

CHAPTER VIII.

Mrs. Gallilee made her appearance in the library--and Mr. Mool's pulse accelerated its beat. Mrs. Gallilee's son followed her into the room--and Mr. Mool's pulse steadied itself again. By special arrangement with the lawyer, Ovid had been always kept in ignorance of his mother's affairs. No matter how angry she might be in the course of the next few minutes, she could hardly express her indignation in the presence of her son.

Joyous anticipation has the happiest effect on female beauty. Mrs. Gallilee looked remarkably well, that day. Having rather a round and full face, she wore her hair (coloured from youthful nature) in a fringe across her forehead, balanced on either side by clusters of charming little curls. Her mourning for Robert was worthy of its Parisian origin; it showed to perfect advantage the bloom of her complexion and the whiteness of her neck--also worthy of their Parisian origin. She looked like a portrait of the period of Charles the Second, endowed with life.

"And how do you do, Mr. Mool? Have you been looking at my ferns?"

The ferns were grouped at the entrance, leading from the library to the conservatory. They had certainly not escaped the notice of the lawyer, who possessed a hot-house of his own, and who was an enthusiast in botany. It now occurred to him--if he innocently provoked embarrassing results--that ferns might be turned to useful and harmless account as a means of introducing a change of subject. "Even when she hasn't spoken a word," thought Mr. Mool, consulting his recollections, "I have felt her eyes go through me like a knife."

"Spare us the technicalities, please," Mrs. Gallilee continued, pointing to the documents on the table. "I want to be exactly acquainted with the duties I owe to Carmina. And, by the way, I naturally feel some interest in knowing whether Lady Northlake has any place in the Will."

Mrs. Gallilee never said "my sister," never spoke in the family circle of "Susan." The inexhaustible sense of injury, aroused by that magnificent marriage, asserted itself in keeping her sister at the full distance implied by never forgetting her title.

"The first legacy mentioned in the Will," said Mr. Mool, "is a legacy to Lady Northlake." Mrs. Gallilee's face turned as hard as iron. "One hundred

pounds," Mr. Mool continued, "to buy a mourning ring." Mrs. Gallilee's eyes became eloquent in an instant, and said as if in words, "Thank Heaven!"

"So like your uncle's unpretending good sense," she remarked to her son. "Any other legacy to Lady Northlake would have been simply absurd. Yes, Mr. Mool? Perhaps my name follows?"

Mr. Mool cast a side-look at the ferns. He afterwards described his sensations as reminding him of previous experience in a dentist's chair, at the awful moment when the operator says "Let me look," and has his devilish instrument hidden in his hand. The "situation," to use the language of the stage, was indeed critical enough already. Ovid added to the horror of it by making a feeble joke. "What will you take for your chance, mother?"

Before bad became worse, Mr. Mool summoned the energy of despair. He wisely read the exact words of the Will, this time: "And I give and bequeath to my sister, Mrs. Maria Gallilee, one hundred pounds."

Ovid's astonishment could only express itself in action. He started to his feet.

Mr. Mool went on reading. "Free of legacy duty, to buy a mourning ring--"

"Impossible!" Ovid broke out.

Mr. Mool finished the sentence. "And my sister will understand the motive which animates me in making this bequest." He laid the Will on the table, and ventured to look up. At the same time, Ovid turned to his mother, struck by the words which had been just read, and eager to inquire what their meaning might be.

Happily for themselves, the two men never knew what the preservation of their tranquillity owed to that one moment of delay.

If they had looked at Mrs. Gallilee, when she was first aware of her position in the Will, they might have seen the incarnate Devil self-revealed in a human face. They might have read, in her eyes and on her lips, a warning hardly less fearful than the unearthly writing on the wall, which told the Eastern Monarch of his coming death. "See this woman, and know what I can do with her, when she has repelled her guardian angel, and her soul is left to ME."

But the revelation showed itself, and vanished. Her face was composed

again, when her son and her lawyer looked at it. Her voice was under control; her inbred capacity for deceit was ready for action. All those formidable qualities in her nature, which a gentler and wiser training than hers had been might have held in check--by development of preservative influences that lay inert--were now driven back to their lurking-place; leaving only the faintest traces of their momentary appearance on the surface. Her breathing seemed to be oppressed; her eyelids drooped heavily--and that was all.

"Is the room too hot for you?" Ovid asked.

It was a harmless question, but any question annoyed her at that moment. "Nonsense!" she exclaimed irritably.

"The atmosphere of the conservatory is rich in reviving smells," Mr. Mool remarked. "Do I detect, among the delightful perfumes which reach us, the fragrant root-stock of the American fern? If I am wrong, Mrs. Gallilee, may I send you some of the sweet-smelling Maidenhair from my own little hot-house?" He smiled persuasively. The ferns were already justifying his confidence in their peace-making virtues, turned discreetly to account. Those terrible eyes rested on him mercifully. Not even a covert allusion to his silence in the matter of the legacy escaped her. Did the lawyer's artlessly abrupt attempt to change the subject warn her to be on her guard? In any case, she thanked him with the readiest courtesy for his kind offer. Might she trouble him in the meantime to let her see the Will?

She read attentively the concluding words of the clause in which her name appeared--"My sister will understand the motive which animates me in making this bequest"--and then handed back the Will to Mr. Mool. Before Ovid could ask for it, she was ready with a plausible explanation. "When your uncle became a husband and a father," she said, "those claims on him were paramount. He knew that a token of remembrance (the smaller the better) was all I could accept, if I happened to outlive him. Please go on, Mr. Mool."

In one respect, Ovid resembled his late uncle. They both belonged to that high-minded order of men, who are slow to suspect, and therefore easy to deceive. Ovid tenderly took his mother's hand.

"I ought to have known it," he said, "without obliging you to tell me."

Mrs. Gallilee did not blush. Mr. Mool did.

"Go on!" Mrs. Gallilee repeated. Mr. Mool looked at Ovid. "The next name, Mr. Vere, is yours."

"Does my uncle remember me as he has remembered my mother?" asked Ovid.

"Yes, sir--and let me tell you, a very pretty compliment is attached to the bequest. 'It is needless' (your late uncle says) 'to leave any more important proof of remembrance to my nephew. His father has already provided for him; and, with his rare abilities, he will make a second fortune by the exercise of his profession.' Most gratifying, Mrs. Gallilee, is it not? The next clause provides for the good old housekeeper Teresa, and for her husband if he survives her, in the following terms--"

Mrs. Gallilee was becoming impatient to hear more of herself. "We may, I think, pass over that," she suggested, "and get to the part of it which relates to Carmina and me. Don't think I am impatient; I am only desirous--"

The growling of a dog in the conservatory interrupted her. "That tiresome creature!" she said sharply; "I shall be obliged to get rid of him!"

Mr. Mool volunteered to drive the dog out of the conservatory. Mrs. Gallilee, as irritable as ever, stopped him at the door.

"Don't, Mr. Mool! That dog's temper is not to be trusted. He shows it with Miss Minerva, my governess--growls just in that way whenever he sees her. I dare say he smells you. There! Now he barks! You are only making him worse. Come back!"

Being at the door, gentle Mr. Mool tried the ferns as peace-makers once more. He gathered a leaf, and returned to his place in a state of meek admiration. "The flowering fern!" he said softly.

"A really fine specimen, Mrs. Gallilee, of the *Osmunda Regalis*. What a world of beauty in this bipinnate frond! One hardly knows where the stalk ends and the leaf begins!"

The dog, a bright little terrier, came trotting into the library. He saluted the company briskly with his tail, not excepting Mr. Mool. No growl, or approach to a growl, now escaped him. The manner in which he laid himself down at Mrs. Gallilee's feet completely refuted her aspersion on his temper. Ovid suggested that he might have been provoked by a cat in the conservatory.

Meanwhile, Mr. Mool turned over a page of the Will, and arrived at the clauses relating to Carmina and her guardian.

"It may not be amiss," he began, "to mention, in the first place, that the fortune left to Miss Carmina amounts, in round numbers, to one hundred and thirty thousand pounds. The Trustees--"

"Skip the Trustees," said Mrs. Gallilee.

Mr. Mool skipped.

"In the matter of the guardian," he said, "there is a preliminary clause, in the event of your death or refusal to act, appointing Lady Northlake--"

"Skip Lady Northlake," said Mrs. Gallilee.

Mr. Mool skipped.

"You are appointed Miss Carmina's guardian, until she comes of age," he resumed. "If she marries in that interval--"

He paused to turn over a page. Not only Mrs. Gallilee, but Ovid also, now listened with the deepest interest.

"If she marries in that interval, with her guardian's approval--"

"Suppose I don't approve of her choice?" Mrs. Gallilee interposed.

Ovid looked at his mother--and quickly looked away again. The restless little terrier caught his eye, and jumped up to be patted. Ovid was too pre-occupied to notice this modest advance. The dog's eyes and ears expressed reproachful surprise. His friend Ovid had treated him rudely for the first time in his life.

"If the young lady contracts a matrimonial engagement of which you disapprove," Mr. Mool answered, "you are instructed by the testator to assert your reasons in the presence of--well, I may describe it, as a family council; composed of Mr. Gallilee, and of Lord and Lady Northlake."

"Excessively foolish of Robert," Mrs. Gallilee remarked. "And what, Mr. Mool, is this meddling council of three to do?"

"A majority of the council, Mrs. Gallilee, is to decide the question absolutely.

If the decision confirms your view, and if Miss Carmina still persists in her resolution notwithstanding--"

"Am I to give way?" Mrs. Gallilee asked.

"Not until your niece comes of age, ma'am. Then, she decides for herself."

"And inherits the fortune?"

"Only an income from part of it--if her marriage is disapproved by her guardian and her relatives."

"And what becomes of the rest?"

"The whole of it," said Mr. Mool, "will be invested by the Trustees, and will be divided equally, on her death, among her children."

"Suppose she leaves no children?"

"That case is provided for, ma'am, by the last clause. I will only say now, that you are interested in the result."

Mrs. Gallilee turned swiftly and sternly to her son. "When I am dead and gone," she said, "I look to you to defend my memory."

"To defend your memory?" Ovid repeated, wondering what she could possibly mean.

"If I do become interested in the disposal of Robert's fortune--which God forbid!--can't you foresee what will happen?" his mother inquired bitterly. "Lady Northlake will say, 'Maria intrigued for this!'"

Mr. Mool looked doubtfully at the ferns. No! His vegetable allies were not strong enough to check any further outpouring of such family feeling as this. Nothing was to be trusted, in the present emergency, but the superior authority of the Will.

"Pardon me," he said; "there are some further instructions, Mrs. Gallilee, which, as I venture to think, exhibit your late brother's well-known liberality of feeling in a very interesting light. They relate to the provision made for his daughter, while she is residing under your roof. Miss Carmina is to have the services of the best masters, in finishing her education."

"Certainly!" cried Mrs. Gallilee, with the utmost fervour.

"And the use of a carriage to herself, whenever she may require it."

"No, Mr. Mool! Two carriages--in such a climate as this. One open, and one closed."

"And to defray these and other expenses, the Trustees are authorized to place at your disposal one thousand a year."

"Too much! too much!"

Mr. Mool might have agreed with her--if he had nor known that Robert Graywell had thought of his sister's interests, in making this excessive provision for expenses incurred on his daughter's account.

"Perhaps, her dresses and her pocket money are included?" Mrs. Gallilee resumed.

Mr. Mool smiled, and shook his head. "Mr. Graywell's generosity has no limits," he said, "where his daughter is concerned. Miss Carmina is to have five hundred a year for pocket-money and dresses."

Mrs. Gallilee appealed to the sympathies of her son. "Isn't it touching?" she said. "Dear Carmina! my own people in Paris shall make her dresses. Well, Mr. Mool?"

"Allow me to read the exact language of the Will next," Mr. Mool answered. "'If her sweet disposition leads her into exceeding her allowance, in the pursuit of her own little charities, my Trustees are hereby authorized, at their own discretion, to increase the amount, within the limit of another five hundred pounds annually.' It sounds presumptuous, perhaps, on my part," said Mr. Mool, venturing on a modest confession of enthusiasm, "but one can't help thinking, What a good father! what a good child!"

Mrs. Gallilee had another appropriate remark ready on her lips, when the unlucky dog interrupted her once more. He made a sudden rush into the conservatory, barking with all his might. A crashing noise followed the dog's outbreak, which sounded like the fall of a flower-pot.

Ovid hurried into the conservatory--with the dog ahead of him, tearing down the steps which led into the back garden.

The pot lay broken on the tiled floor. Struck by the beauty of the flower that grew in it, he stooped to set it up again. If, instead of doing this, he had advanced at once to the second door, he would have seen a lady hastening into the house; and, though her back view only was presented, he could hardly have failed to recognize Miss Minerva. As it was, when he reached the door, the garden was empty.

He looked up at the house, and saw Carmina at the open window of her bedroom.

The sad expression on that sweet young face grieved him. Was she thinking of her happy past life? or of the doubtful future, among strangers in a strange country? She noticed Ovid--and her eyes brightened. His customary coldness with women melted instantly: he kissed his hand to her. She returned the salute (so familiar to her in Italy) with her gentle smile, and looked back into the room. Teresa showed herself at the window. Always following her impulses without troubling herself to think first, the duenna followed them now. "We are dull up here," she called out. "Come back to us, Mr. Ovid." The words had hardly been spoken before they both turned from the window. Teresa pointed significantly into the room. They disappeared.

Ovid went back to the library.

"Anybody listening?" Mr. Mool inquired.

"I have not discovered anybody, but I doubt if a stray cat could have upset that heavy flower-pot." He looked round him as he made the reply. "Where is my mother?" he asked.

Mrs. Gallilee had gone upstairs, eager to tell Carmina of the handsome allowance made to her by her father. Having answered in these terms, Mr. Mool began to fold up the Will--and suddenly stopped.

"Very inconsiderate, on my part," he said; "I forgot, Mr. Ovid, that you haven't heard the end of it. Let me give you a brief abstract. You know, perhaps, that Miss Carmina is a Catholic? Very natural--her poor mother's religion. Well, sir, her good father forgets nothing. All attempts at proselytizing are strictly forbidden."

Ovid smiled. His mother's religious convictions began and ended with the inorganic matter of the earth.

"The last clause," Mr. Mool proceeded, "seemed to agitate Mrs. Gallilee quite

painfully. I reminded her that her brother had no near relations living, but Lady Northlake and herself. As to leaving money to my lady, in my lord's princely position--"

"Pardon me," Ovid interposed, "what is there to agitate my mother in this?"

Mr. Mool made his apologies for not getting sooner to the point, with the readiest good-will. "Professional habit, Mr. Ovid," he explained. "We are apt to be wordy--paid, in fact, at so much a folio, for so many words!--and we like to clear the ground first. Your late uncle ends his Will, by providing for the disposal of his fortune, in two possible events, as follows: Miss Carmina may die unmarried, or Miss Carmina (being married) may die without offspring."

Seeing the importance of the last clause now, Ovid stopped him again. "Do I remember the amount of the fortune correctly?" he asked. "Was it a hundred and thirty thousand pounds?"

"Yes."

"And what becomes of all that money, if Carmina never marries, or if she leaves no children?"

"In either of those cases, sir, the whole of the money goes to Mrs. Gallilee and her daughters."