

CHAPTER LV.

Mrs. Gallilee read the telegram--paused--and read it again. She let it drop on her lap; but her eyes still rested mechanically on the slip of paper. When she spoke, her voice startled Mr. Null. Usually loud and hard, her tones were strangely subdued. If his back had been turned towards her, he would hardly have known who was speaking to him.

"I must ask you to make allowances for me," she began, abruptly; "I hardly know what to say. This surprise comes at a time when I am badly prepared for it. I am getting well; but, you see, I am not quite so strong as I was before that woman attacked me. My husband has gone away--I don't know where--and has taken my children with him. Read his note: but don't say anything. You must let me be quiet, or I can't think."

She handed the letter to Mr. Null. He looked at her--read the few words submitted to him--and looked at her again. For once, his stock of conventional phrases failed him. Who could have anticipated such conduct on the part of her husband? Who could have supposed that she herself would have been affected in this way, by the return of her son?

Mrs. Gallilee drew a long heavy breath. "I have got it now," she said. "My son is coming home in a hurry because of Carmina's illness. Has Carmina written to him?"

Mr. Null was in his element again: this question appealed to his knowledge of his patient. "Impossible, Mrs. Gallilee--in her present state of health."

"In her present state of health? I forgot that. There was something else. Oh, yes! Has Carmina seen the telegram?"

Mr. Null explained. He had just come from Carmina. In his medical capacity, he had thought it judicious to try the moral effect on his patient of a first allusion to the good news. He had only ventured to say that Mr. Ovid's agents in Canada had heard from him on his travels, and had reason to believe that he would shortly return to Quebec. Upon the whole, the impression produced on the young lady--

It was useless to go on. Mrs. Gallilee was pursuing her own thoughts, without even the pretence of listening to him.

"I want to know who wrote to my son," she persisted. "Was it the nurse?"

Mr. Null considered this to be in the last degree unlikely. The nurse's language showed a hostile feeling towards Mr. Ovid, in consequence of his absence.

Mrs. Gallilee looked once more at the telegram. "Why," she asked, "does Ovid telegraph to You?"

Mr. Null answered with his customary sense of what was due to himself. "As the medical attendant of the family, your son naturally supposed, madam, that Miss Carmina was under my care."

The implied reproof produced no effect. "I wonder whether my son was afraid to trust us?" was all Mrs. Gallilee said. It was the chance guess of a wandering mind--but it had hit the truth. Kept in ignorance of Carmina's illness by the elder members of the family, at what other conclusion could Ovid arrive, with Zo's letter before him? After a momentary pause, Mrs. Gallilee went on. "I suppose I may keep the telegram?" she said.

Prudent Mr. Null offered a copy--and made the copy, then and there. The original (he explained) was his authority for acting on Mr. Ovid's behalf, and he must therefore beg leave to keep it. Mrs. Gallilee permitted him to exchange the two papers. "Is there anything more?" she asked. "Your time is valuable of course. Don't let me detain you."

"May I feel your pulse before I go?"

She held out her arm to him in silence.

The carriage came to the door while he was counting the beat of the pulse. She glanced at the window, and said, "Send it away." Mr. Null remonstrated. "My dear lady, the air will do you good." She answered obstinately and quietly, "No"--and once more became absorbed in thought.

It had been her intention to combine her first day of carriage exercise with a visit to Teresa's lodgings, and a personal exertion of her authority. The news of Ovid's impending return made it a matter of serious importance to consider this resolution under a new light. She had now, not only to reckon with Teresa, but with her son. With this burden on her enfeebled mind--heavily laden by the sense of injury which her husband's flight had aroused--she had not even reserves enough of energy to spare for the trifling effort of dressing to go out. She broke into irritability, for the first time. "I am trying

to find out who has written to my son. How can I do it when you are worrying me about the carriage? Have you ever held a full glass in your hand, and been afraid of letting it overflow? That's what I'm afraid of--in my mind--I don't mean that my mind is a glass--I mean--" Her forehead turned red. "Will you leave me?" she cried.

He left her instantly.

The change in her manner, the difficulty she found in expressing her thoughts, had even startled stupid Mr. Null. She had herself alluded to results of the murderous attack made on her by Teresa, which had not perhaps hitherto sufficiently impressed him. In the shock inflicted on the patient's body, had there been involved some subtly-working influence that had disturbed the steady balance of her mind? Pondering uneasily on that question, he spoke to Joseph in the hall.

"Do you know about your master and the children?" he said.

"Yes, sir."

"I wish you had told me of it, when you let me in."

"Have I done any harm, sir?"

"I don't know yet. If you want me, I shall be at home to dinner at seven."

The next visitor was one of the partners in the legal firm, to which Mrs. Gallilee had applied for advice. After what Mr. Null had said, Joseph hesitated to conduct this gentleman into the presence of his mistress. He left the lawyer in the waiting-room, and took his card.

Mrs. Gallilee's attitude had not changed. She sat looking down at the copied telegram and the letter from her husband, lying together on her lap. Joseph was obliged to speak twice, before he could rouse her.

"To-morrow," was all she said.

"What time shall I say, ma'am?"

She put her hand to her head--and broke into anger against Joseph. "Settle it yourself, you wretch!" Her head drooped again over the papers. Joseph returned to the lawyer. "My mistress is not very well, sir. She will be obliged if you will call to-morrow, at your own time."

About an hour later, she rang her bell--rang it unintermittingly, until Joseph appeared. "I'm famished," she said. "Something to eat! I never was so hungry in my life. At once--I can't wait."

The cook sent up a cold fowl, and a ham. Her eyes devoured the food, while the footman was carving it for her. Her bad temper seemed to have completely disappeared. She said, "What a delicious dinner! Just the very things I like." She lifted the first morsel to her mouth--and laid the fork down again with a weary sigh. "No: I can't eat; what has come to me?" With those words, she pushed her chair away from the table, and looked slowly all round her. "I want the telegram and the letter." Joseph found them. "Can you help me?" she said. "I am trying to find out who wrote my son. Say yes, or no, at once; I hate waiting."

Joseph left her in her old posture, with her head down and the papers on her lap.

The appearance of the uneaten dinner in the kitchen produced a discussion, followed by a quarrel.

Joseph was of the opinion that the mistress had got more upon her mind than her mind could well bear. It was useless to send for Mr. Null; he had already mentioned that he would not be home until seven o'clock.. There was no superior person in the house to consult. It was not for the servants to take responsibility on themselves. "Fetch the nearest doctor, and let him be answerable, if anything serious happens." Such was Joseph's advice.

The women (angrily remembering that Mrs. Gallilee had spoken of sending for the police) ridiculed the footman's cautious proposal--with one exception. When the others ironically asked him if he was not accustomed to the mistress's temper yet, Mrs. Gallilee's own maid (Marceline) said, "What do we know about it? Joseph is the only one of us who has seen her, since the morning."

This perfectly sensible remark had the effect of a breath of wind on a smouldering fire. The female servants, all equally suspected of having assisted Mr. Gallilee in making up his parcels, were all equally assured that there was a traitress among them--and that Marceline was the woman. Hitherto suppressed, this feeling now openly found its way to expression. Marceline lost her temper; and betrayed herself as her master's guilty confederate.

"I'm a mean mongrel--am I?" cried the angry maid, repeating the cook's allusion to her birthplace in the Channel Islands. "The mistress shall know, this minute, that I'm the woman who did it!"

"Why didn't you say so before?" the cook retorted.

"Because I promised my master not to tell on him, till he got to his journey's end."

"Who'll lay a wager?" asked the cook. "I bet half-a-crown she changes her mind, before she gets to the top of the stairs."

"Perhaps she thinks the mistress will forgive her," the parlour-maid suggested ironically.

"Or perhaps," the housemaid added, "she means to give the mistress notice to leave."

"That's exactly what I'm going to do!" said Marceline.

The women all declined to believe her. She appealed to Joseph. "What did I tell you, when the mistress first sent me out in the carriage with poor Miss Carmina? Didn't I say that I was no spy, and that I wouldn't submit to be made one? I would have left the house--I would!--but for Miss Carmina's kindness. Any other young lady would have made me feel my mean position. She treated me like a friend--and I don't forget it. I'll go straight from this place, and help to nurse her!"

With that declaration, Marceline left the kitchen.

Arrived at the library door, she paused. Not as the cook had suggested, to "change her mind;" but to consider beforehand how much she should confess to her mistress, and how much she should hold in reserve.

Zo's narrative of what had happened, on the evening of Teresa's arrival, had produced its inevitable effect on the maid's mind. Strengthening, by the sympathy which it excited, her grateful attachment to Carmina, it had necessarily intensified her dislike of Mrs. Gallilee--and Mrs. Gallilee's innocent husband had profited by that circumstance!

Unexpectedly tried by time, Mr. Gallilee's resolution to assert his paternal authority, in spite of his wife, had failed him. The same timidity which invents a lie in a hurry, can construct a stratagem at leisure. Marceline had

discovered her master putting a plan of escape, devised by himself, to its first practical trial before the open wardrobe of his daughters--and had asked slyly if she could be of any use. Never remarkable for presence of mind in emergencies, Mr. Gallilee had helplessly admitted to his confidence the last person in the house, whom anyone else (in his position) would have trusted. "My good soul, I want to take the girls away quietly for change of air--you have got little secrets of your own, like me, haven't you?--and the fact is, I don't quite know how many petticoats--." There, he checked himself; conscious, when it was too late, that he was asking his wife's maid to help him in deceiving his wife. The ready Marceline helped him through the difficulty. "I understand, sir: my mistress's mind is much occupied--and you don't want to trouble her about this little journey." Mr. Gallilee, at a loss for any other answer, pulled out his purse. Marceline modestly drew back at the sight of it. "My mistress pays me, sir; I serve you for nothing." In those words, she would have informed any other man of the place which Mrs. Gallilee held in her estimation. Her master simply considered her to be the most disinterested woman he had ever met with. If she lost her situation through helping him, he engaged to pay her wages until she found another place. The maid set his mind at rest on that subject. "A woman who understands hairdressing as I do, sir, can refer to other ladies besides Mrs. Gallilee, and can get a place whenever she wants one."

Having decided on what she should confess, and on what she should conceal, Marceline knocked at the library door. Receiving no answer, she went in.

Mrs. Gallilee was leaning back in her chair: her hands hung down on either side of her; her eyes looked up drowsily at the ceiling. Prepared to see a person with an overburdened mind, the maid (without sympathy, to quicken her perceptions) saw nothing but a person on the point of taking a nap.

"Can I speak a word, ma'am?"

Mrs. Gallilee's eyes remained fixed on the ceiling. "Is that my maid?" she asked.

Treated--to all appearance--with marked contempt, Marceline no longer cared to assume the forms of respect either in language or manner. "I wish to give you notice to leave," she said abruptly; "I find I can't get on with my fellow-servants."

Mrs. Gallilee slowly raised her head, and looked at her maid--and said nothing.

"And while I'm about it," the angry woman proceeded, "I may as well own the truth. You suspect one of us of helping my master to take away the young ladies' things--I mean some few of their things. Well! you needn't blame innocent people. I'm the person."

Mrs. Gallilee laid her head back again on the chair--and burst out laughing.

For one moment, Marceline looked at her mistress in blank surprise. Then, the terrible truth burst on her. She ran into the hall, and called for Joseph.

He hurried up the stairs. The instant he presented himself at the open door, Mrs. Gallilee rose to her feet. "My medical attendant," she said, with an assumption of dignity; "I must explain myself." She held up one hand, outstretched; and counted her fingers with the other. "First my husband. Then my son. Now my maid. One, two, three. Mr. Null, do you know the proverb? 'It's the last hair that breaks the camel's back.'" She suddenly dropped on her knees. "Will somebody pray for me?" she cried piteously. "I don't know how to pray for myself. Where is God?"

Bareheaded as he was, Joseph ran out. The nearest doctor lived on the opposite side of the Square. He happened to be at home. When he reached the house, the women servants were holding their mistress down by main force.