

## CHAPTER VIII.--SHE TRAVELS IN PURSUIT

April 16. Evening, Paris, Hotel ---.--There is no overtaking her at this place; but she has been here, as I thought, no other hotel in Paris being known to her. We go on to-morrow morning.

April 18. Venice.--A morning of adventures and emotions which leave me sick and weary, and yet unable to sleep, though I have lain down on the sofa of my room for more than an hour in the attempt. I therefore make up my diary to date in a hurried fashion, for the sake of the riddance it affords to ideas which otherwise remain suspended hotly in the brain.

We arrived here this morning in broad sunlight, which lit up the sea-girt buildings as we approached so that they seemed like a city of cork floating raft-like on the smooth, blue deep. But I only glanced from the carriage window at the lovely scene, and we were soon across the intervening water and inside the railway station. When we got to the front steps the row of black gondolas and the shouts of the gondoliers so bewildered my father that he was understood to require two gondolas instead of one with two oars, and so I found him in one and myself in another. We got this righted after a while, and were rowed at once to the hotel on the Riva degli Schiavoni where M. de la Feste had been staying when we last heard from him, the way being down the Grand Canal for some distance, under the Rialto, and then by narrow canals which eventually brought us under the Bridge of Sighs--harmonious to our

moods!--and out again into open water. The scene was purity itself as to colour, but it was cruel that I should behold it for the first time under such circumstances.

As soon as I entered the hotel, which is an old-fashioned place, like most places here, where people are taken en pension as well as the ordinary way, I rushed to the framed list of visitors hanging in the hall, and in a moment I saw Charles's name upon it among the rest. But she was our chief thought. I turned to the hall porter, and--knowing that she would have travelled as 'Madame de la Feste'--I asked for her under that name, without my father hearing. (He, poor soul, was making confused inquiries outside the door about 'an English lady,' as if there were not a score of English ladies at hand.)

'She has just come,' said the porter. 'Madame came by the very early train this morning, when Monsieur was asleep, and she requested us not to disturb him. She is now in her room.'

Whether Caroline had seen us from the window, or overheard me, I do not know, but at that moment I heard footsteps on the bare marble stairs, and she appeared in person descending.

'Caroline!' I exclaimed, 'why have you done this?' and rushed up to her.

She did not answer; but looked down to hide her emotion, which she conquered after the lapse of a few seconds, putting on a practical tone

that belied her.

'I am just going to my husband,' she said. 'I have not yet seen him. I have not been here long.' She condescended to give no further reason for her movements, and made as if to move on. I implored her to come into a private room where I could speak to her in confidence, but she objected. However, the dining-room, close at hand, was quite empty at this hour, and I got her inside and closed the door. I do not know how I began my explanation, or how I ended it, but I told her briefly and brokenly enough that the marriage was not real.

'Not real?' she said vacantly.

'It is not,' said I. 'You will find that it is all as I say.'

She could not believe my meaning even then. 'Not his wife?' she cried.

'It is impossible. What am I, then?'

I added more details, and reiterated the reason for my conduct as well as I could; but Heaven knows how very difficult I found it to feel a jot more justification for it in my own mind than she did in hers.

The revulsion of feeling, as soon as she really comprehended all, was most distressing. After her grief had in some measure spent itself she turned against both him and me.

'Why should have I been deceived like this?' she demanded, with a bitter haughtiness of which I had not deemed such a tractable creature capable. 'Do you suppose that anything could justify such an imposition? What, O what a snare you have spread for me!'

I murmured, 'Your life seemed to require it,' but she did not hear me. She sank down in a chair, covered her face, and then my father came in. 'O, here you are!' he said. 'I could not find you. And Caroline!'

'And were you, papa, a party to this strange deed of kindness?'

'To what?' said he.

Then out it all came, and for the first time he was made acquainted with the fact that the scheme for soothing her illness, which I had sounded him upon, had been really carried out. In a moment he sided with Caroline. My repeated assurance that my motive was good availed less than nothing. In a minute or two Caroline arose and went abruptly out of the room, and my father followed her, leaving me alone to my reflections.

I was so bent upon finding Charles immediately that I did not notice whither they went. The servants told me that M. de la Feste was just outside smoking, and one of them went to look for him, I following; but before we had gone many steps he came out of the hotel behind me. I expected him to be amazed; but he showed no surprise at seeing me, though he showed another kind of feeling to an extent which dismayed me. I may

have revealed something similar; but I struggled hard against all emotion, and as soon as I could I told him she had come. He simply said 'Yes' in a low voice.

'You know it, Charles?' said I.

'I have just learnt it,' he said.

'O, Charles,' I went on, 'having delayed completing your marriage with her till now, I fear--it has become a serious position for us. Why did you not reply to our letters?'

'I was purposing to reply in person: I did not know how to address her on the point--how to address you. But what has become of her?'

'She has gone off with my father,' said I; 'indignant with you, and scorning me.'

He was silent: and I suggested that we should follow them, pointing out the direction which I fancied their gondola had taken. As the one we got into was doubly manned we soon came in view of their two figures ahead of us, while they were not likely to observe us, our boat having the 'felze' on, while theirs was uncovered. They shot into a narrow canal just beyond the Giardino Reale, and by the time we were floating up between its slimy walls we saw them getting out of their gondola at the steps which lead up near the end of the Via 22 Marzo. When we reached the same

spot they were walking up and down the Via in consultation. Getting out he stood on the lower steps watching them. I watched him. He seemed to fall into a reverie.

'Will you not go and speak to her?' said I at length.

He assented, and went forward. Still he did not hasten to join them, but, screened by a projecting window, observed their musing converse. At last he looked back at me; whereupon I pointed forward, and he in obedience stepped out, and met them face to face. Caroline flushed hot, bowed haughtily to him, turned away, and taking my father's arm violently, led him off before he had had time to use his own judgment. They disappeared into a narrow calle, or alley, leading to the back of the buildings on the Grand Canal.

M. de la Feste came slowly back; as he stepped in beside me I realized my position so vividly that my heart might almost have been heard to beat. The third condition had arisen--the least expected by either of us. She had refused him; he was free to claim me.

We returned in the boat together. He seemed quite absorbed till we had turned the angle into the Grand Canal, when he broke the silence. 'She spoke very bitterly to you in the salle-a-manger,' he said. 'I do not think she was quite warranted in speaking so to you, who had nursed her so tenderly.'

'O, but I think she was,' I answered. 'It was there I told her what had been done; she did not know till then.'

'She was very dignified--very striking,' he murmured. 'You were more.'

'But how do you know what passed between us,' said I. He then told me that he had seen and heard all. The dining-room was divided by folding-doors from an inner portion, and he had been sitting in the latter part when we entered the outer, so that our words were distinctly audible.

'But, dear Alicia,' he went on, 'I was more impressed by the affection of your apology to her than by anything else. And do you know that now the conditions have arisen which give me liberty to consider you my affianced?' I had been expecting this, but yet was not prepared. I stammered out that we would not discuss it then.

'Why not?' said he. 'Do you know that we may marry here and now? She has cast off both you and me.'

'It cannot be,' said I, firmly. 'She has not been fairly asked to be your wife in fact--to repeat the service lawfully; and until that has been done it would be grievous sin in me to accept you.'

I had not noticed where the gondoliers were rowing us. I suppose he had given them some direction unheard by me, for as I resigned myself in despairing indolence to the motion of the gondola, I perceived that it

was taking us up the Canal, and, turning into a side opening near the Palazzo Grimani, drew up at some steps near the end of a large church.

'Where are we?' said I.

'It is the Church of the Frari,' he replied. 'We might be married there. At any rate, let us go inside, and grow calm, and decide what to do.'

When we had entered I found that whether a place to marry in or not, it was one to depress. The word which Venice speaks most constantly--decay--was in a sense accentuated here. The whole large fabric itself seemed sinking into an earth which was not solid enough to bear it. Cobwebbed cracks zigzagged the walls, and similar webs clouded the window-panes. A sickly-sweet smell pervaded the aisles. After walking about with him a little while in embarrassing silences, divided only by his cursory explanations of the monuments and other objects, and almost fearing he might produce a marriage licence, I went to a door in the south transept which opened into the sacristy.

I glanced through it, towards the small altar at the upper end. The place was empty save of one figure; and she was kneeling here in front of the beautiful altarpiece by Bellini. Beautiful though it was she seemed not to see it. She was weeping and praying as though her heart was broken. She was my sister Caroline. I beckoned to Charles, and he came to my side, and looked through the door with me.



'Speak to her,' said I. 'She will forgive you.'

I gently pushed him through the doorway, and went back into the transept, down the nave, and onward to the west door. There I saw my father, to whom I spoke. He answered severely that, having first obtained comfortable quarters in a pension on the Grand Canal, he had gone back to the hotel on the Riva degli Schiavoni to find me; but that I was not there. He was now waiting for Caroline, to accompany her back to the pension, at which she had requested to be left to herself as much as possible till she could regain some composure.

I told him that it was useless to dwell on what was past, that I no doubt had erred, that the remedy lay in the future and their marriage. In this he quite agreed with me, and on my informing him that M. de la Feste was at that moment with Caroline in the sacristy, he assented to my proposal that we should leave them to themselves, and return together to await them at the pension, where he had also engaged a room for me. This we did, and going up to the chamber he had chosen for me, which overlooked the Canal, I leant from the window to watch for the gondola that should contain Charles and my sister.

They were not long in coming. I recognized them by the colour of her sunshade as soon as they turned the bend on my right hand. They were side by side of necessity, but there was no conversation between them, and I thought that she looked flushed and he pale. When they were rowed in to the steps of our house he handed her up. I fancied she might have

refused his assistance, but she did not. Soon I heard her pass my door, and wishing to know the result of their interview I went downstairs, seeing that the gondola had not put off with him. He was turning from the door, but not towards the water, intending apparently to walk home by way of the calle which led into the Via 22 Marzo.

'Has she forgiven you?' said I.

'I have not asked her,' he said.

'But you are bound to do so,' I told him.

He paused, and then said, 'Alicia, let us understand each other. Do you mean to tell me, once for all, that if your sister is willing to become my wife you absolutely make way for her, and will not entertain any thought of what I suggested to you any more?'

'I do tell you so,' said I with dry lips. 'You belong to her--how can I do otherwise?'

'Yes; it is so; it is purely a question of honour,' he returned. 'Very well then, honour shall be my word, and not my love. I will put the question to her frankly; if she says yes, the marriage shall be. But not here. It shall be at your own house in England.'

'When?' said I.

'I will accompany her there,' he replied, 'and it shall be within a week of her return. I have nothing to gain by delay. But I will not answer for the consequences.'

'What do you mean?' said I. He made no reply, went away, and I came back to my room.