

CHAPTER IX.--SHE WITNESSES THE END

April 20. Milan, 10.30 p.m.--We are thus far on our way homeward. I, being decidedly *de trop*, travel apart from the rest as much as I can. Having dined at the hotel here, I went out by myself; regardless of the proprieties, for I could not stay in. I walked at a leisurely pace along the Via Alessandro Manzoni till my eye was caught by the grand Galleria Vittorio Emanuele, and I entered under the high glass arcades till I reached the central octagon, where I sat down on one of a group of chairs placed there. Becoming accustomed to the stream of promenaders, I soon observed, seated on the chairs opposite, Caroline and Charles. This was the first occasion on which I had seen them *en tete-a-tete* since my conversation with him. She soon caught sight of me; averted her eyes; then, apparently abandoning herself to an impulse, she jumped up from her seat and came across to me. We had not spoken to each other since the meeting in Venice.

'Alicia,' she said, sitting down by my side, 'Charles asks me to forgive you, and I do forgive you.'

I pressed her hand, with tears in my eyes, and said, 'And do you forgive him?'

'Yes,' said she, shyly.

'And what's the result?' said I.

'We are to be married directly we reach home.'

This was almost the whole of our conversation; she walked home with me, Charles following a little way behind, though she kept turning her head, as if anxious that he should overtake us. 'Honour and not love' seemed to ring in my ears. So matters stand. Caroline is again happy.

April 25.--We have reached home, Charles with us. Events are now moving in silent speed, almost with velocity, indeed; and I sometimes feel oppressed by the strange and preternatural ease which seems to accompany their flow. Charles is staying at the neighbouring town; he is only waiting for the marriage licence; when obtained he is to come here, be quietly married to her, and carry her off. It is rather resignation than content which sits on his face; but he has not spoken a word more to me on the burning subject, or deviated one hair's breadth from the course he laid down. They may be happy in time to come: I hope so. But I cannot shake off depression.

May 6.--Eve of the wedding. Caroline is serenely happy, though not blithe. But there is nothing to excite anxiety about her. I wish I could say the same of him. He comes and goes like a ghost, and yet nobody seems to observe this strangeness in his mien.

I could not help being here for the ceremony; but my absence would have

resulted in less disquiet on his part, I believe. However, I may be wrong in attributing causes: my father simply says that Charles and Caroline have as good a chance of being happy as other people. Well, to-morrow settles all.

May 7.--They are married: we have just returned from church. Charles looked so pale this morning that my father asked him if he was ill. He said, 'No: only a slight headache;' and we started for the church.

There was no hitch or hindrance; and the thing is done.

4 p.m.--They ought to have set out on their journey by this time; but there is an unaccountable delay. Charles went out half-an-hour ago, and has not yet returned. Caroline is waiting in the hall; but I am dreadfully afraid they will miss the train. I suppose the trifling hindrance is of no account; and yet I am full of misgivings . . .

Sept. 14.--Four months have passed; only four months! It seems like years. Can it be that only seventeen weeks ago I set on this paper the fact of their marriage? I am now an aged woman by comparison!

On that never to be forgotten day we waited and waited, and Charles did not return. At six o'clock, when poor little Caroline had gone back to her room in a state of suspense impossible to describe, a man who worked in the water-meadows came to the house and asked for my father. He had an interview with him in the study. My father then rang his bell, and

sent for me. I went down; and I then learnt the fatal news. Charles was no more. The waterman had been going to shut down the hatches of a weir in the meads when he saw a hat on the edge of the pool below, floating round and round in the eddy, and looking into the pool saw something strange at the bottom. He knew what it meant, and lowering the hatches so that the water was still, could distinctly see the body. It is needless to write particulars that were in the newspapers at the time. Charles was brought to the house, but he was dead.

We all feared for Caroline; and she suffered much; but strange to say, her suffering was purely of the nature of deep grief which found relief in sobbing and tears. It came out at the inquest that Charles had been accustomed to cross the meads to give an occasional half-crown to an old man who lived on the opposite hill, who had once been a landscape painter in an humble way till he lost his eyesight; and it was assumed that he had gone thither for the same purpose to-day, and to bid him farewell. On this information the coroner's jury found that his death had been caused by misadventure; and everybody believes to this hour that he was drowned while crossing the weir to relieve the old man. Except one: she believes in no accident. After the stunning effect of the first news, I thought it strange that he should have chosen to go on such an errand at the last moment, and to go personally, when there was so little time to spare, since any gift could have been so easily sent by another hand. Further reflection has convinced me that this step out of life was as much a part of the day's plan as was the wedding in the church hard by. They were the two halves of his complete intention when he gave me on the Grand

Canal that assurance which I shall never forget: 'Very well, then; honour shall be my word, not love. If she says "Yes," the marriage shall be.'

I do not know why I should have made this entry at this particular time; but it has occurred to me to do it--to complete, in a measure, that part of my desultory chronicle which relates to the love-story of my sister and Charles. She lives on meekly in her grief; and will probably outlive it; while I--but never mind me.