

CHAPTER VI.

Mrs. Gallilee was as complete a mistress of the practice of domestic virtue as of the theory of acoustics and fainting fits. At dressing with taste, and ordering dinners with invention; at heading her table gracefully, and making her guests comfortable; at managing refractory servants and detecting dishonest tradespeople, she was the equal of the least intellectual woman that ever lived. Her preparations for the reception of her niece were finished in advance, without an oversight in the smallest detail. Carmina's inviting bedroom, in blue, opened into Carmina's irresistible sitting-room, in brown. The ventilation was arranged, the light and shade were disposed, the flowers were attractively placed, under Mrs. Gallilee's infallible superintendence. Before Carmina had recovered her senses she was provided with a second mother, who played the part to perfection.

The four persons, now assembled in the pretty sitting-room upstairs, were in a position of insupportable embarrassment towards each other.

Finding her son at a concert (after he had told her that he hated music) Mrs. Gallilee, had first discovered him hurrying to the assistance of a young lady in a swoon, with all the anxiety and alarm which he might have shown in the case of a near and dear friend. And yet, when this stranger was revealed as a relation, he had displayed an amazement equal to her own! What explanation could reconcile such contradictions as these?

As for Carmina, her conduct complicated the mystery.

What was she doing at a concert, when she ought to have been on her way to her aunt's house? Why, if she must faint when the hot room had not overpowered anyone else, had she failed to recover in the usual way? There she lay on the sofa, alternately flushing and turning pale when she was spoken to; ill at ease in the most comfortable house in London; timid and confused under the care of her best friends. Making all allowance for a sensitive temperament, could a long journey from Italy, and a childish fright at seeing a dog run over, account for such a state of things as this?

Annoyed and perplexed--but yet far too prudent to commit herself ignorantly to inquiries which might lead to future embarrassment--Mrs. Gallilee tried suggestive small talk as a means of enlightenment. The wrinkled duenna, sitting miserably on satin supported by frail gilt legs, seemed to take her tone of feeling from her young mistress, exactly as she took her orders. Mrs.

Gallilee spoke to her in English, and spoke to her in Italian--and could make nothing of the experiment in either case. The wild old creature seemed to be afraid to look at her.

Ovid himself proved to be just as difficult to fathom, in another way

He certainly answered when his mother spoke to him, but always briefly, and in the same absent tone. He asked no questions, and offered no explanations. The sense of embarrassment, on his side, had produced unaccountable changes. He showed the needful attention to Carmina, with a silent gentleness which presented him in a new character. His customary manner with ailing persons, women as well as men, was rather abrupt: his quick perception hurried him into taking the words out of their mouths (too pleasantly to give offence) when they were describing their symptoms. There he sat now, contemplating his pale little cousin, with a patient attention wonderful to see; listening to the commonplace words which dropped at intervals from her lips, as if--in his state of health, and with the doubtful prospect which it implied--there were no serious interests to occupy his mind.

Mrs. Gallilee could endure it no longer.

If she had not deliberately starved her imagination, and emptied her heart of any tenderness of feeling which it might once have possessed, her son's odd behaviour would have interested instead of perplexing her. As it was, her scientific education left her as completely in the dark, where questions of sentiment were concerned, as if her experience of humanity, in its relation to love, had been experience in the cannibal islands. She decided on leaving her niece to repose, and on taking her son away with her.

"In your present state of health, Ovid," she began, "Carmina must not accept your professional advice."

Something in those words stung Ovid's temper.

"My professional advice?" he repeated. "You talk as if she was seriously ill!"

Carmina's sweet smile stopped him there.

"We don't know what may happen," she said, playfully.

"God forbid that should happen!" He spoke so fervently that the women all looked at him in surprise.

Mrs. Gallilee turned to her niece, and proceeded quietly with what she had to say.

"Ovid is so sadly overworked, my dear, that I actually rejoice in his giving up practice, and going away from us to-morrow. We will leave you for the present with your old friend. Pray ring, if you want anything." She kissed her hand to Carmina, and, beckoning to her son, advanced towards the door.

Teresa looked at her, and suddenly looked away again. Mrs. Gallilee stopped on her way out, at a chiffonier, and altered the arrangement of some of the china on it. The duenna followed on tiptoe--folded her thumb and two middle fingers into the palm of her hand--and, stretching out the forefinger and the little finger, touched Mrs. Gallilee on the back, so softly that she was unaware of it. "The Evil Eye," Teresa whispered to herself in Italian, as she stole back to her place.

Ovid lingered near his cousin: neither of them had seen what Teresa had done. He rose reluctantly to go. Feeling his little attentions gratefully, Carmina checked him with innocent familiarity as he left his chair. "I must thank you," she said, simply; "it seems hard indeed that you, who cure others, should suffer from illness yourself."

Teresa, watching them with interest, came a little nearer.

She could now examine Ovid's face with close and jealous scrutiny. Mrs. Gallilee reminded her son that she was waiting for him. He had some last words yet to say. The duenna drew back from the sofa, still looking at Ovid: she muttered to herself, "Holy Teresa, my patroness, show me that man's soul in his face!" At last, Ovid took his leave. "I shall call and see how you are to-morrow," he said, "before I go." He nodded kindly to Teresa. Instead of being satisfied with that act of courtesy, she wanted something more. "May I shake hands?" she asked. Mrs. Gallilee was a Liberal in politics; never had her principles been tried, as they were tried when she heard those words. Teresa wrung Ovid's hand with tremulous energy--still intent on reading his character in his face. He asked her, smiling, what she saw to interest her. "A good man, I hope," she answered, sternly. Carmina and Ovid were amused. Teresa rebuked them, as if they had been children. "Laugh at some fitter time," she said, "not now."

Descending the stairs, Mrs. Gallilee and Ovid met the footman. "Mr. Mool is in the library, ma'am," the man said.

"Have you anything to do, Ovid, for the next half-hour?" his mother asked.

"Do you wish me to see Mr. Mool? If it's law-business, I am afraid I shall not be of much use."

"The lawyer is here by appointment, with a copy of your late uncle's Will," Mrs. Gallilee answered. "You may have some interest in it. I think you ought to hear it read."

Ovid showed no inclination to adopt this proposal. He asked an idle question. "I heard of their finding the Will--are there any romantic circumstances?"

Mrs. Gallilee surveyed her son with an expression of good-humoured contempt. "What a boy you are, in some things! Have you been reading a novel lately? My dear, when the people in Italy made up their minds, at last, to have the furniture in your uncle's room taken to pieces, they found the Will. It had slipped behind a drawer, in a rotten old cabinet, full of useless papers. Nothing romantic (thank God!), and nothing (as Mr. Mool's letter tells me) that can lead to misunderstandings or disputes."

Ovid's indifference was not to be conquered. He left it to his mother to send him word if he had a legacy "I am not as much interested in it as you are," he explained. "Plenty of money left to you, of course?" He was evidently thinking all the time of something else.

Mrs. Gallilee stopped in the hall, with an air of downright alarm.

"Your mind is in a dreadful state," she said.

"Have you really forgotten what I told you, only yesterday? The Will appoints me Carmina's guardian."

He had plainly forgotten it--he started, when his mother recalled the circumstance. "Curious," he said to himself, "that I was not reminded of it, when I saw Carmina's rooms prepared for her." His mother, anxiously looking at him, observed that his face brightened when he spoke of Carmina. He suddenly changed his mind.

"Make allowances for an overworked man," he said. "You are quite right. I ought to hear the Will read--I am at your service."

Even Mrs. Gallilee now drew the right inference at last. She made no remark. Something seemed to move feebly under her powder and paint. Soft emotion trying to find its way to the surface? Impossible!

As they entered the library together, Miss Minerva returned to the schoolroom. She had lingered on the upper landing, and had heard the conversation between mother and son.