

CHAPTER V.

"May I ask for a cup of tea, Miss Minerva?"

"Delighted, I'm sure, Mr. Le Frank."

"And was Mrs. Gallilee pleased with the Concert?"

"Charmed."

Mr. Le Frank shook his head. "I am afraid there was a drawback," he suggested. "You forget the lady who fainted. So alarming to the audience. So disagreeable to the artists."

"Take care, Mr. Le Frank! These new houses are flimsily built; they might hear you upstairs. The fainting lady is upstairs. All the elements of a romance are upstairs. Is your tea to your liking?"

In this playfully provocative manner, Miss Minerva (the governess) trifled with the curiosity of Mr. Le Frank (the music-master), as the proverbial cat trifles with the terror of the captive mouse. The man of the bald head and the servile smile showed a polite interest in the coming disclosure; he opened his deeply-sunk eyes, and lazily lifted his delicate eyebrows.

He had called at Mrs. Gallilee's house, after the concert, to get a little tea (with a large infusion of praise) in the schoolroom. A striking personal contrast confronted him, in the face of the lady who was dispensing the hospitalities of the table. Mr. Le Frank's plump cheeks were, in colour, of the obtrusively florid sort. The relics of yellow hair, still adhering to the sides of his head, looked as silkily frail as spun glass. His noble beard made amends for his untimely baldness. The glossy glory of it exhaled delicious perfumes; the keenest eyes might have tried in vain to discover a hair that was out of place. Miss Minerva's eager sallow face, so lean, and so hard, and so long, looked, by contrast, as if it wanted some sort of discreet covering thrown over some part of it. Her coarse black hair projected like a penthouse over her bushy black eyebrows and her keen black eyes. Oh, dear me (as they said in the servants' hall), she would never be married--so yellow and so learned, so ugly and so poor! And yet, if mystery is interesting, this was an interesting woman. The people about her felt an uneasy perception of something secret, ominously secret, in the nature of the governess which defied detection. If Inquisitive Science, vowed to medical research, could

dissect firmness of will, working at its steadiest repressive action--then, the mystery of Miss Minerva's inner nature might possibly have been revealed. As it was, nothing more remarkable exposed itself to view than an irritable temper; serving perhaps as safety-valve to an underlying explosive force, which (with strong enough temptation and sufficient opportunity) might yet break out.

"Gently, Mr. Le Frank! The tea is hot--you may burn your mouth. How am I to tell you what has happened?" Miss Minerva dropped the playfully provocative tone, with infinite tact, exactly at the right moment. "Just imagine," she resumed, "a scene on the stage, occurring in private life. The lady who fainted at your concert, turns out to be no less a person than Mrs. Gallilee's niece!"

The general folly which reads a prospectus and blindly speculates in shares, is matched by the equally diffused stupidity, which is incapable of discovering that there can be any possible relation between fiction and truth. Say it's in a novel--and you are a fool if you believe it. Say it's in a newspaper--and you are a fool if you doubt it. Mr. Le Frank, following the general example, followed it on this occasion a little too unreservedly. He avowed his doubts of the circumstance just related, although it was, on the authority of a lady, a circumstance occurring in real life! Far from being offended, Miss Minerva cordially sympathized with him.

"It is too theatrical to be believed," she admitted; "but this fainting young person is positively the interesting stranger we have been expecting from Italy. You know Mrs. Gallilee. Hers was the first smelling-bottle produced; hers was the presence of mind which suggested a horizontal position. 'Help the heart,' she said; 'don't impede it.' The whole theory of fainting fits, in six words! In another moment," proceeded the governess making a theatrical point without suspecting it--"in another moment, Mrs. Gallilee herself stood in need of the smelling-bottle."

Mr. Le Frank was not a true believer, even yet. "You don't mean she fainted!" he said.

Miss Minerva held up the indicative forefinger, with which she emphasized instruction when her pupils required rousing. "Mrs. Gallilee's strength of mind--as I was about to say, if you had listened to me--resisted the shock. What the effort must have cost her you will presently understand. Our interesting young lady was accompanied by a hideous old foreign woman who completely lost her head. She smacked her hands distractedly; she called on the saints (without producing the slightest effect)--but she mixed

up a name, remarkable even in Italy, with the rest of the delirium; and that was serious. Put yourself in Mrs. Gallilee's place--"

"I couldn't do it," said Mr. Le Frank, with humility.

Miss Minerva passed over this reply without notice. Perhaps she was not a believer in the humility of musicians.

"The young lady's Christian name," she proceeded, "is Carmina; (put the accent, if you please, on the first syllable). The moment Mrs. Gallilee heard the name, it struck her like a blow. She enlightened the old woman, and asserted herself as Miss Carmina's aunt in an instant. 'I am Mrs. Gallilee:' that was all she said. The result"--Miss Minerva paused, and pointed to the ceiling; "the result is up there. Our charming guest was on the sofa, and the hideous old nurse was fanning her, when I had the honour of seeing them just now. No, Mr. Le Frank! I haven't done yet. There is a last act in this drama of private life still to relate. A medical gentleman was present at the concert, who offered his services in reviving Miss Carmina. The same gentleman is now in attendance on the interesting patient. Can you guess who he is?"

Mr. Le Frank had sold a ticket for his concert to the medical adviser of the family--one Mr. Null. A cautious guess in this direction seemed to offer the likeliest chance of success.

"He is a patron of music," the pianist began.

"He hates music," the governess interposed.

"I mean Mr. Null," Mr. Le Frank persisted.

"I mean--" Miss Minerva paused (like the cat with the mouse again!)--"I mean, Mr. Ovid Vere."

What form the music-master's astonishment might have assumed may be matter for speculation, it was never destined to become matter of fact. At the moment when Miss Minerva overwhelmed him with the climax of her story, a little, rosy, elderly gentleman, with a round face, a sweet smile, and a curly gray head, walked into the room, accompanied by two girls. Persons of small importance--only Mr. Gallilee and his daughters.

"How d'ye-do, Mr. Le Frank. I hope you got plenty of money by the concert. I gave away my own two tickets. You will excuse me, I'm sure. Music, I can't

think why, always sends me to sleep. Here are your two pupils, Miss Minerva, safe and sound. It struck me we were rather in the way, when that sweet young creature was brought home. Sadly in want of quiet, poor thing--not in want of us. Mrs. Gallilee and Ovid, so clever and attentive, were just the right people in the right place. So I put on my hat--I'm always available, Mr. Le Frank; I have the great advantage of never having anything to do--and I said to the girls, 'Let's have a walk.' We had no particular place to go to--that's another advantage of mine--so we drifted about. I didn't mean it, but, somehow or other, we stopped at a pastry-cook's shop. What was the name of the pastry-cook?"

So far Mr. Gallilee proceeded, speaking in the oddest self-contradictory voice, if such a description is permissible--a voice at once high in pitch and mild in tone: in short, as Mr. Le Frank once professionally remarked, a soft falsetto. When the good gentleman paused to make his little effort of memory, his eldest daughter--aged twelve, and always ready to distinguish herself--saw her opportunity, and took the rest of the narrative into her own hands.

Miss Maria, named after her mother, was one of the successful new products of the age we live in--the conventionally-charming child (who has never been smacked); possessed of the large round eyes that we see in pictures, and the sweet manners and perfect principles that we read of in books. She called everybody "dear;" she knew to a nicety how much oxygen she wanted in the composition of her native air; and--alas, poor wretch!--she had never wetted her shoes or dirtied her face since the day when she was born.

"Dear Miss Minerva," said Maria, "the pastry-cook's name was Timbal. We have had ices."

His mind being now set at rest on the subject of the pastry-cook, Mr. Gallilee turned to his youngest daughter--aged ten, and one of the unsuccessful products of the age we live in. This was a curiously slow, quaint, self-contained child; the image of her father, with an occasional reflection of his smile; incurably stupid, or incurably perverse--the friends of the family were not quite sure which. Whether she might have been over-crammed with useless knowledge, was not a question in connection with the subject which occurred to anybody.

"Rouse yourself, Zo," said Mr. Gallilee. "What did we have besides ices?"

Zoe (known to her father, by vulgar abbreviation, as "Zo") took Mr. Gallilee's

stumpy red hand, and held hard by it as if that was the one way in which a dull child could rouse herself, with a prospect of success.

"I've had so many of them," she said; "I don't know. Ask Maria."

Maria responded with the sweetest readiness. "Dear Zoe, you are so slow! Cheesecakes."

Mr. Gallilee patted Zoe's head as encouragingly as if she had discovered the right answer by herself. "That's right--ices and cheese-cakes," he said. "We tried cream-ice, and then we tried water-ice. The children, Miss Minerva, preferred the cream-ice. And, do you know, I'm of their opinion. There's something in a cream-ice--what do you think yourself of cream-ices, Mr. Le Frank?"

It was one among the many weaknesses of Mr. Gallilee's character to be incapable of opening his lips without, sooner or later, taking somebody into his confidence. In the merest trifles, he instinctively invited sympathy and agreement from any person within his reach--from a total stranger quite as readily as from an intimate friend. Mr. Le Frank, representing the present Court of Social Appeal, attempted to deliver judgment on the question of ices, and was interrupted without ceremony by Miss Minerva. She, too, had been waiting her opportunity to speak, and she now took it--not amiably.

"With all possible respect, Mr. Gallilee, I venture to entreat that you will be a little more thoughtful, where the children are concerned. I beg your pardon, Mr. Le Frank, for interrupting you--but it is really a little too hard on Me. I am held responsible for the health of these girls; I am blamed over and over again, when it is not my fault, for irregularities in their diet--and there they are, at this moment, chilled with ices and cloyed with cakes! What will Mrs. Gallilee say?"

"Don't tell her," Mr. Gallilee suggested.

"The girls will be thirsty for the rest of the evening," Miss Minerva persisted; "the girls will have no appetite for the last meal before bedtime. And their mother will ask Me what it means."

"My good creature," cried Mr. Gallilee, "don't be afraid of the girls' appetites! Take off their hats, and give them something nice for supper. They inherit my stomach, Miss Minerva--and they'll 'tuck in,' as we used to say at school. Did they say so in your time, Mr. Le Frank?"

Mrs. Gallilee's governess and vulgar expressions were anomalies never to be reconciled, under any circumstances. Miss Minerva took off the hats in stern silence. Even "Papa" might have seen the contempt in her face, if she had not managed to hide it in this way, by means of the girls.

In the silence that ensued, Mr. Le Frank had his chance of speaking, and showed himself to be a gentleman with a happily balanced character--a musician, with an eye to business. Using gratitude to Mr. Gallilee as a means of persuasion, he gently pushed the interests of a friend who was giving a concert next week. "We poor artists have our faults, my dear sir; but we are all earnest in helping each other. My friend sang for nothing at my concert. Don't suppose for a moment that he expects it of me! But I am going to play for nothing at his concert. May I appeal to your kind patronage to take two tickets?" The reply ended appropriately in musical sound--a golden tinkling, in Mr. Le Frank's pocket.

Having paid his tribute to art and artists, Mr. Gallilee looked furtively at Miss Minerva. On the wise principle of letting well alone, he perceived that the happy time had arrived for leaving the room. How was he to make his exit? He prided himself on his readiness of resource, in difficulties of this sort, and he was equal to the occasion as usual--he said he would go to his club.

"We really have a capital smoking-room at that club," he said. "I do like a good cigar; and--what do you think Mr. Le Frank?--isn't a pint of champagne nice drinking, this hot weather? Just cooled with ice--I don't know whether you feel the weather, Miss Minerva, as I do?--and poured, fizzing, into a silver mug. Lord, how delicious! Good-bye, girls. Give me a kiss before I go."

Maria led the way, as became the elder. She not only gave the kiss, but threw an appropriate sentiment into the bargain. "I do love you, dear papa!" said this perfect daughter--with a look in Miss Minerva's direction, which might have been a malicious look in any eyes but Maria's.

Mr. Gallilee turned to his youngest child. "Well, Zo--what do you say?"

Zo took her father's hand once more, and rubbed her head against it like a cat. This new method of expressing filial affection seemed to interest Mr. Gallilee. "Does your head itch, my dear?" he asked. The idea was new to Zo. She brightened, and looked at her father with a sly smile. "Why do you do it?" Miss Minerva asked sharply. Zo clouded over again, and answered, "I don't know." Mr. Gallilee rewarded her with a kiss, and went away to

champagne and the club.

Mr. Le Frank left the schoolroom next. He paid the governess the compliment of reverting to her narrative of events at the concert.

"I am greatly struck," he said, "by what you told me about Mr. Ovid Vere. We may, perhaps, have misjudged him in thinking that he doesn't like music. His coming to my concert suggests a more cheering view. Do you think there would be any impropriety in my calling to thank him? Perhaps it would be better if I wrote, and enclosed two tickets for my friend's concert? To tell you the truth, I've pledged myself to dispose of a certain number of tickets. My friend is so much in request--it's expecting too much to ask him to sing for nothing. I think I'll write. Good-evening!"

Left alone with her pupils, Miss Minerva looked at her watch. "Prepare your lessons for to-morrow," she said.

The girls produced their books. Maria's library of knowledge was in perfect order. The pages over which Zo pondered in endless perplexity were crumpled by weary fingers, and stained by frequent tears. Oh, fatal knowledge! mercifully forbidden to the first two of our race, who shall count the crimes and stupidities committed in your name?

Miss Minerva leaned back in her easy-chair. Her mind was occupied by the mysterious question of Ovid's presence at the concert. She raised her keenly penetrating eyes to the ceiling, and listened for sounds from above.

"I wonder," she thought to herself, "what they are doing upstairs?"