

## **VOLUME TWO**

### **CHAPTER XXI.**

On the afternoon of the day that followed Ovid's departure, the three ladies of the household were in a state of retirement--each in her own room.

The writing-table in Mrs. Gallilee's boudoir was covered with letters. Her banker's pass-book and her cheque-book were on the desk; Mr. Gallilee's affairs having been long since left as completely in the hands of his wife, as if Mr. Gallilee had been dead. A sheet of paper lay near the cheque-book, covered with calculations divided into two columns. The figures in the right-hand column were contained in one line at the top of the page. The figures in the left-hand column filled the page from top to bottom. With her fan in her hand, and her pen in the ink-bottle, Mrs. Gallilee waited, steadily thinking.

It was the hottest day of the season. All the fat women in London fanned themselves on that sultry afternoon; and Mrs. Gallilee followed the general example. When she looked to the right, her calculations showed the balance at the bank. When she looked to the left, her calculations showed her debts: some partially paid, some not paid at all. If she wearied of the prospect thus presented, and turned for relief to her letters, she was confronted by polite requests for money; from tradespeople in the first place, and from secretaries of fashionable Charities in the second. Here and there, by way of variety, were invitations to parties, representing more pecuniary liabilities, incurred for new dresses, and for hospitalities acknowledged by dinners and conversaziones at her own house. Money that she owed, money that she must spend; nothing but outlay of money--and where was it to come from?

So far as her pecuniary resources were concerned, she was equally removed from hope and fear. Twice a year the same income flowed in regularly from the same investments. What she could pay at any future time was far more plainly revealed to her than what she might owe. With tact and management it would be possible to partially satisfy creditors, and keep up appearances for six months more. To that conclusion her reflections led her, and left her to write cheques.

And after the six months--what then?

Having first completed her correspondence with the tradespeople, and having next decided on her contributions to the Charities, this iron matron took up her fan again, cooled herself, and met the question of the future face to face.

Ovid was the central figure in the prospect.

If he lived devoted to his profession, and lived unmarried, there was a last resource always left to Mrs. Gallilee. For years past, his professional gains had added largely to the income which he had inherited from his father. Unembarrassed by expensive tastes, he had some thousands of pounds put by--for the simple reason that he was at a loss what else to do with them. Thus far, her brother's generosity had spared Mrs. Gallilee the hard necessity of making a confession to her son. As things were now, she must submit to tell the humiliating truth; and Ovid (with no wife to check his liberal instincts) would do what Ovid's uncle (with no wife living to check his liberal instincts) had done already.

There was the prospect, if her son remained a bachelor. But her son had resolved to marry Carmina. What would be the result if she was weak enough to allow it?

There would be, not one result, but three results. Natural; Legal; Pecuniary.

The natural result would be--children.

The legal result (if only one of those children lived) would be the loss to Mrs. Gallilee and her daughters of the splendid fortune reserved for them in the Will, if Carmina died without leaving offspring.

The pecuniary result would be (adding the husband's income to the wife's) about eight thousand a year for the young married people.

And how much for a loan, applicable to the mother-in-law's creditors? Judging Carmina by the standard of herself--by what other standard do we really judge our fellow-creatures, no matter how clever we may be?--Mrs. Gallilee decided that not one farthing would be left to help her to pay debts, which were steadily increasing with every new concession that she made to the claims of society. Young Mrs. Ovid Vere, at the head of a household, would have the grand example of her other aunt before her eyes. Although her place of residence might not be a palace, she would be a poor creature

indeed, if she failed to spend eight thousand a year, in the effort to be worthy of the social position of Lady Northlake. Add to these results of Ovid's contemplated marriage the loss of a thousand a year, secured to the guardian by the Will, while the ward remained under her care--and the statement of disaster would be complete. "We must leave this house, and submit to be Lady Northlake's poor relations--there is the price I pay for it, if Ovid and Carmina become man and wife."

She quietly laid aside her fan, as the thought in her completed itself in this form.

The trivial action, and the look which accompanied it, had a sinister meaning of their own, beyond the reach of words. And Ovid was already on the sea. And Teresa was far away in Italy.

The clock on the mantelpiece struck five; the punctual parlour-maid appeared with her mistress's customary cup of tea. Mrs. Gallilee asked for the governess. The servant answered that Miss Minerva was in her room.

"Where are the young ladies?"

"My master has taken them out for a walk."

"Have they had their music lesson?"

"Not yet, ma'am. Mr. Le Frank left word yesterday that he would come at six this evening."

"Does Mr. Gallilee know that?"

"I heard Miss Minerva tell my master, while I was helping the young ladies to get ready."

"Very well. Ask Miss Minerva to come here, and speak to me."

Miss Minerva sat at the open window of her bedroom, looking out vacantly at the backs of houses, in the street behind Fairfield Gardens.

The evil spirit was the dominant spirit in her again. She, too, was thinking of Ovid and Carmina. Her memory was busy with the parting scene on the previous day.

The more she thought of all that had happened in that short space of time,

the more bitterly she reproached herself. Her one besetting weakness had openly degraded her, without so much as an attempt at resistance on her part. The fear of betraying herself if she took leave of the man she secretly loved, in the presence of his family, had forced her to ask a favour of Carmina, and to ask it under circumstances which might have led her rival to suspect the truth. Admitted to a private interview with Ovid, she had failed to control her agitation; and, worse still, in her ungovernable eagerness to produce a favourable impression on him at parting, she had promised--honestly promised, in that moment of impulse--to make Carmina's happiness her own peculiar care! Carmina, who had destroyed in a day the hope of years! Carmina, who had taken him away from her; who had clung round him when he ran upstairs, and had kissed him--fervently, shamelessly kissed him--before the servants in the hall!

She started to her feet, roused to a frenzy of rage by her own recollections. Standing at the window, she looked down at the pavement of the courtyard--it was far enough below to kill her instantly if she fell on it. Through the heat of her anger there crept the chill and stealthy prompting of despair. She leaned over the window-sill--she was not afraid--she might have done it, but for a trifling interruption. Somebody spoke outside.

It was the parlour-maid. Instead of entering the room, she spoke through the open door. The woman was one of Miss Minerva's many enemies in the house. "Mrs. Gallilee wishes to see you," she said--and shut the door again, the instant the words were out of her mouth.

Mrs. Gallilee!

The very name was full of promise at that moment. It suggested hope--merciless hope.

She left the window, and consulted her looking-glass. Even to herself, her haggard face was terrible to see. She poured eau-de-cologne and water into her basin, and bathed her burning head and eyes. Her shaggy black hair stood in need of attention next. She took almost as much pains with it as if she had been going into the presence of Ovid himself. "I must make a calm appearance," she thought, still as far as ever from suspecting that her employer had guessed her secret, "or his mother may find me out." Her knees trembled under her. She sat down for a minute to rest.

Was she merely wanted for some ordinary domestic consultation? or was there really a chance of hearing the question of Ovid and Carmina brought forward at the coming interview?

She believed what she hoped: she believed that the time had come when Mrs. Gallilee had need of an ally--perhaps of an accomplice. Only let her object be the separation of the two cousins--and Miss Minerva was eager to help her, in either capacity. Suppose she was too cautious to mention her object? Miss Minerva was equally ready for her employer, in that case. The doubt which had prompted her fruitless suggestions to Carmina, when they were alone in the young girl's room--the doubt whether a clue to the discovery of Mrs. Gallilee's motives might not be found, in that latter part of the Will which she had failed to overhear--was as present as ever in the governess's mind. "The learned lady is not infallible," she thought as she entered Mrs. Gallilee's room. "If one unwary word trips over her tongue, I shall pick it up!"

Mrs. Gallilee's manner was encouraging at the outset. She had left her writing-table; and she now presented herself, reclining in an easy chair, weary and discouraged--the picture of a woman in want of a helpful friend.

"My head aches with adding up figures, and writing letters," she said. "I wish you would finish my correspondence for me."

Miss Minerva took her place at the desk. She at once discovered the unfinished correspondence to be a false pretence. Three cheques for charitable subscriptions, due at that date, were waiting to be sent to three secretaries, with the customary letters. In five minutes, the letters were ready for the post. "Anything more?" Miss Minerva asked.

"Not that I remember. Do you mind giving me my fan? I feel perfectly helpless--I am wretchedly depressed to-day."

"The heat, perhaps?"

"No. The expenses. Every year, the demands on our resources seem to increase. On principle, I dislike living up to our income--and I am obliged to do it."

Here, plainly revealed to the governess's experienced eyes, was another false pretence--used to introduce the true object of the interview, as something which might accidentally suggest itself in the course of conversation. Miss Minerva expressed the necessary regret with innocent readiness. "Might I suggest economy?" she asked with impenetrable gravity.

"Admirably advised," Mrs. Gallilee admitted; "but how is it to be done? Those

subscriptions, for instance, are more than I ought to give. And what happens if I lower the amount? I expose myself to unfavourable comparison with other people of our rank in society."

Miss Minerva still patiently played the part expected of her. "You might perhaps do with only one carriage-horse," she remarked.

"My good creature, look at the people who have only one carriage-horse! Situated as I am, can I descend to that level? Don't suppose I care two straws about such things, myself. My one pride and pleasure in life is the pride and pleasure of improving my mind. But I have Lady Northlake for a sister; and I must not be entirely unworthy of my family connections. I have two daughters; and I must think of their interests. In a few years, Maria will be presented at Court. Thanks to you, she will be one of the most accomplished girls in England. Think of Maria's mother in a one-horse chaise. Dear child! tell me all about her lessons. Is she getting on as well as ever?"

"Examine her yourself, Mrs. Gallilee. I can answer for the result."

"No, Miss Minerva! I have too much confidence in you to do anything of the kind. Besides, in one of the most important of Maria's accomplishments, I am entirely dependent on yourself. I know nothing of music. You are not responsible for her progress in that direction. Still, I should like to know if you are satisfied with Maria's music?"

"Quite satisfied."

"You don't think she is getting--how can I express it?--shall I say beyond the reach of Mr. Le Frank's teaching?"

"Certainly not."

"Perhaps you would consider Mr. Le Frank equal to the instruction of an older and more advanced pupil than Maria?"

Thus far, Miss Minerva had answered the questions submitted to her with well-concealed indifference. This last inquiry roused her attention. Why did Mrs. Gallilee show an interest, for the first time, in Mr. Le Frank's capacity as a teacher? Who was this "older and more advanced pupil," for whose appearance in the conversation the previous questions had so smoothly prepared the way? Feeling delicate ground under her, the governess advanced cautiously.

"I have always thought Mr. Le Frank an excellent teacher," she said.

"Can you give me no more definite answer than that?" Mrs. Gallilee asked.

"I am quite unacquainted, madam, with the musical proficiency of the pupil to whom you refer. I don't even know (which adds to my perplexity) whether you are speaking of a lady or a gentleman."

"I am speaking," said Mrs. Gallilee quietly, "of my niece, Carmina."

Those words set all further doubt at rest in Miss Minerva's mind. Introduced by such elaborate preparation, the allusion to Carmina's name could only lead, in due course, to the subject of Carmina's marriage. By indirect methods of approach, Mrs. Gallilee had at last reached the object that she had in view.