

CHAPTER XXXIII.

An unusually long day's work at the office had fatigued good Mr. Mool. He pushed aside his papers, and let his weary eyes rest on a glass vase full of flowers on the table--a present from a grateful client. As a man, he enjoyed the lovely colours of the nosegay. As a botanist, he lamented the act which had cut the flowers from their parent stems, and doomed them to a premature death. "I should not have had the heart to do it myself," he thought; "but tastes differ."

The office boy came into the room, with a visiting card in his hand.

"I'm going home to dinner," said Mr. Mool. "The person must call to-morrow."

The boy laid the card on the table. The person was Mrs. Gallilee.

Mrs. Gallilee, at seven o'clock in the evening! Mrs. Gallilee, without a previous appointment by letter! Mr. Mool trembled under the apprehension of some serious family emergency, in imminent need of legal interference. He submitted as a matter of course. "Show the lady in."

Before a word had passed between them, the lawyer's mind was relieved. Mrs. Gallilee shone on him with her sweetest smiles; pressed his hand with her friendliest warmth; admired the nosegay with her readiest enthusiasm. "Quite perfect," she said--"especially the Pansy. The round flat edge, Mr. Mool; the upper petals perfectly uniform--there is a flower that defies criticism! I long to dissect it."

Mr. Mool politely resigned the Pansy to dissection (murderous mutilation, he would have called it, in the case of one of his own flowers), and waited to hear what his learned client might have to say to him.

"I am going to surprise you," Mrs. Gallilee announced. "No--to shock you. No--even that is not strong enough. Let me say, to horrify you."

Mr. Mool's anxieties returned, complicated by confusion. The behaviour of Mrs. Gallilee exhibited the most unaccountable contrast to her language. She showed no sign of those strong emotions to which she had alluded. "How am I to put it?" she went on, with a transparent affectation of embarrassment. "Shall I call it a disgrace to our family?" Mr. Mool started.

Mrs. Gallilee entreated him to compose himself; she approached the inevitable disclosure by degrees. "I think," she said, "you have met Doctor Benjulia at my house?"

"I have had that honour, Mrs. Gallilee. Not a very sociable person--if I may venture to say so."

"Downright rude, Mr. Mool, on some occasions. But that doesn't matter now. I have just been visiting the doctor."

Was this visit connected with the "disgrace to the family?" Mr. Mool ventured to put a question.

"Doctor Benjulia is not related to you, ma'am--is he?"

"Not the least in the world. Please don't interrupt me again. I am, so to speak, laying a train of circumstances before you; and I might leave one of them out. When Doctor Benjulia was a young man--I am returning to my train of circumstances, Mr. Mool--he was at Rome, pursuing his professional studies. I have all this, mind, straight from the doctor himself. At Rome, he became acquainted with my late brother, after the period of his unfortunate marriage. Stop! I have failed to put it strongly enough again. I ought to have said, his disgraceful marriage."

"Really, Mrs. Gallilee--"

"Mr. Mool!"

"I beg your pardon, ma'am."

"Don't mention it. The next circumstance is ready in my mind. One of the doctor's fellow-students (described as being personally an irresistible man) was possessed of abilities which even attracted our unsociable Benjulia. They became friends. At the time of which I am now speaking, my brother's disgusting wife--oh, but I repeat it, Mr. Mool! I say again, his disgusting wife--was the mother of a female child."

"Your niece, Mrs. Gallilee."

"No!"

"Not Miss Carmina?"

"Miss Carmina is no more my niece than she is your niece. Carry your mind back to what I have just said. I mentioned a medical student who was an irresistible man. Miss Carmina's father was that man."

Mr. Mool's astonishment and indignation would have instantly expressed themselves, if he had not been a lawyer. As it was, his professional experience warned him of the imprudence of speaking too soon.

Mrs. Galilee's exultation forced its way outwards. Her eyes glittered; her voice rose. "The law, Mr. Mool! what does the law say?" she broke out. "Is my brother's Will no better than waste-paper? Is the money divided among his only near relations? Tell me! tell me!"

Mr. Mool suddenly plunged his face into his vase of flowers. Did he feel that the air of the office wanted purifying? or was he conscious that his face might betray him unless he hid it? Mrs. Galilee was at no loss to set her own clever interpretation on her lawyer's extraordinary proceeding.

"Take your time," she said with the most patronising kindness. "I know your sensitive nature; I know what I felt myself when this dreadful discovery burst upon me. If you remember, I said I should horrify you. Take your time, my dear sir--pray take your time."

To be encouraged in this way--as if he was the emotional client, and Mrs. Gallilee the impassive lawyer--was more than even Mr. Mool could endure. Shy men are, in the innermost depths of their nature, proud men: the lawyer had his professional pride. He came out of his flowery retreat, with a steady countenance. For the first time in his life, he was not afraid of Mrs. Galilee.

"Before we enter on the legal aspect of the case--" he began.

"The shocking case," Mrs. Gallilee interposed, in the interests of Virtue.

Under any other circumstances Mr. Mool would have accepted the correction. He actually took no notice of it now! "There is one point," he proceeded, "on which I must beg you to enlighten me."

"By all means! I am ready to go into any details, no matter how disgusting they may be."

Mr. Mool thought of certain "ladies" (objects of perfectly needless respect among men) who, being requested to leave the Court, at unmentionable

Trials, persist in keeping their places. It was a relief to him to feel--if his next questions did nothing else--that they would disappoint Mrs. Galilee.

"Am I right in supposing that you believe what you have told me?" he resumed.

"Most assuredly!"

"Is Doctor Benjulia the only person who has spoken to you on the subject?"

"The only person."

"His information being derived from his friend--the fellow-student whom you mentioned just now?"

"In other words," Mrs. Gallilee answered viciously, "the father of the wretched girl who has been foisted on my care."

If Mr. Mool's courage had been in danger of failing him, he would have found it again now. His regard for Carmina, his respect for the memory of her mother, had been wounded to the quick. Strong on his own legal ground, he proceeded as if he was examining a witness in a police court.

"I suppose the doctor had some reason for believing what his friend told him?"

"Ample reason! Vice and poverty generally go together--this man was poor. He showed Doctor Benjulia money received from his mistress--her husband's money, it is needless to say."

"Her motive might be innocent, Mrs. Gallilee. Had the man any letters of hers to show?"

"Letters? From a woman in her position? It's notorious, Mr. Mool, that Italian models don't know how to read or write."

"May I ask if there are any further proofs?"

"You have had proofs enough."

"With all possible respect, ma'am, I deny that."

Mrs. Gallilee had not been asked to enter into disgusting details. Mrs.

Gallilee had been contradicted by her obedient humble servant of other days. She thought it high time to bring the examination to an end.

"If you are determined to believe in the woman's innocence," she said, "without knowing any of the circumstances--"

Mr. Mool went on from bad to worse: he interrupted her now.

"Excuse me, Mrs. Gallilee, I think you have forgotten that one of my autumn holidays, many years since, was spent in Italy. I was in Rome, like Doctor Benjulia, after your brother's marriage. His wife was, to my certain knowledge, received in society. Her reputation was unblemished; and her husband was devoted to her."

"In plain English," said Mrs. Gallilee, "my brother was a poor weak creature--and his wife, when you knew her, had not been found out."

"That is just the difficulty I feel," Mr. Mool rejoined. "How is it that she is only found out now? Years have passed since she died. More years have passed since this attack on her character reached Doctor Benjulia's knowledge. He is an old friend of yours. Why has he only told you of it to-day? I hope I don't offend you by asking these questions?"

"Oh, dear, no! your questions are so easily answered. I never encouraged the doctor to speak of my brother and his wife. The subject was too distasteful to me--and I don't doubt that Doctor Benjulia felt about it as I did."

"Until to-day," the lawyer remarked; "Doctor Benjulia appears to have been quite ready to mention the subject to-day."

"Under special circumstances, Mr. Mool. Perhaps, you will not allow that special circumstances make any difference?"

On the contrary, Mr. Mool made every allowance. At the same time, he waited to hear what the circumstances might be.

But Mrs. Galilee had her reasons for keeping silence. It was impossible to mention Benjulia's reception of her without inflicting a wound on her self-esteem. To begin with, he had kept the door of the room open, and had remained standing. "Have you got Ovid's letters? Leave them here; I'm not fit to look at them now." Those were his first words. There was nothing in the letters which a friend might not read: she accordingly consented to leave them. The doctor had expressed his sense of obligation by bidding her get

into her carriage again, and go. "I have been put in a passion; I have made a fool of myself; I haven't a nerve in my body that isn't quivering with rage. Go! go! go!" There was his explanation. Impenetrably obstinate, Mrs. Galilee faced him--standing between the doctor and the door--without shrinking. She had not driven all the way to Benjulia's house to be sent back again without gaining her object: she had her questions to put to him, and she persisted in pressing them as only a woman can. He was left--with the education of a gentleman against him--between the two vulgar alternatives of turning her out by main force, or of yielding, and getting rid of her decently in that way. At any other time, he would have flatly refused to lower himself to the level of a scandal-mongering woman, by entering on the subject. In his present mood, if pacifying Mrs. Galilee, and ridding himself of Mrs. Gallilee, meant one and the same thing, he was ready, recklessly ready, to let her have her own way. She heard the infamous story, which she had repeated to her lawyer; and she had Lemuel Benjulia's visit, and Mr. Morphew's contemplated attack on Vivisection, to thank for getting her information.

Mr. Mool waited, and waited in vain. He reminded his client of what she had just said.

"You mentioned certain circumstances. May I know what they are?" he asked.

Mrs. Gallilee rose, before she replied.

"Your time is valuable, and my time is valuable," she said. "We shall not convince each other by prolonging our conversation. I came here, Mr. Mool, to ask you a question about the law. Permit me to remind you that I have not had my answer yet. My own impression is that the girl now in my house, not being my brother's child, has no claim on my brother's property? Tell me in two words, if you please--am I right or wrong?"

"I can do it in one word, Mrs. Gallilee. Wrong."

"What!"

Mr. Mool entered on the necessary explanation, triumphing in the reply that he had just made. "It's the smartest thing," he thought, "I ever said in my life."

"While husbands and wives live together," he continued, "the Law holds that all children, born in wedlock, are the husband's children. Even if Miss

Carmina's mother had not been as good and innocent a woman as ever drew the breath of life--"

"That will do, Mr. Mool. You really mean to say that this girl's interest in my brother's Will--"

"Remains quite unaffected, ma'am, by all that you have told me."

"And I am still obliged to keep her under my care?"

"Or," Mr. Mool answered, "to resign the office of guardian, in favour of Lady Northlake--appointed to act, in your place."

"I won't trouble you any further, sir. Good-evening!"

She turned to leave the office. Mr. Mool actually tried to stop her.

"One word more, Mrs. Galilee."

"No; we have said enough already."

Mr. Mool's audacity arrived at its climax. He put his hand on the lock of the office door, and held it shut.

"The young lady, Mrs. Gallilee! I am sure you will never breathe a word of this to the pretty gentle, young lady? Even if it was true; and, as God is my witness, I am sure it's false--"

"Good-evening, Mr. Mool!"

He opened the door, and let her go; her looks and tones told him that remonstrance was worse than useless. From year's end to year's end, this modest and amiable man had never been heard to swear. He swore now. "Damn Doctor Benjulia!" he burst out, in the solitude of his office. His dinner was waiting for him at home. Instead of putting on his hat, he went back to his writing-table. His thoughts projected themselves into the future--and discovered possibilities from which they recoiled. He took up his pen, and began a letter. "To John Gallilee, Esquire: Dear Sir,--Circumstances have occurred, which I am not at liberty to mention, but which make it necessary for me, in justice to my own views and feelings, to withdraw from the position of legal adviser to yourself and family." He paused and considered with himself. "No," he decided; "I may be of some use to that poor child, while I am the family lawyer." He tore up his unfinished letter.

When Mr. Mool got home that night, it was noticed that he had a poor appetite for his dinner. On the other hand, he drank more wine than usual.