

CHAPTER XLVII.

The slander on which Mrs. Gallilee had reckoned, as a means of separating Ovid and Carmina, was now a slander refuted by unanswerable proof. And the man whose exertions had achieved this result, was her own lawyer--the agent whom she had designed to employ, in asserting that claim of the guardian over the ward which Teresa had defied.

As a necessary consequence, the relations between Mr. Mool and herself were already at an end.

There she lay helpless--her authority set at naught; her person outraged by a brutal attack--there she lay, urged to action by every reason that a resolute woman could have for asserting her power, and avenging her wrong--without a creature to take her part, without an accomplice to serve her purpose.

She got on her feet, with the resolution of despair. Her heart sank--the room whirled round her--she dropped back on the sofa. In a recumbent position, the giddiness subsided. She could ring the hand-bell on the table at her side. "Send instantly for Mr. Null," she said to the maid. "If he is out, let the messenger follow him, wherever he may be."

The messenger came back with a note. Mr. Null would call on Mrs. Gallilee as soon as possible. He was then engaged in attendance on Miss Carmina.

At that discovery, Mrs. Gallilee's last reserves of independent resolution gave way. The services of her own medical attendant were only at her disposal, when Carmina had done with him! At the top of his letter the address, which she had thus far tried vainly to discover, stared her in the face: the house was within five minutes' walk--and she was not even able to cross the room! For the first time in her life, Mrs. Gallilee's imperious spirit acknowledged defeat. For the first time in her life, she asked herself the despicable question: Who can I find to help me?

Someone knocked at the door.

"Who is it?" she cried.

Joseph's voice answered her. "Mr. Le Frank has called, ma'am--and wishes to know if you can see him."

She never stopped to think. She never even sent for the maid to see to her personal appearance. The horror of her own helplessness drove her on. Here was the man, whose timely betrayal of Carmina had stopped her on her way to Ovid, in the nick of time! Here was the self-devoted instrument, waiting to be employed.

"I'll see Mr. Le Frank," she said. "Show him up."

The music-master looked round the obscurely lit room, and bowed to the recumbent figure on the sofa.

"I fear I disturb you, madam, at an inconvenient time."

"I am suffering from illness, Mr. Le Frank; but I am able to receive you--as you see."

She stopped there. Now, when she saw him, and heard him, some perverse hesitation in her began to doubt him. Now, when it was too late, she weakly tried to put herself on her guard. What a decay of energy (she felt it herself) in the ready and resolute woman, equal to any emergency at other times! "To what am I to attribute the favour of your visit?" she resumed.

Even her voice failed her: it faltered in spite of her efforts to steady it. Mr. Le Frank's vanity drew its own encouraging conclusion from this one circumstance.

"I am anxious to know how I stand in your estimation," he replied. "Early this evening, I left a few lines here, enclosing a letter--with my compliments. Have you received the letter?"

"Yes."

"Have you read it?"

Mrs. Gallilee hesitated. Mr. Le Frank smiled.

"I won't trouble you, madam, for any more direct reply," he said; "I will speak plainly. Be so good as to tell me plainly, on your side, which I am--a man who has disgraced himself by stealing a letter? or a man who has distinguished himself by doing you a service?"

An unpleasant alternative, neatly defined! To disavow Mr. Le Frank or to use

Mr. Le Frank--there was the case for Mrs. Gallilee's consideration. She was incapable of pronouncing judgment; the mere effort of decision, after what she had suffered, fatigued and irritated her. "I can't deny," she said, with weary resignation, "that you have done me a service."

He rose, and made a generous return for the confidence that had been placed in him--he repeated his magnificent bow, and sat down again.

"Our position towards each other seems too plain to be mistaken," he proceeded. "Your niece's letter--perfectly useless for the purpose with which I opened it--offers me a means of being even with Miss Carmina, and a chance of being useful to You. Shall I begin by keeping an eye on the young lady?"

"Is that said, Mr. Le Frank, out of devotion to me?"

"My devotion to you might wear out," he answered audaciously. "You may trust my feeling towards your niece to last--I never forget an injury. Is it indiscreet to inquire how you mean to keep Miss Carmina from joining her lover in Quebec? Does a guardian's authority extend to locking her up in her room?"

Mrs. Gallilee felt the underlying familiarity in these questions--elaborately concealed as it was under an assumption of respect.

"My niece is no longer in my house," she answered coldly.

"Gone!" cried Mr. Le Frank.

She corrected the expression. "Removed," she said, and dropped the subject there.

Mr. Le Frank took the subject up again. "Removed, I presume, under the care of her nurse?" he rejoined.

The nurse? What did he know about the nurse? "May I ask--?" Mrs. Gallilee began.

He smiled indulgently, and stopped her there. "You are not quite yourself to-night," he said. "Permit me to remind you that your niece's letter to Mr. Ovid Vere is explicit, and that I took the liberty of reading it before I left it at your house."

Mrs. Gallilee listened in silence, conscious that she had committed another error. She had carefully excluded from her confidence a man who was already in possession of her secrets! Mr. Le Frank's courteous sympathy forbade him to take advantage of the position of superiority which he now held.

"I will do myself the honour of calling again," he said, "when you are better able to place the right estimate on my humble offers of service. I wouldn't fatigue you, Mrs. Gallilee, for the world! At the same time, permit me to put one last question which ought not to be delayed. When Miss Carmina left you, did she take away her writing-desk and her keys?"

"No."

"Allow me to suggest that she may send for them at any moment."

Before it was possible to ask for an explanation, Joseph presented himself again. Mr. Null was waiting downstairs. Mrs. Gallilee arranged that he should be admitted when she rang her bell. Mr. Le Frank approached the sofa, when they were alone, and returned to his suggestion in a whisper.

"Surely, you see the importance of using your niece's keys?" he resumed. "We don't know what correspondence may have been going on, in which the nurse and the governess have been concerned. After we have already intercepted a letter, hesitation is absurd! You are not equal to the effort yourself. I know the room. Don't be afraid of discovery; I have a naturally soft footfall--and my excuse is ready, if somebody else has a soft footfall too. Leave it to me."

He lit a candle as he spoke. But for that allusion to the nurse, Mrs. Gallilee might have ordered him to blow it out again. Eager for any discovery which might, by the barest possibility, place Teresa at her mercy, she silently submitted to Mr. Le Frank. "I'll call to-morrow," he said--and slipped out of the room.

When Mr. Null was announced, Mrs. Gallilee pushed up the shade over the globe of the lamp. Her medical attendant's face might be worth observing, under a clear light.

His timid look, his confused manner, when he made the conventional apologies, told her at once that Teresa had spoken, and that he knew what had happened. Even he had never before been so soothing and so attentive. But he forgot, or he was afraid, to consult appearances by asking what was

the matter, before he felt the pulse, and took the temperature, and wrote his prescription. Not a word was uttered by Mrs. Gallilee, until the medical formalities came to an end. "Is there anything more that I can do?" he asked.

"You can tell me," she said, "when I shall be well again."

Mr. Null was polite; Mr. Null was sympathetic. Mrs. Gallilee might be herself again in a day or two--or Mrs. Gallilee might be unhappily confined to her room for some little time. He had hope in his prescription, and hope in perfect quiet and repose--he would suggest the propriety of going to bed at once, and would not fail to call early the next morning.

"Sit down again," said Mrs. Gallilee.

Mr. Null turned pale. He foresaw what was coming.

"You have been in attendance on Miss Carmina. I wish to know what her illness is."

Mr. Null began to prevaricate at the outset. "The case causes us serious anxiety. The complications are formidable. Doctor Benjulia himself--"

"In plain words, Mr. Null, can she be moved?"

This produced a definite answer. "Quite impossible."

She only ventured to put her next question after waiting a little to control herself.

"Is that foreign woman, the nurse--the only nurse--in attendance?"

"Don't speak of her, Mrs. Gallilee! A dreadful woman; coarse, furious, a perfect savage. When I suggested a second nurse--"

"I understand. You asked just now if you could do anything for me. You can do me a great service--you can recommend me a trustworthy lawyer."

Mr. Null was surprised. As the old medical attendant of the family, he was not unacquainted with the legal adviser. He mentioned Mr. Mool's name.

"Mr. Mool has forfeited my confidence," Mrs. Gallilee announced. "Can you, or can you not, recommend a lawyer?"

"Oh, certainly! My own lawyer."

"You will find writing materials on the table behind me. I won't keep you more than five minutes. I want you to write from my dictation."

"My dear lady, in your present condition--"

"Do as I tell you! My head is quiet while I lie down. Even a woman in my condition can say what she means to do. I shall not close my eyes tonight, unless I can feel that I have put that wretch in her right place. Who are your lawyers?"

Mr. Null mentioned the names, and took up his pen.

"Introduce me in the customary form," Mrs. Gallilee proceeded; "and then refer the lawyers to my brother's Will. Is it done?"

In due time it was done.

"Tell them next, how my niece has been taken away from me, and where she has been taken to."

To the best of his ability, Mr. Null complied.

"Now," said Mrs. Gallilee, "write what I mean to do!"

The prospect of being revenged on Teresa revived her. For the moment, at least, she almost looked like herself again.

Mr. Null turned over to a new leaf, with a hand that trembled a little. The dictating voice pronounced these words:

"I forbid the woman Teresa to act in the capacity of nurse to Miss Carmina, and even to enter the room in which that young lady is now lying ill. I further warn this person, that my niece will be restored to my care, the moment her medical attendants allow her to be removed. And I desire my legal advisers to assert my authority, as guardian, to-morrow morning."

Mr. Null finished his task in silent dismay. He took out his handkerchief and wiped his forehead.

"Is there any very terrible effort required in saying those few words--even to a shattered creature like me?" Mrs. Gallilee asked bitterly. "Let me hear that

the lawyers have got their instructions, when you come to-morrow; and give me the name and address of a nurse whom you can thoroughly recommend. Good-night!"

At last, Mr. Null got away. As he softly closed the dressing-room door, the serious question still dwelt on his mind: What would Teresa do?