

## **CHAPTER XLIII.**

The mind of the clerk's master had been troubled by serious doubts, after Carmina left his house on Sunday.

Her agitated manner, her strange questions, and her abrupt departure, all suggested to Mr. Mool's mind some rash project in contemplation--perhaps even the plan of an elopement. To most other men, the obvious course to take would have been to communicate with Mrs. Gallilee. But the lawyer preserved a vivid remembrance of the interview which had taken place at his office. The detestable pleasure which Mrs. Gallilee had betrayed in profaning the memory of Carmina's mother, had so shocked and disgusted him, that he recoiled from the idea of holding any further intercourse with her, no matter how pressing the emergency might be. It was possible, after what had passed, that Carmina might feel the propriety of making some explanation by letter. He decided to wait until the next morning, on the chance of hearing from her.

On the Monday, no letter arrived.

Proceeding to the office, Mr. Mool found, in his business-correspondence, enough to occupy every moment of his time. He had purposed writing to Carmina, but the idea was now inevitably pressed out of his mind. It was only at the close of the day's work that he had leisure to think of a matter of greater importance--that is to say, of the necessity of discovering Benjulia's friend of other days, the Italian teacher Baccani. He left instructions with one of his clerks to make inquiries, the next morning, at the shops of foreign booksellers. There, and there only, the question might be answered, whether Baccani was still living, and living in London.

The inquiries proved successful. On Tuesday afternoon, Baccani's address was in Mr. Mool's hands.

Busy as he still was, the lawyer set aside his own affairs, in deference to the sacred duty of defending the memory of the dead, and to the pressing necessity of silencing Mrs. Gallilee's cruel and slanderous tongue. Arrived at Baccani's lodgings, he was informed that the language-master had gone to his dinner at a neighbouring restaurant. Mr. Mool waited at the lodgings, and sent a note to Baccani. In ten minutes more he found himself in the presence of an elderly man, of ascetic appearance; whose looks and tones showed him to be apt to take offence on small provocation, and more than

half ready to suspect an eminent solicitor of being a spy.

But Mr. Mool's experience was equal to the call on it. Having fully explained the object that he had in view, he left the apology for his intrusion to be inferred, and concluded by appealing, in his own modest way, to the sympathy of an honourable man.

Silently forming his opinion of the lawyer, while he listened, Baccani expressed the conclusion at which he had arrived, in these terms:

"My experience of mankind, sir, has been a bitterly bad one. You have improved my opinion of human nature since you entered this room. That is not a little thing to say, at my age and in my circumstances."

He bowed gravely, and turned to his bed. From under it, he pulled out a clumsy tin box. Having opened the rusty lock with some difficulty, he produced a ragged pocket-book, and picked out from it a paper which looked like an old letter.

"There," he said, handing the paper to Mr. Mool, "is the statement which vindicates this lady's reputation. Before you open the manuscript I must tell you how I came by it."

He appeared to feel such embarrassment in approaching the subject, that Mr. Mool interposed. "I am already acquainted," he said, "with some of the circumstances to which you are about to allude. I happen to know of the wager in which the calumny originated, and of the manner in which that wager was decided. The events which followed are the only events that I need trouble you to describe."

Baccani's grateful sense of relief avowed itself without reserve. "I feel your kindness," he said, "almost as keenly as I feel my own disgraceful conduct, in permitting a woman's reputation to be made the subject of a wager. From whom did you obtain your information?"

"From the person who mentioned your name to me--Doctor Benjulia."

Baccani lifted his hand with a gesture of angry protest.

"Don't speak of him again in my presence!" he burst out. "That man has insulted me. When I took refuge from political persecution in this country, I sent him my prospectus. From my own humble position as a teacher of languages, I looked up without envy to his celebrity among doctors; I

thought I might remind him, not unfavourably, of our early friendship--I, who had done him a hundred kindnesses in those past days. He has never taken the slightest notice of me; he has not even acknowledged the receipt of my prospectus. Despicable wretch! Let me hear no more of him."

"Pray forgive me if I refer to him again--for the last time," Mr. Mool pleaded. "Did your acquaintance with him continue, after the question of the wager had been settled?"

"No, sir!" Baccani answered sternly. "When I was at leisure to go to the club at which we were accustomed to meet, he had left Rome. From that time to this--I rejoice to say it--I have never set eyes on him."

The obstacles which had prevented the refutation of the calumny from reaching Benjulia were now revealed. Mr. Mool had only to hear, next, how that refutation had been obtained. A polite hint sufficed to remind Baccani of the explanation that he had promised.

"I am naturally suspicious," he began abruptly; "and I doubted the woman when I found that she kept her veil down. Besides, it was not in my way of thinking to believe that an estimable married lady could have compromised herself with a scoundrel, who had boasted that she was his mistress. I waited in the street, until the woman came out. I followed her, and saw her meet a man. The two went together to a theatre. I took my place near them. She lifted her veil as a matter of course. My suspicion of foul play was instantly confirmed. When the performance was over, I traced her back to Mr. Robert Graywell's house. He and his wife were both absent at a party. I was too indignant to wait till they came back. Under the threat of charging the wretch with stealing her mistress's clothes, I extorted from her the signed confession which you have in your hand. She was under notice to leave her place for insolent behaviour. The personation which had been intended to deceive me, was an act of revenge; planned between herself and the blackguard who had employed her to make his lie look like truth. A more shameless creature I never met with. She said to me, 'I am as tall as my mistress, and a better figure; and I've often worn her fine clothes on holiday occasions.' In your country Mr. Mool, such women--so I am told--are ducked in a pond. There is one thing more to add, before you read the confession. Mrs. Robert Graywell did imprudently send the man some money--in answer to a begging letter artfully enough written to excite her pity. A second application was refused by her husband. What followed on that, you know already."

Having read the confession, Mr. Mool was permitted to take a copy, and to

make any use of it which he might think desirable. His one remaining anxiety was to hear what had become of the person who had planned the deception. "Surely," he said, "that villain has not escaped punishment?"

Baccani answered this in his own bitter way.

"My dear sir, how can you ask such a simple question? That sort of man always escapes punishment. In the last extreme of poverty his luck provides him with somebody to cheat. Common respect for Mrs. Robert Graywell closed my lips; and I was the only person acquainted with the circumstances. I wrote to our club declaring the fellow to be a cheat--and leaving it to be inferred that he cheated at cards. He knew better than to insist on my explaining myself--he resigned, and disappeared. I dare say he is living still--living in clover on some unfortunate woman. The beautiful and the good die untimely deaths. He, and his kind, last and live."

Mr. Mool had neither time nor inclination to plead in favour of the more hopeful view, which believes in the agreeable fiction called "Poetical justice." He tried to express his sense of obligation at parting. Baccani refused to listen.

"The obligation is all on my side," he said. "As I have already told you, your visit has added a bright day to my calendar. In our pilgrimage, my friend, through this world of rogues and fools, we may never meet again. Let us remember gratefully that we have met. Farewell."

So they parted.

Returning to his office, Mr. Mool attached to the copy of the confession a brief statement of the circumstances under which the Italian had become possessed of it. He then added these lines, addressed to Benjulia:--"You set the false report afloat. I leave it to your sense of duty, to decide whether you ought not to go at once to Mrs. Gallilee, and tell her that the slander which you repeated is now proved to be a lie. If you don't agree with me, I must go to Mrs. Gallilee myself. In that case please return, by the bearer, the papers which are enclosed."

The clerk instructed to deliver these documents, within the shortest possible space of time, found Mr. Mool waiting at the office, on his return. He answered his master's inquiries by producing Benjulia's reply.

The doctor's amiable humour was still in the ascendant. His success in torturing his unfortunate cook had been followed by the receipt of a

telegram from his friend at Montreal, containing this satisfactory answer to his question:--"Not brain disease." With his mind now set completely at rest, his instincts as a gentleman were at full liberty to control him. "I entirely agree with you," he wrote to Mr. Mool. "I go back with your clerk; the cab will drop me at Mrs. Gallilee's house."

Mr. Mool turned to the clerk.

"Did you wait to hear if Mrs. Gallilee was at home?" he asked.

"Mrs. Gallilee was absent, sir--attending a lecture."

"What did Doctor Benjulia do?"

"Went into the house, to wait her return."