

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE CHARMED GARDEN.

ONE must be very happy or very unhappy to love Solitude, to lean upon her silent breast, and, fleeing mankind, to seek in its arms what is so seldom found among men, repose for happiness or consolation for sorrow! For the happy, solitude provides the most delightful festival, as it allows one in the most enjoyable resignation to repose in himself, to breathe out himself, to participate in himself! But it also provides a festival for the unhappy—a festival of the memory, of living in the past, of reflection upon those long-since vanished joys, the loss of which has caused the sorrow! For the children of the world, for the striving, for the seeker of inordinate enjoyments, for the ambitious, for the sensual, solitude is but ill-adapted—only for the happy, for the sorrow-laden, and also for the innocent, who yet know nothing of the world, of neither its pleasures nor torments, of neither its loves nor hatreds!

So thought and spoke the curious Romans when passing the high walls surrounding the beautiful garden formerly belonging to the Count Appiani. At an earlier period this garden had been well known to all of them, as it had been a sort of public promenade, and under its shady walks had many a tender couple exchanged their first vows and experienced the rapture of the first kiss of love. But for the four last years all this had been changed; a rich stranger had come and offered to the impoverished old Count Appiani a large sum for this garden with its decaying villa, and the

count had, notwithstanding the murmurs of the Romans, sold his last possession to the stranger. He had said to the grumbling Romans: "You are dissatisfied that I part with my garden for money. You were pleased to linger in the shady avenues, to listen to these murmuring fountains and rustling cypresses; you have walked here, you have here laughed and enjoyed yourselves, while I, sitting in my dilapidated villa, have suffered deprivation and hunger. I will make you a proposition. Collect this sum, you Romans, which this stranger offers me; ye who love to promenade in my garden, unite yourselves in a common work. Let each one give what he can, until the necessary amount is collected, then the garden will be your common property, where you can walk as much as you please, and I shall be happy to be relieved from poverty by my own countrymen, and not compelled to sell to a stranger the garden so agreeable to the Romans!"

But the good Romans had no answer to make to Count Appiani. They, indeed, would have the enjoyment, but it must cost them nothing—in vain had they very much loved this garden, had taken great pleasure under its shady trees; but when it became necessary to pay for these pleasures, they found that they were not worth the cost, that they could very well dispense with them.

The good Romans therefore turned away from this garden, which threatened them with a tax, and sought other places of recreation; while old Count Appiani sold his garden and the ruins of his villa to the rich stranger who had offered him so considerable a sum for them. From that day forward every thing in the garden had assumed a dif-

ferent appearance. Masons, carpenters, and upholsterers had come and so improved the villa, within and without, that it now made a stately and beautiful appearance amid the dense foliage of the trees. It had been expensively and splendidly furnished with every thing desirable for a rich man's dwelling, and the upholsterers had enough to relate to the listening Romans of the elegant magnificence now displayed in this formerly pitiable villa. How gladly would the former promenaders now have returned to this garden; how gladly would they now have revisited this villa, which, with its deserted halls and its ragged and dirty tapestry, had formerly seemed to them not worth looking at! But their return to it was now rendered impossible; for on the same day in which the new owner took possession of the garden, he had brought with him more than fifty workmen, who had immediately commenced surrounding it with a high wall.

Higher and higher rose the wall; nobody could see over it, as no giant was sufficiently tall; no one could climb over it, as the smoothly-hammered stones of which it was built offered not the least supporting point. The garden with its villa had become a secret mystery to the Romans! They yet heard the rustling of the trees, they saw the green branches waving in the wind; but of what occurred under those branches and in those shaded walks they could know nothing. At first, some curious individuals had ventured to knock at the low, narrow door that formed the only entrance into this walled garden. They had knocked at that door and demanded entrance. Then would a small sliding window be opened, and a gruff, bearded man with angry

voice would ask what was wanted, and at the same time inform the knocker that no one could be admitted; that he and his two bulldogs would be able to keep the garden clear of all intruders. And the two great hounds, as if they understood the threats of their master, would show their teeth, and their threatening growl would rise to a loud and angry bark.

They soon ceased to knock at that door, and, as they could not gain admission, they took the next best course, of assuming the appearance of not wishing it.

Four years had since passed; they had overcome the desire to enter the premises or to look over the wall, but they told wondrous tales of the garden and of a beautiful fairy who dwelt in it, and whose soft, melodious voice was sometimes heard in the stillness of the night singing sweet, transporting songs. No one had seen her, this fairy, but she was certainly beautiful, and of course young; there were also some bold individuals who asserted that when the moon shone brightly and goldenly, the young fairy was then to be seen in the tops of the trees or upon the edge of the wall. Light as an elf, transparent as a moonbeam, she there swung to and fro, executing singular dances and singing songs that brought tears to the eyes and compassion to the hearts of those who heard them. On hearing these tales, the Romans would make the sign of the cross, and pass more quickly by the walls of this garden, which thenceforth they called "*The Charmed Garden.*" It was indeed a charmed garden! It was an island of happiness, behind these walls, concealed from the knavery of the world. Like an eternal smile of the Divinity rested the heavens over

this ever-blooming, ever-fragrant garden, in whose myrtle-bushes the nightingales sang, and in whose silver-clear basins the goldfishes splashed.

Yes, it was indeed a charmed garden, and also had its fairy, who, if she did not compete with the moonbeams in rocking herself on the tops of the trees and the edges of the wall, was nevertheless as delicate as an elf, and who tripped from flower to brook and from brook to hill as lightly and gracefully as the gazelle. The whole spring, the whole youth of nature, flashed and beamed from this beautiful maiden-face, so full of childlike innocence, purity, and peace. No storm had as yet passed over these smiling features, not the smallest leaf of this rose had been touched by an ungentle hand; freely and freshly had she blossomed in luxuriant natural beauty; she had drunk the dews of heaven, but not the dew of tears, for those deeply-dark beaming eyes had wept only such tears as were called forth by emotions of joy and happiness.

She sat under a myrtle, whose blossoming branches bent down to her as if they would entwine that pure and tender brow with a bridal wreath. With her head thrown back upon these branches, she reposed with an inimitable grace her reclining form. A white transparent robe, held by a golden clasp, fell in waves to her little feet, which were encased in gold-embroidered slippers of dark-red leather. A blushing rose was fastened by a diamond pin in the folds of her dress upon her budding bosom, finely contrasting with the delicate flush upon her cheeks. A guitar rested upon her full round arm. She had been singing, this beautiful fairy child, but her song was now silenced, and she was

glancing up to the clouds, following their movements with her dreamy, thoughtful eyes. A smile hovered about her fresh, youthful lips—the smile peculiar to innocence and happiness.

She dreamed; precious, ecstatic images passed before her mental eyes; she dreamed of a distant land in which she had once been, of a distant house in which she had once dwelt. It was even more beautiful and splendid than this which she now occupied, but it had lacked this blue sky and fragrant atmosphere; it lacked these trees and flowers, these myrtle bushes, and these songs of the nightingale, and upon a few summer days had followed long, dull winter months with their cold winding-sheet of snow, with their benumbing masses of ice, and the fantastic flowers painted on the windows by the frost. And yet, and yet, there had been a sun which shone into her heart warmer than this bright sun of Italy, and the thought of which spread a purple glow upon her cheeks. This sun had shone upon her from the tender glances of a lady whom she had loved as a tutelary genius, as a divinity, as the bright star of her existence! Whenever that lady had come to her in the solitary house in which she then dwelt, then had all appeared to her as in a transfiguration; then had even her peevish old servant learned to smile and become humble and friendly; then all was joy and happiness, and whoever saw that beautiful and brilliant lady, had thought himself blessed, and had fallen down to adore her.

Of that lady was the young maiden now thinking, of that memorable woman with the flashing eyes whose tender glance had always penetrated the heart of the child

with delight, whose gentle words yet resounded like music in her ears.

Where was she now, this lady of her love, her longings? why had she been brought away from that house with its snowy winding-sheet and the ice drapery upon its windows? Where lay that house, and where had she to seek it with her thoughts? What was the language she had there spoken, and which she now secretly spoke in her heart, although nobody else addressed her in it, no one about her understood it; and wherefore had her friend and protector, he who had brought her here, who had always been with her, wherefore had he suddenly given himself the appearance of no longer understanding it?

And even as she was thinking of him, of this dear friend and protector, he came along down the alley; his tall form appeared at the end of the walk; she recognized his noble features, with the proud eagle glance and the bold arched brow.

The young maiden rose from her seat and hastened to meet him.

"How charming that you have come, Paulo," she gayly said, stretching forth her little hands toward him. "I must ask you something, and that directly, Paulo. Tell me quickly what is that language called in which we formerly conversed together, and why have we ceased to speak it since we came here to Rome?"

Paulo's brow became slightly clouded, but when he looked into her beautiful face, animated by expectant curiosity, this expression of displeasure quickly vanished from his features, and, threatening her with his finger, he said:

"Always this same question, Natalie; and yet I have so often begged of you to forget the past, and live only in the present, my dear, sweet child! The past is sunken in an immeasurable gulf behind you, which you can never pass, and if it stretches out its arms to you, it will only be for the purpose of dragging you down into the abyss with it! Forget it, therefore, my Natalie, and yield thyself to this beautiful and delightful present, to increase for you the attractions of which will ever be the dearest task of my life."

"It is true," said the young maiden, sighing, "I am wrong to be always recurring to those long-past times; you must pardon me, Paulo, but you will also acknowledge that my enigmatical past justifies me in feeling some curiosity. Only think how it began! You one day came rushing to my room, you pressed me all trembling to your heart, and silently bore me away. 'Natalie,' said you, 'danger threatens you; I will save, or perish with you!' You mounted your horse with me in your arms. Behind us screamed and moaned the servants of my house, but you regarded them not, and I trustingly clung to your heart, for I knew that if danger threatened me, you would surely save me! Oh, do you yet remember that fabulous ride? How we rested in out-of-the-way houses, or with poor peasant people, and then proceeded on farther and farther! And how the sun constantly grew warmer, melting the snow, and you constantly became more cheerful and happy, until, one day, you impetuously pressed me to your bosom, and said: 'Natalie, we are saved! Life and the future are now yours! Look around you, we are in Italy. Here you can be free and happy!'"

"And was not that a good prophecy?" asked Paulo.
 "Has it not been fulfilled? Are you not happy?"

"I should be so," sighed Natalie, "could I avoid thinking so often of that past! Those words which you then spoke to me were the last I ever heard in that language, which I had always spoken until then, but of which I know not the name! From that hour you spoke to me in an unknown tongue, and I felt like a poor deserted orphan, from whom was taken her last possession, her language!"

"And yet whole peoples have been robbed of that last and dearest possession!" said Paulo, his brow suddenly darkening, "and not, as in your case, to save life and liberty, but for the purpose of enslaving and oppressing them."

Natalie, perceiving the sudden sadness of her friend, attempted to smile, and, grasping his hand, she said:

"Come, Paulo, we are naughty children, and vex ourselves with vagaries, while all nature is so cheerful and so replete with divine beauty. Only see with what glowing splendor the departing sun rests upon the tops of the cypresses! Ah, it is nowhere so beautiful as here in my dear garden. This is my world and my happiness! Sometimes, Paulo, it makes me shudder to think that the walls surrounding us might suddenly tumble down, and all the tall houses standing behind them, and all the curious people lounging in the streets, could then look in upon my paradise! That must be terrible, and yet Marianne tells me that other people live differently from us, that their houses are not surrounded by walls, and that no watchman with dogs drives away troublesome visitors from them. And yet, she says, they smilingly welcome such inconvenient people,

receiving them with friendly words, while they only thank God when they finally go and leave the occupants in peace. Is it then true, Paulo, that people can be so false to each other, and that those who live in the world never dare to speak as they think?"

"It is, alas! but too true, Natalie," said Paulo, with a sad smile.

"Then never let me become acquainted with such a world," said the young maiden, clinging to Paulo's arm. "Let me always remain here in our solitude, which none but good people can share with us. For Marianne is good, as also Cecil, your servant; and Carlo—oh, Carlo would give his life for me. He is not false, like other people; I can confide in him."

"Think you so!" asked Paulo, looking deep into her eyes with a scrutinizing glance.

She bore his glance with a cheerful and unembarrassed smile, and a roguish nod of her little head.

"You must certainly wish to paint me again, that you look at me so earnestly. No, Paulo, I will not sit to you again, you paint me much too handsome; you make an angel of me, while I am yet only a poor little thing, who lives but by your mercy, and does not even know her own name!"

"Angels never have a name, they are only known as angels, and need no further designation. As there is an Angel Gabriel, so is there an Angel Natalie!"

"Mocker," said she, laughing, "there are no feminine angels! But now come, be seated. Here is my guitar, and I will sing you a song for which Carlo yesterday brought me the melody."

"And the words?" asked Paulo.

"Well, as to the words, they must come in the singing—to-day one set of words, to-morrow another. Who can know what glows in your heart at any given hour, and what you may feel in the next, and which will escape you in words unknown to yourself, and which unconsciously and involuntarily stream from your lips."

"You are my charming poetess, my Sappho!" exclaimed Paulo, kissing her hand.

"Ah, would that you spoke true!" said she, with sparkling eyes and a deeper flush upon her cheeks. "Let me be a poetess like Sappho, and I would, like her, joyfully leap from the rocks into the sea. Oh, there are yet poetesses—Carlo has told me of them. All Rome now worships the great improvisatrice, Corilla. I should like to know her, Paulo, only to adore her, only to see her in her splendor and her beauty!"

"If you wish it, you shall see her," said Paulo.

"Ah, I shall see her then!" shouted Natalie, and, as if to give expression to her inward joy, she touched the strings of her guitar, and in clear tones resounded a jubilant melody. Then she began to sing, at first in single isolated words and exclamations, which constantly swelled into more powerful, animated and blissful tones, and finally flowed into a regular dithyramb. It was a song of jubilee, a sigh of innocence and happiness; she sang of God and the stars, of happy love, and of reuniting; of blossom, fragrance, and fanning zephyrs; and in unconscious, foreboding pain, she sang of the sorrows of love, and the pangs of renunciation.



NATALIE AND COUNT PAULO.

All Nature seemed listening to her charming song; no leaflet stirred, in low murmurs splashed the waves of the fountain by which she sat, and occasionally a nightingale wailed in unison with her hymn of rejoicing. The sun had descended to a point nearer the horizon, and bordered it with moving purple clouds. Natalie, suddenly interrupting her song, pointed with her rosy fingers to the heavens.

“How beautiful it is, Paulo!” said she.

He, however, saw nothing but her face, illuminated by the evening glow.

“How beautiful art thou!” he whispered low, pressing her head to his bosom.

Then both were silent, looking, lost in sweetest dreams, upon the surrounding landscape, which, as if in a silence of adoration, seemed to listen for the parting salutation of the god of day. A nightingale suddenly came and perched upon the myrtle-bush under which Natalie and her friend were reposing. Soon she began to sing, now in complaining, now in exulting tones, now tenderly soft, now in joyful trumpet-blasts; and the night-wind that now arose rustled in organ-tones among the cypress and olive trees.

Natalie clung closer to her friend’s side.

“I would now gladly die,” said she.

“Already die!” whispered he. “Die before you have lived, Natalie?”

Then they were again silent, the wind rustled in the trees, the fountains murmured, the birds sang, and in golden light lay the moon over this paradise of two happy beings.

But what is that which is rustling in the pines close to

the wall—what is that looking out with flashing eyes and a poisonous glance? Is it the serpent already come to expel these happy beings from their paradise?

They see nothing, they hear nothing, they are both dreaming, so sure do they feel of their happiness.

But there is a continued rustling. It is unnatural! It resembles not the rustling of the evening wind! It is not the rustling of a bird, balancing itself upon the branch of the tree! What, then, is it?

An opening is made in the foliage, and it is the arm of a man that makes it. Upon the wall is to be seen the form of a man, and near him slowly rises a second form. Cautiously he glances around, and then makes a scornful grimace, while his eyes shine like those of a hyena. He has discovered the two sitting together in happy security, and enjoying the tranquil beauty of the evening in silent beatitude. He has seen them, and points toward them with his finger, while, at the same time, he lightly touches the arm of the other man, who has boldly swung himself up on the wall. The glance of the latter follows the direction in which the other points; he also now sees the reposing pair, and over his features also flits an unnatural smile. He suddenly fumbles in his bosom, and when his hand is withdrawn a small dagger glistens in it. With a bold leap, the man is already on the point of springing from the wall into the garden. The other holds him back, and makes a threatening counter-movement. He, it seems, is the commander, and uses his power with an indignant negative shake of the head; his commanding glance seems to say: "Be silent, and observe!"

Staring and immovably their eyes were now fixed upon the silent pair sitting in the bright moonlight which surrounded them as with a glory. One of the men still holds the dagger in his hand, and with a powerful arm the other holds him in check. Then they whisper low together—they seem to be consulting as to what is to be done. The man with the dagger seems to yield to the arguments or persuasions of the other. He nods his consent. The first disappears behind the wall, and the armed one slowly follows him. Yet once again he glances over the wall, raising his arm and shaking his dagger toward Natalie and her friend. Then he disappeared, and all was again peaceful and still in this smiling paradise!

Was it, perhaps, only an illusive dream that bantered us, only a *fata morgana* formed by the moonbeams? Or does the serpent of evil really lurk about this paradise? Will destruction find its way into this charmed garden? Ah, no solitude and no wall can afford protection against misfortune! It creeps through the strongest lock, and over the highest wall; and while we think ourselves safe, it is already there, close to us, and nearly ready to swallow us up.

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE LETTERS.

It was suddenly lively in the garden. Cecil, Paulo's old servant, approached from the house, with a lantern in his hand.