

## **CHAPTER XLIV.**

Mrs. Gallilee's page (attending to the house-door, in the footman's absence) had just shown Benjulia into the library, when there was another ring at the bell. The new visitor was Mr. Le Frank. He appeared to be in a hurry. Without any preliminary questions, he said, "Take my card to Mrs. Gallilee."

"My mistress is out, sir."

The music-master looked impatiently at the hall-clock. The hall-clock answered him by striking the half hour after five.

"Do you expect Mrs. Gallilee back soon?"

"We don't know, sir. The footman had his orders to be in waiting with the carriage, at five."

After a moment of irritable reflection, Mr. Le Frank took a letter from his pocket. "Say that I have an appointment, and am not able to wait. Give Mrs. Gallilee that letter the moment she comes in." With those directions he left the house.

The page looked at the letter. It was sealed; and, over the address, two underlined words were written:--"Private. Immediate." Mindful of visits from tradespeople, anxious to see his mistress, and provided beforehand with letters to be delivered immediately, the boy took a pecuniary view of Mr. Le Frank's errand at the house. "Another of them," he thought, "wanting his money."

As he placed the letter on the hall-table, the library door opened, and Benjulia appeared--weary already of waiting, without occupation, for Mrs. Gallilee's return.

"Is smoking allowed in the library?" he asked.

The page looked up at the giant towering over him, with the envious admiration of a short boy. He replied with a discretion beyond his years: "Would you please step into the smoking-room, sir?"

"Anybody there?"

"My master, sir."

Benjulia at once declined the invitation to the smoking-room. "Anybody else at home?" he inquired.

Miss Carmina was upstairs--the page answered. "And I think," he added, "Mr. Null is with her."

"Who's Mr. Null?"

"The doctor, sir."

Benjulia declined to disturb the doctor. He tried a third, and last question.

"Where's Zo?"

"Here!" cried a shrill voice from the upper regions. "Who are You?"

To the page's astonishment, the giant gentleman with the resonant bass voice answered this quite gravely. "I'm Benjulia," he said.

"Come up!" cried Zo.

Benjulia ascended the stairs.

"Stop!" shouted the voice from above.

Benjulia stopped.

"Have you got your big stick?"

"Yes."

"Bring it up with you." Benjulia retraced his steps into the hall. The page respectfully handed him his stick. Zo became impatient. "Look sharp!" she called out.

Benjulia obediently quickened his pace. Zo left the schoolroom (in spite of the faintly-heard protest of the maid in charge) to receive him on the stairs. They met on the landing, outside Carmina's room. Zo possessed herself of the bamboo cane, and led the way in. "Carmina! here's the big stick, I told you about," she announced.

"Whose stick, dear?"

Zo returned to the landing. "Come in, Benjulia," she said--and seized him by the coat-tails. Mr. Null rose instinctively. Was this his celebrated colleague?

With some reluctance, Carmina appeared at the door; thinking of the day when Ovid had fainted, and when the great man had treated her so harshly. In fear of more rudeness, she unwillingly asked him to come in.

Still immovable on the landing, he looked at her in silence.

The serious question occurred to him which had formerly presented itself to Mr. Mool. Had Mrs. Gallilee repeated, in Carmina's presence, the lie which slandered her mother's memory--the lie which he was then in the house to expose?

Watching Benjulia respectfully, Mr. Null saw, in that grave scrutiny, an opportunity of presenting himself under a favourable light. He waved his hand persuasively towards Carmina. "Some nervous prostration, sir, in my interesting patient, as you no doubt perceive," he began. "Not such rapid progress towards recovery as I had hoped. I think of recommending the air of the seaside." Benjulia's dreary eyes turned on him slowly, and estimated his mental calibre at its exact value, in a moment. Mr. Null felt that look in the very marrow of his bones. He bowed with servile submission, and took his leave.

In the meantime, Benjulia had satisfied himself that the embarrassment in Carmina's manner was merely attributable to shyness. She was now no longer an object even of momentary interest to him. He was ready to play with Zo--but not on condition of amusing himself with the child, in Carmina's presence. "I am waiting till Mrs. Gallilee returns," he said to her in his quietly indifferent way. "If you will excuse me, I'll go downstairs again; I won't intrude."

Her pale face flushed as she listened to him. Innocently supposing that she had made her little offer of hospitality in too cold a manner, she looked at Benjulia with a timid and troubled smile. "Pray wait here till my aunt comes back," she said. "Zo will amuse you, I'm sure." Zo seconded the invitation by hiding the stick, and laying hold again on her big friend's coattails.

He let the child drag him into the room, without noticing her. The silent questioning of his eyes had been again directed to Carmina, at the moment when she smiled.

His long and terrible experience made its own merciless discoveries, in the nervous movement of her eyelids and her lips. The poor girl, pleasing herself with the idea of having produced the right impression on him at last, had only succeeded in becoming an object of medical inquiry, pursued in secret. When he companionably took a chair by her side, and let Zo climb on his knee, he was privately regretting his cold reception of Mr. Null. Under certain conditions of nervous excitement, Carmina might furnish an interesting case. "If I had been commonly civil to that fawning idiot," he thought, "I might have been called into consultation."

They were all three seated--but there was no talk. Zo set the example.

"You haven't tickled me yet," she said. "Show Carmina how you do it."

He gravely operated on the back of Zo's neck; and his patient acknowledged the process with a wriggle and a scream. The performance being so far at an end, Zo called to the dog, and issued her orders once more.

"Now make Tinker kick his leg!"

Benjulia obeyed once again. The young tyrant was not satisfied yet.

"Now tickle Carmina!" she said.

He heard this without laughing: his fleshless lips never relaxed into a smile. To Carmina's unutterable embarrassment, he looked at her, when she laughed, with steadier attention than ever. Those coldly-inquiring eyes exercised some inscrutable influence over her. Now they made her angry; and now they frightened her. The silence that had fallen on them again, became an unendurable infliction. She burst into talk; she was loud and familiar--ashamed of her own boldness, and quite unable to control it. "You are very fond of Zo!" she said suddenly.

It was a perfectly commonplace remark--and yet, it seemed to perplex him.

"Am I?" he answered.

She went on. Against her own will, she persisted in speaking to him. "And I'm sure Zo is fond of you."

He looked at Zo. "Are you fond of me?" he asked.

Zo, staring hard at him, got off his knee; retired to a little distance to think; and stood staring at him again.

He quietly repeated the question. Zo answered this time--as she had formerly answered Teresa in the Gardens. "I don't know."

He turned again to Carmina, in a slow, puzzled way. "I don't know either," he said.

Hearing the big man own that he was no wiser than herself, Zo returned to him--without, however, getting on his knee again. She clasped her chubby hands under the inspiration of a new idea. "Let's play at something," she said to Benjulia. "Do you know any games?"

He shook his head.

"Didn't you know any games, when you were only as big as me?"

"I have forgotten them."

"Haven't you got children?"

"No."

"Haven't you got a wife?"

"No."

"Haven't you got a friend?"

"No."

"Well, you are a miserable chap!"

Thanks to Zo, Carmina's sense of nervous oppression burst its way into relief. She laughed loudly and wildly--she was on the verge of hysterics, when Benjulia's eyes, silently questioning her again, controlled her at the critical moment. Her laughter died away. But the exciting influence still possessed her; still forced her into the other alternative of saying something--she neither knew nor cared what.

"I couldn't live such a lonely life as yours," she said to him--so loudly and so confidently that even Zo noticed it.

"I couldn't live such a life either," he admitted, "but for one thing."

"And what is that?"

"Why are you so loud?" Zo interposed. "Do you think he's deaf?"

Benjulia made a sign, commanding the child to be silent--without turning towards her. He answered Carmina as if there had been no interruption.

"My medical studies," he said, "reconcile me to my life."

"Suppose you got tired of your studies?" she asked.

"I should never get tired of them."

"Suppose you couldn't study any more?"

"In that case I shouldn't live any more."

"Do you mean that it would kill you to leave off?"

"No."

"Then what do you mean?"

He laid his great soft fingers on her pulse. She shrank from his touch; he deliberately held her by the arm. "You're getting excited," he said. "Never mind what I mean."

Zo, left unnoticed and not liking it, saw a chance of asserting herself. "I know why Carmina's excited," she said. "The old woman's coming at six o'clock."

He paid no attention to the child; he persisted in keeping watch on Carmina. "Who is the woman?" he asked.

"The most lovable woman in the world," she cried; "my dear old nurse!" She started up from the sofa, and pointed with theatrical exaggeration of gesture to the clock on the mantelpiece. "Look! it's only ten minutes to six. In ten minutes, I shall have my arms round Teresa's neck. Don't look at me in that way! It's your fault if I'm excited. It's your dreadful eyes that do it. Come here, Zo! I want to give you a kiss." She seized on Zo with a roughness that

startled the child, and looked wildly at Benjulia. "Ha! you don't understand loving and kissing, do you? What's the use of speaking to you about my old nurse?"

He pointed imperatively to the sofa. "Sit down again."

She obeyed him--but he had not quite composed her yet. Her eyes sparkled; she went on talking. "Ah, you're a hard man! a miserable man! a man that will end badly! You never loved anybody. You don't know what love is."

"What is it?"

That icy question cooled her in an instant: her head sank on her bosom: she suddenly became indifferent to persons and things about her. "When will Teresa come?" she whispered to herself. "Oh, when will Teresa come!"

Any other man, whether he really felt for her or not, would, as a mere matter of instinct, have said a kind word to her at that moment. Not the vestige of a change appeared in Benjulia's impenetrable composure. She might have been a man--or a baby--or the picture of a girl instead of the girl herself, so far as he was concerned. He quietly returned to his question.

"Well," he resumed--"and what is love?"

Not a word, not a movement escaped her.

"I want to know," he persisted, waiting for what might happen.

Nothing happened. He was not perplexed by the sudden change. "This is the reaction," he thought. "We shall see what comes of it." He looked about him. A bottle of water stood on one of the tables. "Likely to be useful," he concluded, "in case she feels faint."

Zo had been listening; Zo saw her way to getting noticed again. Not quite sure of herself this time, she appealed to Carmina. "Didn't he say, just now, he wanted to know?"

Carmina neither heard nor heeded her. Zo tried Benjulia next. "Shall I tell you what we do in the schoolroom, when we want to know?" His attention, like Carmina's attention, seemed to be far away from her. Zo impatiently reminded him of her presence--she laid her hand on his knee.

It was only the hand of a child--an idle, quaint, perverse child--but it

touched, ignorantly touched, the one tender place in his nature, unprofaned by the infernal cruelties which made his life acceptable to him; the one tender place, hidden so deep from the man himself, that even his far-reaching intellect groped in vain to find it out. There, nevertheless, was the feeling which drew him to Zo, contending successfully with his medical interest in a case of nervous derangement. That unintelligible sympathy with a child looked dimly out of his eyes, spoke faintly in his voice, when he replied to her. "Well," he said, "what do you do in the schoolroom?"

"We look in the dictionary," Zo answered. "Carmina's got a dictionary. I'll get it."

She climbed on a chair, and found the book, and laid it on Benjulia's lap. "I don't so much mind trying to spell a word," she explained. "What I hate is being asked what it means. Miss Minerva won't let me off. She says, Look. I won't let you off. I'm Miss Minerva and you're Zo. Look!"

He humoured her silently and mechanically--just as he had humoured her in the matter of the stick, and in the matter of the tickling. Having opened the dictionary, he looked again at Carmina. She had not moved; she seemed to be weary enough to fall asleep. The reaction--nothing but the reaction. It might last for hours, or it might be at an end in another minute. An interesting temperament, whichever way it ended. He opened the dictionary.

"Love?" he muttered grimly to himself. "It seems I'm an object of compassion, because I know nothing about love. Well, what does the book say about it?"

He found the word, and ran his finger down the paragraphs of explanation which followed. "Seven meanings to Love," he remarked. "First: An affection of the mind excited by beauty and worth of any kind, or by the qualities of an object which communicate pleasure. Second: Courtship. Third: Patriotism, as the love of country. Fourth: Benevolence. Fifth: The object beloved. Sixth: A word of endearment. Seventh: Cupid, the god of love."

He paused, and reflected a little. Zo, hearing nothing to amuse her, strayed away to the window, and looked out. He glanced at Carmina.

"Which of those meanings makes the pleasure of her life?" he wondered. "Which of them might have made the pleasure of mine?" He closed the dictionary in contempt. "The very man whose business is to explain it, tries seven different ways, and doesn't explain it after all. And yet, there is such a thing." He reached that conclusion unwillingly and angrily. For the first



time, a doubt about himself forced its way into his mind. Might he have looked higher than his torture-table and his knife? Had he gained from his life all that his life might have given to him?

Left by herself, Zo began to grow tired of it. She tried to get Carmina for a companion. "Come and look out of window," she said.

Carmina gently refused: she was unwilling to be disturbed. Since she had spoken to Benjulia, her thoughts had been dwelling restfully on Ovid. In another day she might be on her way to him. When would Teresa come?

Benjulia was too preoccupied to notice her. The weak doubt that had got the better of his strong reason, still held him in thrall. "Love!" he broke out, in the bitterness of his heart. "It isn't a question of sentiment: it's a question of use. Who is the better for love?"

She heard the last words, and answered him. "Everybody is the better for it." She looked at him with sorrowful eyes, and laid her hand on his arm. "Everybody," she added, "but you."

He smiled scornfully. "Everybody is the better for it," he repeated. "And who knows what it is?"

She drew away her hand, and looked towards the heavenly tranquillity of the evening sky.

"Who knows what it is?" he reiterated.

"God," she said.

Benjulia was silent.