

CHAPTER XLIX.

It was past the middle of the day, before Mr. Le Frank paid his promised visit to Mrs. Gallilee. He entered the room with gloomy looks; and made his polite inquiries, as became a depressed musician, in the minor key.

"I am sorry, madam, to find you still on the sofa. Is there no improvement in your health?"

"None whatever."

"Does your medical attendant give you any hope?"

"He does what they all do--he preaches patience. No more of myself! You appear to be in depressed spirits."

Mr. Le Frank admitted with a sigh that appearances had not misrepresented him. "I have been bitterly disappointed," he said. "My feelings as an artist are wounded to the quick. But why do I trouble you with my poor little personal affairs? I humbly beg your pardon."

His eyes accompanied this modest apology with a look of uneasy anticipation: he evidently expected to be asked to explain himself. Events had followed her instructions to Mr. Null, which left Mrs. Gallilee in need of employing her music-master's services. She felt the necessity of exerting herself; and did it--with an effort.

"You have no reason, I hope, to complain of your pupils?" she said.

"At this time of year, madam, I have no pupils. They are all out of town."

She was too deeply preoccupied by her own affairs to trouble herself any further. The direct way was the easy way. She said wearily, "Well, what is it?"

He answered in plain terms, this time.

"A bitter humiliation, Mrs. Gallilee! I have been made to regret that I asked you to honour me by accepting the dedication of my Song. The music-sellers, on whom the sale depends, have not taken a tenth part of the number of copies for which we expected them to subscribe. Has some

extraordinary change come over the public taste? My composition has been carefully based on fashionable principles--that is to say, on the principles of the modern German school. As little tune as possible; and that little strictly confined to the accompaniment. And what is the result? Loss confronts me, instead of profit--my agreement makes me liable for half the expenses of publication. And, what is far more serious in my estimation, your honoured name is associated with a failure! Don't notice me--the artist nature--I shall be better in a minute." He took out a profusely-scented handkerchief, and buried his face in it with a groan.

Mrs. Gallilee's hard common sense understood the heart-broken composer to perfection.

"Stupid of me not to have offered him money yesterday," she thought: "this waste of time need never have happened." She set her mistake right with admirable brevity and directness. "Don't distress yourself, Mr. Le Frank. Now my name is on it, the Song is mine. If your publisher's account is not satisfactory--be so good as to send it to me." Mr. Le Frank dropped his dry handkerchief, and sprang theatrically to his feet. His indulgent patroness refused to hear him: to this admirable woman, the dignity of Art was a sacred thing. "Not a word more on that subject," she said. "Tell me how you prospered last night. Your investigations cannot have been interrupted, or I should have heard of it. Come to the result! Have you found anything of importance in my niece's room?"

Mr. Le Frank had again been baffled, so far as the confirmation of his own suspicions was concerned. But the time was not favourable to a confession of personal disappointment. He understood the situation; and made himself the hero of it, in three words.

"Judge for yourself," he said--and held out the letter of warning from Father Patrizio.

In silence, Mrs. Gallilee read the words which declared her to be the object of Teresa's inveterate resentment, and which charged Carmina with the serious duty of keeping the peace.

"Does it alarm you?" Mr. Le Frank asked.

"I hardly know what I feel," she answered. "Give me time to think."

Mr. Le Frank went back to his chair. He had reason to congratulate himself already: he had shifted to other shoulders the pecuniary responsibility

involved in the failure of his Song. Observing Mrs. Gallilee, he began to see possibilities of a brighter prospect still. Thus far she had kept him at a certain distance. Was the change of mind coming, which would admit him to the position (with all its solid advantages) of a confidential friend?

She suddenly took up Father Patrizio's letter, and showed it to him.

"What impression does it produce on you," she asked, "knowing no more than you know now?"

"The priest's cautious language, madam, speaks for itself. You have an enemy who will stick at nothing."

She still hesitated to trust him.

"You see me here," she went on, "confined to my room; likely, perhaps, to be in this helpless condition for some time to come. How would you protect yourself against that woman, in my place?"

"I should wait."

"For what purpose?"

"If you will allow me to use the language of the card-table, I should wait till the woman shows her hand."

"She has shown it."

"May I ask when?"

"This morning."

Mr. Le Frank said no more. If he was really wanted, Mrs. Gallilee had only to speak. After a last moment of hesitation, the pitiless necessities of her position decided her once more. "You see me too ill to move," she said; "the first thing to do, is to tell you why."

She related the plain facts; without a word of comment, without a sign of emotion. But her husband's horror of her had left an impression, which neither pride nor contempt had been strong enough to resist. She allowed the music-master to infer, that contending claims to authority over Carmina had led to a quarrel which provoked the assault. The secret of the words that she had spoken, was the one secret that she kept from Mr. Le Frank.

"While I was insensible," she proceeded, "my niece was taken away from me. She has been suffering from nervous illness; she was naturally terrified--and she is now at the nurse's lodgings, too ill to be moved. There you have the state of affairs, up to last night."

"Some people might think," Mr. Le Frank remarked, "that the easiest way out of it, so far, would be to summon the nurse for the assault."

"The easiest way compels me to face a public exposure," Mrs. Gallilee answered. "In my position that is impossible."

Mr. Le Frank accepted this view of the case as a matter of course. "Under the circumstances," he said, "it's not easy to advise you. How can you make the woman submit to your authority, while you are lying here?"

"My lawyers have made her submit this morning."

In the extremity of his surprise, Mr. Le Frank forgot himself. "The devil they have!" he exclaimed.

"They have forbidden her, in my name," Mrs. Gallilee continued, "to act as nurse to my niece. They have informed her that Miss Carmina will be restored to my care, the moment she can be moved. And they have sent me her unconditional submission in writing, signed by herself."

She took it from the desk at her side, and read it to him, in these words:

"I humbly ask pardon of Mrs. Gallilee for the violent and unlawful acts of which I have been guilty. I acknowledge, and submit to, her authority as guardian of Miss Carmina Graywell. And I appeal to her mercy (which I own I have not deserved) to spare me the misery of separation from Miss Carmina, on any conditions which it may be her good will and pleasure to impose."

"Now," Mrs. Galilee concluded, "what do you say?"

Speaking sincerely for once, Mr. Le Frank made a startling reply.

"Submit on your side," he said. "Do what she asks of you. And when you are well enough to go to her lodgings, decline with thanks if she offers you anything to eat or drink."

Mrs. Gallilee raised herself on the sofa. "Are you insulting me, sir," she asked, "by making this serious emergency the subject of a joke?"

"I never was more in earnest, madam, in my life."

"You think--you really think--that she is capable of trying to poison me?"

"Most assuredly I do."

Mrs. Gallilee sank back on the pillow. Mr. Le Frank stated his reasons; checking them off, one by one, on his fingers.

"Who is she?" he began. "She is an Italian woman of the lower orders. The virtues of the people among whom she had been born and bred, are not generally considered to include respect for the sanctity of human life. What do we know already that she has done? She has alarmed the priest, who keeps her conscience, and knows her well; and she has attacked you with such murderous ferocity that it is a wonder you have escaped with your life. What sort of message have you sent to her, after this experience of her temper? You have told the tigress that you have the power to separate her from her cub, and that you mean to use it. On those plain facts, as they stare us in the face, which is the soundest conclusion? To believe that she really submits--or to believe that she is only gaining time, and is capable (if she sees no other alternative) of trying to poison you?"

"What would you advise me to do?" In those words Mrs. Gallilee--never before reduced to ask advice of anybody--owned that sound reasoning was not thrown away on her.

Mr. Le Frank answered the demand made on him without hesitation.

"The nurse has not signed that act of submission," he said, "without having her own private reasons for appearing to give way. Rely on it, she is prepared for you--and there is at least a chance that some proof of it may be found. Have all her movements privately watched--and search the room she lives in, as I searched Miss Carmina's room last night."

"Well?" said Mrs. Gallilee.

"Well?" Mr. Le Frank repeated.

She angrily gave way. "Say at once that you are the man to do it for me!" she answered. "And say next--if you can--how it is to be done."

Mr. Le Frank's manner softened to an air of gentle gallantry.

"Pray compose yourself!" he said. "I am so glad to be of service to you, and it is so easily done!"

"Easily?"

"Dear madam, quite easily. Isn't the house a lodging-house; and, at this time of year, have I anything to do?" He rose, and took his hat.

"Surely, you see me in my new character now? A single gentleman wants a bedroom. His habits are quiet, and he gives excellent references. The address, Mrs. Gallilee--may I trouble you for the address?"