

CHAPTER LVI.

On the next day, Mr. Mool--returning from a legal consultation to an appointment at his office--found a gentleman, whom he knew by sight, walking up and down before his door; apparently bent on intercepting him. "Mr. Null, I believe?" he said, with his customary politeness.

Mr. Null answered to his name, and asked for a moment of Mr. Mool's time. Mr. Mool looked grave, and said he was late for an appointment already. Mr. Null admitted that the clerks in the office had told him so, and said at last, what he ought to have said at first: "I am Mrs. Gallilee's medical attendant--there is serious necessity for communicating with her husband."

Mr. Mool instantly led the way into the office.

The chief clerk approached his employer, with some severity of manner. "The parties have been waiting, sir, for more than a quarter of an hour." Mr. Mool's attention wandered: he was thinking of Mrs. Gallilee. "Is she dying?" he asked. "She is out of her mind," Mr. Null answered. Those words petrified the lawyer: he looked helplessly at the clerk--who, in his turn, looked indignantly at the office clock. Mr. Mool recovered himself. "Say I am detained by a most distressing circumstance; I will call on the parties later in the day, at their own hour." Giving those directions to the clerk, he hurried Mr. Null upstairs into a private room. "Tell me about it; pray tell me about it. Stop! Perhaps, there is not time enough. What can I do?"

Mr. Null put the question, which he ought to have asked when they met at the house door. "Can you tell me Mr. Gallilee's address?"

"Certainly! Care of the Earl of Northlake--"

"Will you please write it in my pocket-book? I am so upset by this dreadful affair that I can't trust my memory."

Such a confession of helplessness as this, was all that was wanted to rouse Mr. Mool. He rejected the pocket-book, and wrote the address on a telegram. "Return directly: your wife is seriously ill." In five minutes more, the message was on its way to Scotland; and Mr. Null was at liberty to tell his melancholy story--if he could.

With assistance from Mr. Mool, he got through it. "This morning," he

proceeded, "I have had the two best opinions in London. Assuming that there is no hereditary taint, the doctors think favourably of Mrs. Gallilee's chances of recovery."

"Is it violent madness?" Mr. Mool asked.

Mr. Null admitted that two nurses were required. "The doctors don't look on her violence as a discouraging symptom," he said. "They are inclined to attribute it to the strength of her constitution. I felt it my duty to place my own knowledge of the case before them. Without mentioning painful family circumstances--"

"I happen to be acquainted with the circumstances," Mr. Mool interposed. "Are they in any way connected with this dreadful state of things?"

He put that question eagerly, as if he had some strong personal interest in hearing the reply.

Mr. Null blundered on steadily with his story. "I thought it right (with all due reserve) to mention that Mrs. Gallilee had been subjected to--I won't trouble you with medical language--let us say, to a severe shock; involving mental disturbance as well as bodily injury, before her reason gave way."

"And they considered that to be the cause--?"

Mr. Null asserted his dignity. "The doctors agreed with Me, that it had shaken her power of self-control."

"You relieve me, Mr. Null--you infinitely relieve me! If our way of removing the children had done the mischief, I should never have forgiven myself."

He blushed, and said no more. Had Mr. Null noticed the slip of the tongue into which his agitation had betrayed him? Mr. Null did certainly look as if he was going to put a question. The lawyer desperately forestalled him.

"May I ask how you came to apply to me for Mr. Gallilee's address? Did you think of it yourself?"

Mr. Null had never had an idea of his own, from the day of his birth, downward. "A very intelligent man," he answered, "reminded me that you were an old friend of Mr. Gallilee. In short, it was Joseph--the footman at Fairfield Gardens."

Joseph's good opinion was of no importance to Mr. Mool's professional interests. He could gratify Mr. Null's curiosity without fear of lowering himself in the estimation of a client.

"I had better, perhaps, explain that chance allusion of mine to the children," he began. "My good friend, Mr. Gallilee, had his own reasons for removing his daughters from home for a time--reasons, I am bound to add, in which I concur. The children were to be placed under the care of their aunt, Lady Northlake. Unfortunately, her ladyship was away with my lord, cruising in their yacht. They were not able to receive Maria and Zoe at once. In the interval that elapsed--excuse my entering into particulars--our excellent friend had his own domestic reasons for arranging the--the sort of clandestine departure which did in fact take place. It was perhaps unwise on my part to consent--in short, I permitted some of the necessary clothing to be privately deposited here, and called for on the way to the station. Very unprofessional, I am aware. I did it for the best; and allowed my friendly feeling to mislead me. Can I be of any use? How is poor Miss Carmina? No better? Oh, dear! dear! Mr. Ovid will hear dreadful news, when he comes home. Can't we prepare him for it, in any way?"

Mr. Null announced that a telegram would meet Ovid at Queenstown--with the air of a man who had removed every obstacle that could be suggested to him. The kind-hearted lawyer shook his head.

"Is there no friend who can meet him there?" Mr. Mool suggested. "I have clients depending on me--cases, in which property is concerned, and reputation is at stake--or I would gladly go myself. You, with your patients, are as little at liberty as I am. Can't you think of some other friend?"

Mr. Null could think of nobody, and had nothing to propose. Of the three weak men, now brought into association by the influence of domestic calamity, he was the feeblest, beyond all doubt. Mr. Mool had knowledge of law, and could on occasion be incited to energy. Mr. Gallilee had warm affections, which, being stimulated, could at least assert themselves. Mr. Null, professionally and personally, was incapable of stepping beyond his own narrow limits, under any provocation whatever. He submitted to the force of events as a cabbage-leaf submits to the teeth of a rabbit.

After leaving the office, Carmina's medical attendant had his patient to see. Since the unfortunate alarm in the house, he had begun to feel doubtful and anxious about her again.

In the sitting-room, he found Teresa and the landlady in consultation. In her

own abrupt way, the nurse made him acquainted with the nature of the conference.

"We have two worries to bother us," she said; "and the music-master is the worst of the two. There's a notion at the hospital (set agoing, I don't doubt, by the man himself), that I crushed his fingers on purpose. That's a lie! With the open cupboard door between us, how could I see him, or he see me? When I gave it a push-to, I no more knew where his hand was, than you do. If I meant anything, I meant to slap his face for prying about in my room. We've made out a writing between us, to show to the doctors. You shall have a copy, in case you're asked about it. Now for the other matter. You keep on telling me I shall fall ill myself, if I don't get a person to help me with Carmina. Make your mind easy--the person has come."

"Where is she?"

Teresa pointed to the bedroom.

"Recommended by me?" Mr. Null inquired.

"Recommended by herself. And we don't like her. That's the other worry."

Mr. Null's dignity declined to attach any importance to the "other worry." "No nurse has any business here, without my sanction! I'll send her away directly."

He pushed open the baize door. A lady was sitting by Carmina's bedside. Even in the dim light, there was no mistaking that face. Mr. Null recognised--Miss Minerva.

She rose, and bowed to him. He returned the bow stiffly. Nature's protecting care of fools supplies them with an instinct which distrusts ability. Mr. Null never liked Miss Minerva. At the same time, he was a little afraid of her. This was not the sort of nurse who could be ordered to retire at a moment's notice.

"I have been waiting anxiously to see you," she said--and led the way to the farther end of the room. "Carmina terrifies me," she added in a whisper. "I have been here for an hour. When I entered the room her face, poor dear, seemed to come to life again; she was able to express her joy at seeing me. Even the jealous old nurse noticed the change for the better. Why didn't it last? Look at her--oh, look at her!"

The melancholy relapse that had followed the short interval of excitement was visible to anyone now.

There was the "simulated paralysis," showing itself plainly in every part of the face. She lay still as death, looking vacantly at the foot of the bed. Mr. Null was inclined to resent the interference of a meddling woman, in the discharge of his duty. He felt Carmina's pulse, in sulky silence. Her eyes never moved; her hand showed no consciousness of his touch. Teresa opened the door, and looked in--impatiently eager to see the intruding nurse sent away. Miss Minerva invited her to return to her place at the bedside. "I only ask to occupy it," she said considerately, "when you want rest." Teresa was ready with an ungracious reply, but found no opportunity of putting it into words. Miss Minerva turned quickly to Mr. Null. "I must ask you to let me say a few words more," she continued; "I will wait for you in the next room."

Her resolute eyes rested on him with a look which said plainly, "I mean to be heard." He followed her into the sitting-room, and waited in sullen submission to hear what she had to say.

"I must not trouble you by entering into my own affairs," she began. "I will only say that I have obtained an engagement much sooner than I had anticipated, and that the convenience of my employers made it necessary for me to meet them in Paris. I owed Carmina a letter; but I had reasons for not writing until I knew whether she had, or had not, left London. With that object, I called this morning at her aunt's house. You now see me here--after what I have heard from the servants. I make no comment, and I ask for no explanations. One thing only, I must know. Teresa refers me to you. Is Carmina attended by any other medical man?"

Mr. Null answered stiffly, "I am in consultation with Doctor Benjulia; and I expect him to-day."

The reply startled her. "Dr. Benjulia?" she repeated.

"The greatest man we have!" Mr. Null asserted in his most positive manner.

She silently determined to wait until Doctor Benjulia arrived.

"What is the last news of Mr. Ovid?" she said to him, after an interval of consideration.

He told her the news, in the fewest words possible. Even he observed that it

seemed to excite her.

"Oh, Mr. Null! who is to prepare him for what he will see in that room? Who is to tell him what he must hear of his mother?"

There was a certain familiarity in the language of this appeal, which Mr. Null felt it necessary to discourage. "The matter is left in my hands," he announced. "I shall telegraph to him at Queenstown. When he comes home, he will find my prescriptions on the table. Being a medical man himself, my treatment of the case will tell Mr. Ovid Vere everything."

The obstinate insensibility of his tone stopped her on the point of saying what Mr. Mool had said already. She, too, felt for Ovid, when she thought of the cruel brevity of a telegram. "At what date will the vessel reach Queenstown?" she asked.

"By way of making sure," said Mr. Null, "I shall telegraph in a week's time."

She troubled him with no more inquiries. He had purposely remained standing, in the expectation that she would take the hint, and go; and he now walked to the window, and looked out. She remained in her chair, thinking. In a few minutes more, there was a heavy step on the stairs. Benjulia had arrived.

He looked hard at Miss Minerva, in unconcealed surprise at finding her in the house. She rose, and made an effort to propitiate him by shaking hands. "I am very anxious," she said gently, "to hear your opinion."

"Your hand tells me that," he answered. "It's a cold hand, on a warm day. You're an excitable woman."

He looked at Mr. Null, and led the way into the bedroom.

Left by herself, Miss Minerva discovered writing materials (placed ready for Mr. Null's next prescription) on a side table. She made use of them at once to write to her employer. "A dear friend of mine is seriously ill, and in urgent need of all that my devotion can do for her. If you are willing to release me from my duties for a short time, your sympathy and indulgence will not be thrown away on an ungrateful woman. If you cannot do me this favour, I ask your pardon for putting you to inconvenience, and leave some other person, whose mind is at ease, to occupy the place which I am for the present unfit to fill." Having completed her letter in those terms, she waited Benjulia's return.

There was sadness in her face, but no agitation, as she looked patiently towards the bedroom door. At last--in her inmost heart, she knew it--the victory over herself was a victory won. Carmina could trust her now; and Ovid himself should see it!

Mr. Null returned to the sitting-room alone. Doctor Benjulia had no time to spare: he had left the bedroom by the other door.

"I may say (as you seem anxious) that my colleague approves of a proposal, on my part, to slightly modify the last prescription. We recognise the new symptoms, without feeling alarm." Having issued this bulletin, Mr. Null sat down to make his feeble treatment of his patient feebler still.

When he looked up again, the room was empty. Had she left the house? No: her travelling hat and her gloves were on the other table. Had she boldly confronted Teresa on her own ground?

He took his modified prescription into the bedroom. There she was, and there sat the implacable nurse, already persuaded into listening to her! What conceivable subject could there be, which offered two such women neutral ground to meet on? Mr. Null left the house without the faintest suspicion that Carmina might be the subject.

"May I try to rouse her?"

Teresa answered by silently resigning her place at the bedside. Miss Minerva touched Carmina's hand, and spoke. "Have you heard the good news, dear? Ovid is coming back in little more than a week."

Carmina looked--reluctantly looked--at her friend, and said, with an effort, "I am glad."

"You will be better," Miss Minerva continued, "the moment you see him."

Her face became faintly animated. "I shall be able to say good-bye," she answered.

"Not good-bye, darling. He is returning to you after a long journey."

"I am going, Frances, on a longer journey still." She closed her eyes, too weary or too indifferent to say more.

Miss Minerva drew back, struggling against the tears that fell fast over her face. The jealous old nurse quietly moved nearer to her, and kissed her hand. "I've been a brute and a fool," said Teresa; "you're almost as fond of her as I am."

A week later, Miss Minerva left London, to wait for Ovid at Queenstown.