Beyond the writing of the letter, her recollections were unable to advance. Not the faintest allusion to any later circumstances escaped her. The poor stricken brain still sought its rest in frequent intervals of sleep. Sometimes, she drifted back into partial unconsciousness; sometimes, the attacks of sickness returned. Mr. Null set an excellent example of patience and resignation. He believed as devoutly as ever in his prescriptions; he placed the greatest reliance on time and care. The derangement of the stomach (as he called it) presented something positive and tangible to treat: he had got over the doubts and anxieties that troubled him, when Carmina was first removed to the lodgings. Looking confidently at the surface--without an idea of what was going on below it--he could tell Teresa, with a safe conscience, that he understood the case. He was always ready to comfort her, when her excitable Italian nature passed from the extreme of hope to the extreme of despair. "My good woman, we see our way now: it's a great point gained, I assure you, to see our way."

"What do you mean by seeing your way?" said the downright nurse. "Tell me when Carmina will be well again."

Mr. Null's medical knowledge was not yet equal to this demand on it. "The

progress is slow," he admitted, "still Miss Carmina is getting on."

"Is her aunt getting on?" Teresa asked abruptly. "When is Mistress Gallilee likely to come here?"

"In a few days--" Mr. Null was about to add "I hope;" but he thought of what might happen when the two women met. As it was, Teresa's face showed signs of serious disturbance: her mind was plainly not prepared for this speedy prospect of a visit from Mrs. Gallilee. She took a letter out of her pocket.

"I find a good deal of sly prudence in you," she said to Mr. Null. "You must have seen something, in your time, of the ways of deceitful Englishwomen. What does that palaver mean in plain words?" She handed the letter to him.

With some reluctance he read it.

"Mrs. Gallilee declines to contract any engagement with the person formerly employed as nurse, in the household of the late Mr. Robert Graywell. Mrs. Gallilee so far recognises the apology and submission offered to her, as to abstain from taking immediate proceedings. In arriving at this decision, she is also influenced by the necessity of sparing her niece any agitation which might interfere with the medical treatment. When the circumstances appear to require it, she will not hesitate to exert her authority."

The handwriting told Mr. Null that this manifesto had not been written by Mrs. Gallilee herself. The person who had succeeded him, in the capacity of that lady's amanuensis, had been evidently capable of giving sound advice. Little did he suspect that this mysterious secretary was identical with an enterprising pianist, who had once prevailed on him to take a seat at a concert; price five shillings.

"Well?" said Teresa.

Mr. Null hesitated.

The nurse stamped impatiently on the floor. "Tell me this! When she does come here, will she part me from Carmina? Is that what she means?"

"Possibly," said prudent Mr. Null.

Teresa pointed to the door. "Good-morning! I want nothing more of you. Oh, man, man, leave me by myself!"

The moment she was alone, she fell on her knees. Fiercely whispering, she repeated over and over again the words of the Lord's Prayer: "Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.' Christ, hear me! Mother of Christ, hear me! Oh, Carmina! Carmina!"

She rose and opened the door which communicated with the bedroom. Trembling pitiably, she looked for a while at Carmina, peacefully asleep--then turned away to a corner of the room, in which stood an old packing-case, fitted with a lock. She took it up; and, returning with it to the sitting-room, softly closed the bedroom door again.

After some hesitation, she decided to open the case. In the terror and confusion that possessed her, she tried the wrong key. Setting this mistake right, she disclosed--strangely mingled with the lighter articles of her own dress--a heap of papers; some of them letters and bills; some of them faded instructions in writing for the preparation of artists' colours.

She recoiled from the objects which her own act had disclosed. Why had she not taken Father Patrizio's advice? If she had only waited another day; if she had only sorted her husband's papers, before she threw the things that her trunk was too full to hold into that half-empty case, what torment might have been spared to her! Her eyes turned mournfully to the bedroom door. "Oh, my darling, I was in such a hurry to get to You!"

At last, she controlled herself, and put her hand into the case. Searching it in one corner, she produced a little tin canister. A dirty label was pasted on the canister, bearing this quaint inscription in the Italian language:

"If there is any of the powder we employ in making some of our prettiest colours, left in here, I request my good wife, or any other trustworthy person in her place, to put a seal on it, and take it directly to the manufactory, with the late foreman's best respects. It looks like nice sugar. Beware of looks--or you may taste poison."

On the point of opening the canister she hesitated. Under some strange impulse, she did what a child might have done: she shook it, and listened.

The rustle of the rising and falling powder--renewing her terror--seemed to exercise some irresistible fascination over her. "The devil's dance," she said to herself, with a ghastly smile. "Softly up--and softly down--and tempting me to take off the cover all the time! Why don't I get rid of it?"

That question set her thinking of Carmina's guardian.

If Mr. Null was right, in a day or two Mrs. Gallilee might come to the house. After the lawyers had threatened Teresa with the prospect of separation from Carmina, she had opened the packing-case, for the first time since she had left Rome--intending to sort her husband's papers as a means of relief from her own thoughts. In this way, she had discovered the canister. The sight of the deadly powder had tempted her. There were the horrid means of setting Mrs. Gallilee's authority at defiance! Some women in her place, would use them. Though she was not looking into the canister now, she felt that thought stealing back into her mind. There was but one hope for her: she resolved to get rid of the poison.

How?

At that period of the year, there was no fire in the grate. Within the limits of the room, the means of certain destruction were slow to present themselves. Her own morbid horror of the canister made her suspicious of the curiosity of other people, who might see it in her hand if she showed herself on the stairs. But she was determined, if she lit a fire for the purpose, to find the way to her end. The firmness of her resolution expressed itself by locking the case again, without restoring the canister to its hiding-place.

Providing herself next with a knife, she sat down in a corner--between the bedroom door on one side, and a cupboard in an angle of the wall on the other--and began the work of destruction by scraping off the paper label. The fragments might be burnt, and the powder (if she made a vow to the Virgin to do it) might be thrown into the fire next--and then the empty canister would be harmless.

She had made but little progress in the work of scraping, when it occurred to her that the lighting of a fire, on that warm autumn day, might look suspicious if the landlady or Mr. Null happened to come in. It would be safer to wait till night-time, when everybody would be in bed.

Arriving at this conclusion, she mechanically suspended the use of her knife.

In the moment of silence that followed, she heard someone enter the bedroom by the door which opened on the stairs. Immediately afterwards, the person turned the handle of the second door at her side. She had barely time enough to open the cupboard, and hide the canister in it--when the landlady came in.

Teresa looked at her wildly. The landlady looked at the cupboard: she was proud of her cupboard.

"Plenty of room there," she said boastfully: "not another house in the neighbourhood could offer you such accommodation as that! Yes--the lock is out of order; I don't deny it. The last lodger's doings! She spoilt my tablecloth, and put the inkstand over it to hide the place. Beast! there's her character in one word. You didn't hear me knock at the bedroom door? I am so glad to see her sleeping nicely, poor dear! Her chicken broth is ready when she wakes. I'm late to-day in making my inquiries after our young lady. You see we have been hard at work upstairs, getting the bedroom ready for a new lodger. Such a contrast to the person who has just left. A perfect gentleman, this time--and so kind in waiting a week till I was able to accommodate him. My ground floor rooms were vacant, as you know--but he said the terms were too high for him. Oh, I didn't forget to mention that we had an invalid in the house! Quiet habits (I said) are indeed an essential qualification of any new inmate, at such a time as this. He understood. 'I've been an invalid myself' (he said); 'and the very reason I am leaving my present lodgings is that they are not quiet enough.' Isn't that just the sort of man we want? And, let me tell you, a handsome man too. With a drawback, I must own, in the shape of a bald head. But such a beard, and such a thrilling voice! Hush! Did I hear her calling?"

At last, the landlady permitted other sounds to be audible, besides the sound of her own voice. It became possible to discover that Carmina was now awake. Teresa hurried into the bedroom.

Left by herself in the sitting-room, the landlady--"purely out of curiosity," as she afterwards said, in conversation with her new lodger--opened the cupboard, and looked in.

The canister stood straight before her, on an upper shelf. Did Miss Carmina's nurse take snuff? She examined the canister: there was a white powder inside. The mutilated label spoke in an unknown tongue. She wetted her finger and tasted the powder. The result was so disagreeable that she was obliged to use her handkerchief. She put the canister back, and closed the cupboard.

"Medicine, undoubtedly," the landlady said to herself. "Why should she hurry to put it away, when I came in?"