

CHAPTER XXII.

There was an interval of silence between the two ladies.

Mrs. Gallilee waited for Miss Minerva to speak next. Miss Minerva waited to be taken into Mrs. Gallilee's confidence. The sparrows twittered in the garden; and, far away in the schoolroom, the notes of the piano announced that the music lesson had begun.

"The birds are noisy," said Mrs. Gallilee.

"And the piano sounds out of tune," Miss Minerva remarked.

There was no help for it. Either Mrs. Gallilee must return to the matter in hand---or the matter in hand must drop.

"I am afraid I have not made myself understood," she resumed.

"I am afraid I have been very stupid," Miss Minerva confessed.

Resigning herself to circumstances, Mrs. Gallilee put the adjourned question under a new form. "We were speaking of Mr. Le Frank as a teacher, and of my niece as a pupil," she said. "Have you been able to form any opinion of Carmina's musical abilities?"

Miss Minerva remained as prudent as ever. She answered, "I have had no opportunity of forming an opinion."

Mrs. Gallilee met this cautious reply by playing her trump card. She handed a letter to Miss Minerva. "I have received a proposal from Mr. Le Frank," she said. "Will you tell me what you think of it?"

The letter was short and servile. Mr. Le Frank presented his best respects. If Mrs. Gallilee's charming niece stood in need of musical instruction, he ventured to hope that he might have the honour and happiness of superintending her studies. Looking back to the top of the letter, the governess discovered that this modest request bore a date of eight days since. "Have you written to Mr. Le Frank?" she asked.

"Only to say that I will take his request into consideration," Mrs. Gallilee replied.

Had she waited for her son's departure, before she committed herself to a decision? On the chance that this might be the case, Miss Minerva consulted her memory. When Mrs. Gallilee first decided on engaging a music-master to teach the children, her son had disapproved of employing Mr. Le Frank. This circumstance might possibly be worth bearing in mind. "Do you see any objection to accepting Mr. Le Frank's proposal?" Mrs. Gallilee asked. Miss Minerva saw an objection forthwith, and, thanks to her effort of memory, discovered an especially mischievous way of stating it. "I feel a certain delicacy in offering an opinion," she said modestly.

Mrs. Gallilee was surprised. "Do you allude to Mr. Le Frank?" she inquired.

"No. I don't doubt that his instructions would be of service to any young lady."

"Are you thinking of my niece?"

"No, Mrs. Gallilee. I am thinking of your son."

"In what way, if you please?"

"In this way. I believe your son would object to employing Mr. Le Frank as Miss Carmina's teacher."

"On musical grounds?"

"No; on personal grounds."

"What do you mean?"

Miss Minerva explained her meaning. "I think you have forgotten what happened, when you first employed Mr. Le Frank to teach Maria and Zoe. His personal appearance produced an unfavourable impression on your son; and Mr. Ovid made certain inquiries which you had not thought necessary. Pardon me if I persist in mentioning the circumstances. I owe it to myself to justify my opinion--an opinion, you will please to remember, that I did not volunteer. Mr. Ovid's investigations brought to light a very unpleasant report, relating to Mr. Le Frank and a young lady who had been one of his pupils."

"An abominable slander, Miss Minerva! I am surprised that you should refer to it."

"I am referring, madam, to the view of the matter taken by Mr. Ovid. If Mr. Le Frank had failed to defend himself successfully, he would of course not have been received into this house. But your son had his own opinion of the defence. I was present at the time, and I heard him say that, if Maria and Zoe had been older, he should have advised employing a music-master who had no false reports against him to contradict. As they were only children, he would say nothing more. That is what I had in my mind, when I gave my opinion. I think Mr. Ovid will be annoyed when he hears that Mr. Le Frank is his cousin's music-master. And, if any foolish gossip reaches him in his absence, I fear it might lead to mischievous results--I mean, to misunderstandings not easily set right by correspondence, and quite likely therefore to lead, in the end, to distrust and jealousy."

There she paused, and crossed her hands on her lap, and waited for what was to come next.

If Mrs. Gallilee could have looked into her mind at that moment as well as into her face, she would have read Miss Minerva's thoughts in these plain terms: "All this time, madam, you have been keeping up appearances in the face of detection. You are going to use Mr. Le Frank as a means of making mischief between Ovid and Carmina. If you had taken me into your confidence, I might have been willing to help you. As it is, please observe that I am not caught in the trap you have set for me. If Mr. Ovid discovers your little plot, you can't lay the blame on your governess's advice."

Mrs. Gallilee felt that she had again measured herself with Miss Minerva, and had again been beaten. She had confidently reckoned on the governess's secret feeling towards her son to encourage, without hesitation or distrust, any project for promoting the estrangement of Ovid and Carmina. There was no alternative now but to put her first obstacle in the way of the marriage, on her own sole responsibility.

"I don't doubt that you have spoken sincerely," she said; "but you have failed to do justice to my son's good sense; and you are--naturally enough, in your position--incapable of estimating his devoted attachment to Carmina." Having planted that sting, she paused to observe the effect. Not the slightest visible result rewarded her. She went on. "Almost the last words he said to me expressed his confidence--his affectionate confidence--in my niece. The bare idea of his being jealous of anybody, and especially of such a person as Mr. Le Frank, is simply ridiculous. I am astonished that you don't see it in that light."

"I should see it in that light as plainly as you do," Miss Minerva quietly replied, "if Mr. Ovid was at home."

"What difference does that make?"

"Excuse me--it makes a great difference, as I think. He has gone away on a long journey, and gone away in bad health. He will have his hours of depression. At such times, trifles are serious things; and even well-meant words--in letters--are sometimes misunderstood. I can offer no better apology for what I have said; and I can only regret that I have made so unsatisfactory a return for your flattering confidence in me."

Having planted her sting, she rose to retire.

"Have you any further commands for me?" she asked.

"I should like to be quite sure that I have not misunderstood you," said Mrs. Gallilee. "You consider Mr. Le Frank to be competent, as director of any young lady's musical studies? Thank you. On the one point on which I wished to consult you, my mind is at ease. Do you know where Carmina is?"

"In her room, I believe."

"Will you have the goodness to send her here?"

"With the greatest pleasure. Good-evening!"

So ended Mrs. Gallilee's first attempt to make use of Miss Minerva, without trusting her.