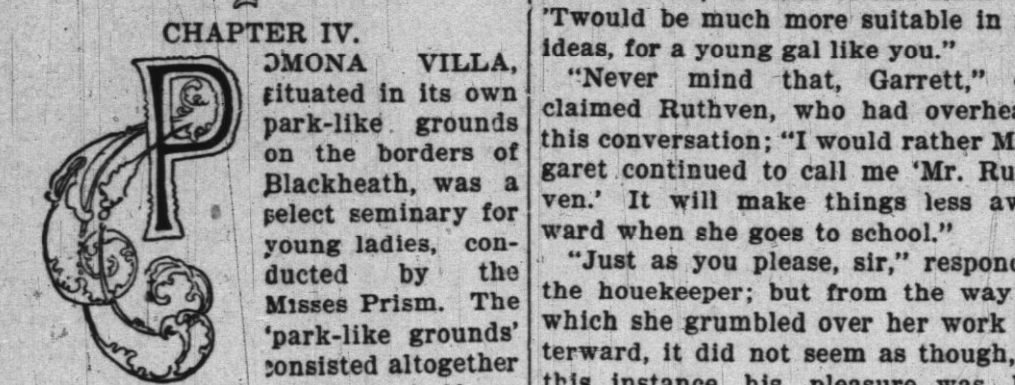


RUTHVEN'S WARD

BY
FLORENCE MARRYAT.



CHAPTER IV.
POMONA VILLA, situated in its own park-like grounds on the borders of Blackheath, was a select seminary for young ladies, conducted by the Misses Prism. The 'park-like grounds' consisted altogether of about half an acre of the terrestrial sphere, the chief part of which was laid down with shingle, affording an excellent opportunity of research for such pupils as were studying geology. As this fact was found, however, on discovery, to depress the spirits of parents, and cause them to imagine they might be deceived in other particulars as well as the grounds, the Misses Prism always hastened to correct the erroneous impression by assuring their would-be patrons that they only received young ladies of the highest families, and from the most select circles of society.

The Misses Prism forgot to mention, whilst alluding to this part of the subject, that Miss Jane Prime, of the first class, was the eldest daughter of the gentleman who provided them with beef, and that he had been gradually induced, as the young lady advanced in years, to increase his deduction from the weekly butcher's bills, from one pound to thirty shillings. It would also, doubtless, have been wasting the time of their visitors to explain that the reason the two Misses Candy were numbered amongst the select, was, that their papa was the principal grocer in the town, or that the two Misses Waters represented a certain number of quarts of milk, and that to make a long story short, they accepted any pupils they could get, without the slightest reference to their ancestors or antecedents.

The seminary at Pomona Villa was conducted on precisely the same principles as the generality of its kind, and turned out as finished women, with some few exceptions. This was the boarding-school to which Ruthven decided to send Margaret O'Reilly. In his dilemma, he had gone, naturally enough, to a married lady friend, the wife of one of his business comrades; a woman who had no children of her own, but had heard of the Misses Prism through some one else, and Ruthven seized on the first opportunity presented to him, and made all the arrangements for the reception of his protegee at Pomona Villa, through the penny-post. He wrote frankly that her education had been neglected; but that was no drawback in the eyes of the Misses Prism. "They would give all the more attention to the sweet child, that she might realize every hope her excellent guardian entertained for her."

Ruthven winced under the correspondence, but considered that a few years with the Misses Prism could do the girl no harm.

"As soon as she can read and write," he thought, "I shall put her under Mrs. Delamaine, who'll make an excellent little chambermaid of her, or train her for any other line she may prove able to fill. I can't hear of her going into burlesque or the ballet with that face. It's quite enough responsibility for me to have picked her out of the gutter without incurring more. I often think I've done a hair-brained thing; but I'm in for it now, and the only course to take is to go through it as creditably as I can. So first to close with Miss Prism."

Both Ruthven and Mrs. Garrett had anticipated some difficulty when they told Peg she was to go to school, but to their astonishment the girl evinced the greatest delight at the prospect.

"Oh! I am glad," she ejaculated; "it is real good of Mr. Ruthven to send me to get some learning. I want to be a lady so much, and read all the books Master Hamilton does, and do beautiful writing like he can."

"Lor' bless the gal!" exclaimed the irate housekeeper, "you don't go to suppose that reading and writing will make you a lady? You'll never be a lady, live as long as you may, so the sooner you get that notion out of your head the better."

"Shan't I never?" said Peg, in a tone of disappointment, clasping her little thin hands together; "not if I tries very hard? Why, I heard Mr. Ruthven say

we were to sleep in the same room, and Miss Prism has put her under my especial care, so I won't see her put upon in any way."

"Which means that she intends to get that scarlet ribbon she is fingering for herself," grumbled one of the select; "it's just like Carmen Flowers—to pounce upon every good thing that comes into the school."

"Greedy!" said Miss Candy.

"Vain!" sneered Miss Prime.

"Stuck up!" chimed in Miss Waters.

By which it may be seen that Carmen Flower—Spanish by her mother's side, and English by her father's—although she was strongly suspected of turning out a beauty, was not much of a favorite at Pomona Villa.

Whether on account of Ruthven's liberality, however, or because some secret attraction drew the two girls together, Carmen Flower and Margaret O'Reilly were fast friends from the first day of meeting. On Peg's side a vast deal of admiration mingled with the affection she conceived for her new companion.

Carmen was only one year older than herself; yet she appeared almost a woman by comparison with her, and Peg thought she had never seen anything more beautiful than her flashing black eyes, and long, straight limbs, and the abundant dark tresses with which her head was crowned. Carmen was an orphan, too, who could not remember either father or mother, and lived with her uncle and guardian, Sir Frederic Flower, in an old house in the country called Abbotsville. It was rumored in the school that Miss Flower was an heiress, and would inherit all her uncle's money, and Carmen was fond of boasting to the same effect; but that circumstance made no difference to Peg. Her heart had known too little of affection not to respond eagerly to that semblance of it which school girls exhibit toward each other, and which has its outlet in kisses, secrets and terms of endearment. She mistook all this gilt for gold, and before a month was over her head she adored Carmen Flower as a being of superior order to herself, and was never so happy as when she was running her errands, doing her commissions, or waiting on her pleasure.

Carmen liked this adulation; it was as balm to her conceited spirit, and if she had ever felt an attachment to anyone it was to Margaret O'Reilly. Inheriting from her Spanish mother a haughtiness and thirst for admiration which had rendered her obnoxious to her companions, her beauty and wealth had not met hitherto with the consideration she thought they deserved. The British girl is almost as ready as her brother to put down anything like self-assurance and conceit, and the butcher's and baker's daughters had been irritated rather than awed, by the assumption of importance maintained by Miss Flower.

But poor Peg had no dignity of her own to keep up. She could not assert loudly like the Misses Prime and Candy, that she was as good as others; she was only anxious to conceal the past, and let it die in silence. Even to her friend, Carmen Flower, she said nothing on the subject. Her feminine instinct had already taught her that the confession would do her harm, added to which Mrs. Garrett had especially cautioned her, on her master's behalf, not to reveal anything of her past life.

So all that the young ladies discovered was that she was an orphan and lived with her guardian, the same as Carmen Flower did. They thought her dreadfully vulgar at first, but natural timidity made her expose her deficiencies as little as possible, and natural intelligence quickly taught her to remedy them. It was Easter when she was sent to Pomona Villa, and by mid-summer no one would have recognized her as the same girl. Her face and figure had filled out, her cheeks bloomed with health, and her language was at least as correct as it is with most of her age. In fact, Margaret O'Reilly had become the prettiest girl in the school, and, though their attachment continued unabated, Carmen Flower was more than disposed to be jealous of the attention she attracted. When Mrs. Garrett arrived on one of her monthly visits to see how the girl was progressing, she held up her hands in amazement.

"Lor' bless me, Miss Margaret, I never did see such a change! Well, Blackheath must agree with you, and these ladies must be doing their duty for you to look so well. I should think you must weigh double what you did when you came here."

But it was nothing more than fresh air and wholesome food and the absence of fear that had wrought the miracle. For the first time in her life Peg's little mind and body were having fair play, and they responded gratefully to it. It was a great disappointment to the girl when the midsummer holidays arrived to find that she was to spend them at Pomona Villa, in company with Miss Tarbrush, whose parents lived in Calcutta. But so it had been arranged by Ruthven from the beginning.

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

If Satan ever laughs it must be at the hypocrites, they are the greatest dupes he has.

A B-a-d Man.
"Whereas," reads a notice printed in the Biddeford (Me.) Journal, "my husband, Amas, has left my bed and board without any cause, I Caution all wimin taking up with him, as I am the third one that he has brought to distraction to my knolidg."

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