

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

"You look hot, sir; have a drink. Old English ale, out of the barrel."

The tone was hearty. He poured out the sparkling ale into a big tumbler, with hospitable good-will. Mr. Mool was completely, and most agreeably, taken by surprise. He too was feeling the influence of the doctor's good humour--enriched in quality by pleasant remembrances of his interview with the cook.

"I live in the suburbs, Doctor Benjulia, on this side of London," Mr. Mool explained; "and I have had a nice walk from my house to yours. If I have done wrong, sir, in visiting you on Sunday, I can only plead that I am engaged in business during the week--"

"All right. One day's the same as another, provided you don't interrupt me. You don't interrupt me now. Do you smoke?"

"No, thank you."

"Do you mind my smoking?"

"I like it, doctor."

"Very amiable on your part, I'm sure. What did you say your name was?"

"Mool."

Benjulia looked at him suspiciously. Was he a physiologist, and a rival? "You're not a doctor--are you?" he said.

"I am a lawyer."

One of the few popular prejudices which Benjulia shared with his inferior fellow-creatures was the prejudice against lawyers. But for his angry recollection of the provocation successfully offered to him by his despicable brother, Mrs. Gallilee would never have found her way into his confidence. But for his hearty enjoyment of the mystification of the cook, Mr. Mool would have been requested to state the object of his visit in writing, and would have gone home again a baffled man. The doctor's holiday amiability had reached its full development indeed, when he allowed a strange lawyer

to sit and talk with him!

"Gentlemen of your profession," he muttered, "never pay visits to people whom they don't know, without having their own interests in view. Mr. Mool, you want something of me. What is it?"

Mr. Mool's professional tact warned him to waste no time on prefatory phrases.

"I venture on my present intrusion," he began, "in consequence of a statement recently made to me, in my office, by Mrs. Gallilee."

"Stop!" cried Benjulia. "I don't like your beginning, I can tell you. Is it necessary to mention the name of that old--?" He used a word, described in dictionaries as having a twofold meaning. (First, "A female of the canine kind." Second, "A term of reproach for a woman.") It shocked Mr. Mool; and it is therefore unfit to be reported.

"Really, Doctor Benjulia!"

"Does that mean that you positively must talk about her?"

Mr. Mool smiled. "Let us say that it may bear that meaning," he answered.

"Go on, then--and get it over. She made a statement in your office. Out with it, my good fellow. Has it anything to do with me?"

"I should not otherwise, Doctor Benjulia, have ventured to present myself at your house." With that necessary explanation, Mr. Mool related all that had passed between Mrs. Gallilee and himself.

At the outset of the narrative, Benjulia angrily laid aside his pipe, on the point of interrupting the lawyer. He changed his mind; and, putting a strong constraint on himself, listened in silence. "I hope, sir," Mr. Mool concluded, "you will not take a hard view of my motive. It is only the truth to say that I am interested in Miss Carmina's welfare. I felt the sincerest respect and affection for her parents. You knew them too. They were good people. On reflection you must surely regret it, if you have carelessly repeated a false report? Won't you help me to clear the poor mother's memory of this horrid stain?"

Benjulia smoked in silence. Had that simple and touching appeal found its way to him? He began very strangely, when he consented at last to open his

lips.

"You're what they call, a middle-aged man," he said. "I suppose you have had some experience of women?"

Mr. Mool blushed. "I am a married man, sir," he replied gravely.

"Very well; that's experience--of one kind. When a man's out of temper, and a woman wants something of him, do you know how cleverly she can take advantage of her privileges to aggravate him, till there's nothing he won't do to get her to leave him in peace? That's how I came to tell Mrs. Gallilee, what she told you."

He waited a little, and comforted himself with his pipe.

"Mind this," he resumed, "I don't profess to feel any interest in the girl; and I never cared two straws about her parents. At the same time, if you can turn to good account what I am going to say next--do it, and welcome. This scandal began in the bragging of a fellow-student of mine at Rome. He was angry with me, and angry with another man, for laughing at him when he declared himself to be Mrs. Robert Graywell's lover: and he laid us a wager that we should see the woman alone in his room, that night. We were hidden behind a curtain, and we did see her in his room. I paid the money I had lost, and left Rome soon afterwards. The other man refused to pay."

"On what ground?" Mr. Mool eagerly asked.

"On the ground that she wore a thick veil, and never showed her face."

"An unanswerable objection, Doctor Benjulia!"

"Perhaps it might be. I didn't think so myself. Two hours before, Mrs. Robert Graywell and I had met in the street. She had on a dress of a remarkable colour in those days--a sort of sea-green. And a bonnet to match, which everybody stared at, because it was not half the size of the big bonnets then in fashion. There was no mistaking the strange dress or the tall figure, when I saw her again in the student's room. So I paid the bet."

"Do you remember the name of the man who refused to pay?"

"His name was Egisto Baccani."

"Have you heard anything of him since?"

"Yes. He got into some political scrape, and took refuge, like the rest of them, in England; and got his living, like the rest of them, by teaching languages. He sent me his prospectus--that's how I came to know about it."

"Have you got the prospectus?"

"Torn up, long ago."

Mr. Mool wrote down the name in his pocket-book. "There is nothing more you can tell me?" he said.

"Nothing."

"Accept my best thanks, doctor. Good-day!"

"If you find Baccani let me know. Another drop of ale? Are you likely to see Mrs. Gallilee soon?"

"Yes--if I find Baccani."

"Do you ever play with children?"

"I have five of my own to play with," Mr. Mool answered.

"Very well. Ask for the youngest child when you go to Mrs. Gallilee's. We call her Zo. Put your finger on her spine--here, just below the neck. Press on the place--so. And, when she wriggles, say, With the big doctor's love."

Getting back to his own house, Mr. Mool was surprised to find an open carriage at the garden gate. A smartly-dressed woman, on the front seat, surveyed him with an uneasy look. "If you please, sir," she said, "would you kindly tell Miss Carmina that we really mustn't wait any longer?"

The woman's uneasiness was reflected in Mr. Mool's face. A visit from Carmina, at his private residence, could have no ordinary motive. The fear instantly occurred to him that Mrs. Gallilee might have spoken to her of her mother.

Before he opened the drawing-room door, this alarm passed away. He heard Carmina talking with his wife and daughters.

"May I say one little word to you, Mr. Mool?"

He took her into his study. She was shy and confused, but certainly neither angry nor distressed.

"My aunt sends me out every day, when it's fine, for a drive," she said. "As the carriage passed close by, I thought I might ask you a question."

"Certainly, my dear! As many questions as you please."

"It's about the law. My aunt says she has the authority over me now, which my dear father had while he was living. Is that true?"

"Quite true."

"For how long is she my guardian?"

"Until you are twenty-one years old."

The faint colour faded from Carmina's face. "More than three years perhaps to suffer!" she said sadly.

"To suffer? What do you mean, my dear?"

She turned paler still, and made no reply. "I want to ask one thing more?" she resumed, in sinking tones. "Would my aunt still be my guardian-- supposing I was married?"

Mr. Mool answered this, with his eyes fixed on her in grave scrutiny.

"In that case, your husband is the only person who has any authority over you. These are rather strange questions, Carmina. Won't you take me into your confidence?"

In sudden agitation she seized his hand and kissed it. "I must go!" she said. "I have kept the carriage waiting too long already."

She ran out, without once looking back.