

CHAPTER XXIX.

Mrs. Gallilee saw her housekeeper as usual, and gave her orders for the day. "If there is anything forgotten," she said, "I must leave it to you. For the next hour or two, don't let me be disturbed."

Some of her letters of the morning were still unread, others required immediate acknowledgment. She was not as ready for her duties as usual. For once, the most unendurably industrious of women was idle, and sat thinking.

Even her unimaginative nature began to tremble on the verge of superstition. Twice, had the subtle force of circumstances defeated her, in the attempt to meddle with the contemplated marriage of her son. By means of the music-master, she had planned to give Ovid jealous reasons for doubting Carmina--and she had failed. By means of the governess, she had planned to give Carmina jealous reasons for doubting Ovid--and she had failed. When some people talked of Fatality, were they quite such fools as she had hitherto supposed them to be? It would be a waste of time to inquire. What next step could she take?

Urged by the intolerable sense of defeat to find reasons for still looking hopefully to the future, the learned Mrs. Gallilee lowered herself to the intellectual level of the most ignorant servant in the house. The modern Muse of Science unconsciously opened her mind to the vulgar belief in luck. She said to herself, as her kitchen-maid might have said, We will see what comes of it, the third time!

Benjulia's letter was among the other letters waiting on the table. She took it up, and read it again.

In her present frame of mind, to find her thoughts occupied by the doctor, was to be reminded of Ovid's strange allusion to his professional colleague, on the day of his departure. Speaking of Carmina, he had referred to one person whom he did not wish her to see in his absence; and that person, he had himself admitted to be Benjulia. He had been asked to state his objection to the doctor--and how had he replied? He had said, "I don't think Benjulia a fit person to be in the company of a young girl."

Why?

There are many men of mature age, who are not fit persons to be in the company of young girls--but they are either men who despise, or men who admire, young girls. Benjulia belonged neither to the one nor to the other of these two classes. Girls were objects of absolute indifference to him--with the one exception of Zo, aged ten. Never yet, after meeting him in society hundreds of times, had Mrs. Gallilee seen him talk to young ladies or even notice young ladies. Ovid's alleged reason for objecting to Benjulia stood palpably revealed as a clumsy excuse.

In the present posture of events, to arrive at that conclusion was enough for Mrs. Gallilee. Without stopping to pursue the idea, she rang the bell, and ordered her carriage to be ready that afternoon, at three o'clock.

Doubtful, and more than doubtful, though it might be, the bare prospect of finding herself possessed, before the day was out, of a means of action capable of being used against Carmina, raised Mrs. Gallilee's spirits. She was ready at last to attend to her correspondence.

One of the letters was from her sister in Scotland. Among other subjects, it referred to Carmina.

"Why won't you let that sweet girl come and stay with us?" Lady Northlake asked. "My daughters are longing for such a companion; and both my sons are ready to envy Ovid the moment they see her. Tell my nephew, when you next write, that I thoroughly understand his falling in love with that gentle pretty creature at first sight."

Carmina's illness was the ready excuse which presented itself in Mrs. Gallilee's reply. With or without an excuse, Lady Northlake was to be resolutely prevented from taking a foremost place in her niece's heart, and encouraging the idea of her niece's marriage. Mrs. Gallilee felt almost pious enough to thank Heaven that her sister's palace in the Highlands was at one end of Great Britain, and her own marine villa at the other!

The marine villa reminded her of the family migration to the sea-side.

When would it be desirable to leave London? Not until her mind was relieved of the heavier anxieties that now weighed on it. Not while events might happen--in connection with the threatening creditors or the contemplated marriage--which would baffle her latest calculations, and make her presence in London a matter of serious importance to her own interests. Miss Minerva, again, was a new obstacle in the way. To take her to the Isle of Wight was not to be thought of for a moment. To dismiss her at once, by

paying the month's salary, might be the preferable course to pursue--but for two objections. In the first place (if the friendly understanding between them really continued) Carmina might communicate with the discarded governess in secret. In the second place, to pay Miss Minerva's salary before she had earned it, was a concession from which Mrs. Gallilee's spite, and Mrs. Gallilee's principles of paltry economy, recoiled in disgust. No! the waiting policy in London, under whatever aspect it might be viewed, was, for the present, the one policy to pursue.

She returned to the demands of her correspondence. Just as she had taken up her pen, the sanctuary of the boudoir was violated by the appearance of a servant.

"What is it now? Didn't the housekeeper tell you that I am not to be disturbed?"

"I beg your pardon, ma'am. My master--"

"What does your master want?"

"He wishes to see you, ma'am."

This was a circumstance entirely without parallel in the domestic history of the house. In sheer astonishment, Mrs. Gallilee pushed away her letters, and said "Show him in."

When the boys of fifty years since were naughty, the schoolmaster of the period was not accustomed to punish them by appealing to their sense of honour. If a boy wanted a flogging, in those days, the educational system seized a cane, or a birch-rod, and gave it to him. Mr. Gallilee entered his wife's room, with the feelings which had once animated him, on entering the schoolmaster's study to be caned. When he said "Good-morning, my dear!" his face presented the expression of fifty years since, when he had said, "Please, sir, let me off this time!"

"Now," said Mrs. Gallilee, "what do you want?"

"Only a little word. How well you're looking, my dear!"

After a sleepless night, followed by her defeat in Carmina's room, Mrs. Gallilee looked, and knew that she looked, ugly and old. And her wretched husband had reminded her of it. "Go on!" she answered sternly.

Mr. Gallilee moistened his dry lips. "I think I'll take a chair, if you will allow me," he said. Having taken his chair (at a respectful distance from his wife), he looked all round the room with the air of a visitor who had never seen it before. "How very pretty!" he remarked softly. "Such taste in colour. I think the carpet was your own design, wasn't it? How chaste!"

"Will you come to the point, Mr. Gallilee?"

"With pleasure, my dear--with pleasure. I'm afraid I smell of tobacco?"

"I don't care if you do!"

This was such an agreeable surprise to Mr. Gallilee, that he got on his legs again to enjoy it standing up. "How kind! Really now, how kind!" He approached Mrs. Gallilee confidentially. "And do you know, my dear, it was one of the most remarkable cigars I ever smoked." Mrs. Gallilee laid down her pen, and eyed him with an annihilating frown. In the extremity of his confusion Mr. Gallilee ventured nearer. He felt the sinister fascination of the serpent in the expression of those awful eyebrows. "How well you are looking! How amazingly well you are looking this morning!" He leered at his learned wife, and patted her shoulder!

For the moment, Mrs. Gallilee was petrified. At his time of life, was this fat and feeble creature approaching her with conjugal endearments? At that early hour of the day, had his guilty lips tasted his favourite champagne, foaming in his well-beloved silver mug, over his much-admired lump of ice? And was this the result?

"Mr. Gallilee!"

"Yes, my dear?"

"Sit down!"

Mr. Gallilee sat down.

"Have you been to the club?"

Mr. Gallilee got up again.

"Sit down!"

Mr. Gallilee sat down. "I was about to say, my dear, that I'll show you over

the club with the greatest pleasure--if that's what you mean."

"If you are not a downright idiot," said Mrs. Gallilee, "understand this! Either say what you have to say, or--" she lifted her hand, and let it down on the writing-table with a slap that made the pens ring in the inkstand--"or, leave the room!"

Mr. Gallilee lifted his hand, and searched in the breast-pocket of his coat. He pulled out his cigar-case, and put it back in a hurry. He tried again, and produced a letter. He looked piteously round the room, in sore need of somebody whom he might appeal to, and ended in appealing to himself. "What sort of temper will she be in?" he whispered.

"What have you got there?" Mrs. Gallilee asked sharply. "One of the letters you had this morning?"

Mr. Gallilee looked at her with admiration. "Wonderful woman!" he said. "Nothing escapes her! Allow me, my dear."

He rose and presented the letter, as if he was presenting a petition. Mrs. Gallilee snatched it out of his hand. Mr. Gallilee went softly back to his chair, and breathed a devout ejaculation. "Oh, Lord!"

It was a letter from one of the tradespeople, whom Mrs. Gallilee had attempted to pacify with a payment "on account." The tradesman felt compelled, in justice to himself, to appeal to Mr. Gallilee, as master of the house (!). It was impossible for him (he submitted with the greatest respect) to accept a payment, which did not amount to one-third of the sum owing to him for more than a twelvemonth. "Wretch!" cried Mrs. Gallilee. "I'll settle his bill, and never employ him again!" She opened her cheque-book, and dipped her pen in the ink. A faint voice meekly protested. Mr. Gallilee was on his legs again. Mr. Gallilee said. "Please don't!"

His incredible rashness silenced his wife. There he stood; his round eyes staring at the cheque-book, his fat cheeks quivering with excitement. "You mustn't do it," he said, with a first and last outburst of courage. "Give me a minute, my dear--oh, good gracious, give me a minute!"

He searched in his pocket again, and produced another letter. His eyes wandered towards the door; drops of perspiration oozed out on his forehead. He laid the second letter on the table; he looked at his wife, and--ran out of the room.

Mrs. Gallilee opened the second letter. Another dissatisfied tradesman? No: creditors far more formidable than the grocer and the butcher. An official letter from the bankers, informing Mr. Gallilee that "the account was overdrawn."

She seized her pass-book, and her paper of calculations. Never yet had her rigid arithmetic committed an error. Column by column she revised her figures--and made the humiliating discovery of her first mistake. She had drawn out all, and more than all, the money deposited in the bank; and the next half-yearly payment of income was not due until Christmas.

There was but one thing to be done--to go at once to the bank. If Ovid had not been in the wilds of Canada, Mrs. Gallilee would have made her confession to him without hesitation. As it was, the servant called a cab, and she made her confession to the bankers.

The matter was soon settled to her satisfaction. It rested (exactly as Miss Minerva had anticipated) with Mr. Gallilee. In the house, he might abdicate his authority to his heart's content. Out of the house, in matters of business, he was master still. His "investments" represented excellent "security;" he had only to say how much he wanted to borrow, and to sign certain papers--and the thing was done.

Mrs. Gallilee went home again, with her pecuniary anxieties at rest for the time. The carriage was waiting for her at the door.

Should she fulfil her intention of visiting Benjulia? She was not a person who readily changed her mind--and, besides, after the troubles of the morning, the drive into the country would be a welcome relief. Hearing that Mr. Gallilee was still at home, she looked in at the smoking-room. Unerring instinct told her where to find her husband, under present circumstances. There he was, enjoying his cigar in comfort, with his coat off and his feet on a chair. She opened the door. "I want you, this evening," she said--and shut the door again; leaving Mr. Gallilee suffocated by a mouthful of his own smoke.

Before getting into the carriage, she only waited to restore her face with a flush of health (from Paris), modified by a sprinkling of pallor (from London). Benjulia's humour was essentially an uncertain humour. It might be necessary to fascinate the doctor.