CHAPTER II.

When two friends happen to meet in the street, do they ever look back along the procession of small circumstances which has led them both, from the starting-point of their own houses, to the same spot, at the same time? Not one man in ten thousand has probably ever thought of making such a fantastic inquiry as this. And consequently not one man in ten thousand, living in the midst of reality, has discovered that he is also living in the midst of romance.

From the moment when the young surgeon closed the door of his house, he was walking blindfold on his way to a patient in the future who was personally still a stranger to him. He never reached the College of Surgeons. He never embarked on his friend's yacht.

What were the obstacles which turned him aside from the course that he had in view? Nothing but a series of trivial circumstances, occurring in the experience of a man who goes out for a walk.

He had only reached the next street, when the first of the circumstances presented itself in the shape of a friend's carriage, which drew up at his side. A bright benevolent face encircled by bushy white whiskers, looked out of the window, and a hearty voice asked him if he had completed his arrangements for a long holiday. Having replied to this, Ovid had a question to put, on his side.

"How is our patient, Sir Richard?"

"Out of danger."

"And what do the other doctors say now?"

Sir Richard laughed: "They say it's my luck."

"Not convinced yet?"

"Not in the least. Who has ever succeeded in convincing fools? Let's try another subject. Is your mother reconciled to your new plans?"

"I can hardly tell you. My mother is in a state of indescribable agitation. Her brother's Will has been found in Italy. And his daughter may arrive in

England at a moment's notice."

"Unmarried?" Sir Richard asked slyly.

"I don't know."

"Any money?"

Ovid smiled--not cheerfully. "Do you think my poor mother would be in a state of indescribable agitation if there was not money?"

Sir Richard was one of those obsolete elderly persons who quote Shakespeare. "Ah, well," he said, "your mother is like Kent in King Lear--she's too old to learn. Is she as fond as ever of lace? and as keen as ever after a bargain?" He handed a card out of the carriage window. "I have just seen an old patient of mine," he resumed, "in whom I feel a friendly interest. She is retiring from business by my advice; and she asks me, of all the people in the world, to help her in getting rid of some wonderful 'remnants,' at 'an alarming sacrifice!' My kind regards to your mother--and there's a chance for her. One last word, Ovid. Don't be in too great a hurry to return to work; you have plenty of spare time before you. Look at my wise dog here, on the front seat, and learn from him to be idle and happy."

The great physician had another companion, besides his dog. A friend, bound his way, had accepted a seat in the carriage. "Who is that handsome young man?" the friend asked as they drove away.

"He is the only son of a relative of mine, dead many years since," Sir Richard replied. "Don't forget that you have seen him."

"May I ask why?"

"He has not yet reached the prime of life; and he is on the way--already far on the way--to be one of the foremost men of his time. With a private fortune, he has worked as few surgeons work who have their bread to get by their profession. The money comes from his late father. His mother has married again. The second husband is a lazy, harmless old fellow, named Gallilee; possessed of one small attraction--fifty thousand pounds, grubbed up in trade. There are two little daughters, by the second marriage. With such a stepfather as I have described, and, between ourselves, with a mother who has rather more than her fair share of the jealous, envious, and money-loving propensities of humanity, my friend Ovid is not diverted by family influences from the close pursuit of his profession. You will tell me,

he may marry. Well! if he gets a good wife she will be a circumstance in his favour. But, so far as I know, he is not that sort of man. Cooler, a deal cooler, with women than I am--though I am old enough to be his father. Let us get back to his professional prospects. You heard him ask me about a patient?"

"Yes."

"Very good. Death was knocking hard at that patient's door, when I called Ovid into consultation with myself and with two other doctors who differed with me. It was one of the very rare cases in which the old practice of bleeding was, to my mind, the only treatment to pursue. I never told him that this was the point in dispute between me and the other men--and they said nothing, on their side, at my express request. He took his time to examine and think; and he saw the chance of saving the patient by venturing on the use of the lancet as plainly as I did--with my forty years' experience to teach me! A young man with that capacity for discovering the remote cause of disease, and with that superiority to the trammels of routine in applying the treatment, has no common medical career before him. His holiday will set his health right in next to no time. I see nothing in his way, at present--not even a woman! But," said Sir Richard, with the explanatory wink of one eye peculiar (like quotation from Shakespeare) to persons of the obsolete old time, "we know better than to forecast the weather if a petticoat influence appears on the horizon. One prediction, however, I do risk. If his mother buys any of that lace--I know who will get the best of the bargain!"

The conditions under which the old doctor was willing to assume the character of a prophet never occurred. Ovid remembered that he was going away on a long voyage--and Ovid was a good son. He bought some of the lace, as a present to his mother at parting; and, most assuredly, he got the worst of the bargain.

His shortest way back to the straight course, from which he had deviated in making his purchase, led him into a by-street, near the flower and fruit market of Covent Garden. Here he met with the second in number of the circumstances which attended his walk. He found himself encountered by an intolerably filthy smell.

The market was not out of the direct way to Lincoln's Inn Fields. He fled from the smell to the flowery and fruity perfumes of Covent Garden, and completed the disinfecting process by means of a basket of strawberries.

Why did a poor ragged little girl, carrying a big baby, look with such longing eyes at the delicious fruit, that, as a kind-hearted man, he had no alternative but to make her a present of the strawberries? Why did two dirty boyfriends of hers appear immediately afterwards with news of Punch in a neighbouring street, and lead the little girl away with them? Why did these two new circumstances inspire him with a fear that the boys might take the strawberries away from the poor child, burdened as she was with a baby almost as big as herself? When we suffer from overwrought nerves we are easily disturbed by small misgivings. The idle man of wearied mind followed the friends of the street drama to see what happened, forgetful of the College of Surgeons, and finding a new fund of amusement in himself.

Arrived in the neighbouring street, he discovered that the Punch performance had come to an end--like some other dramatic performances of higher pretensions--for want of a paying audience. He waited at a certain distance, watching the children. His doubts had done them an injustice. The boys only said, "Give us a taste." And the liberal little girl rewarded their good conduct. An equitable and friendly division of the strawberries was made in a quiet corner.

Where--always excepting the case of a miser or a millionaire--is the man to be found who could have returned to the pursuit of his own affairs, under these circumstances, without encouraging the practice of the social virtues by a present of a few pennies? Ovid was not that man.

Putting back in his breast-pocket the bag in which he was accustomed to carry small coins for small charities, his hand touched something which felt like the envelope of a letter. He took it out--looked at it with an expression of annoyance and surprise--and once more turned aside from the direct way to Lincoln's Inn Fields.

The envelope contained his last prescription. Having occasion to consult the "Pharmacopoeia," he had written it at home, and had promised to send it to the patient immediately. In the absorbing interest of making his preparations for leaving England, it had remained forgotten in his pocket for nearly two days. The one means of setting this unlucky error right, without further delay, was to deliver his prescription himself, and to break through his own rules for the second time by attending to a case of illness--purely as an act of atonement.

The patient lived in a house nearly opposite to the British Museum. In this northward direction he now set his face.

He made his apologies, and gave his advice--and, getting out again into the street, tried once more to shape his course for the College of Surgeons. Passing the walled garden of the British Museum, he looked towards it--and paused. What had stopped him, this time? Nothing but a tree, fluttering its bright leaves in the faint summer air.

A marked change showed itself in his face.

The moment before he had been passing in review the curious little interruptions which had attended his walk, and had wondered humorously what would happen next. Two women, meeting him, and seeing a smile on his lips, had said to each other, "There goes a happy man." If they had encountered him now, they might have reversed their opinion. They would have seen a man thinking of something once dear to him, in the far and unforgotten past.

He crossed over the road to the side-street which faced the garden. His head drooped; he moved mechanically. Arrived in the street, he lifted his eyes, and stood (within nearer view of it) looking at the tree.

Hundreds of miles away from London, under another tree of that gentle family, this man--so cold to women in after life--had made child-love, in the days of his boyhood, to a sweet little cousin long since numbered with the dead. The present time, with its interests and anxieties, passed away like the passing of a dream. Little by little, as the minutes followed each other, his sore heart felt a calming influence, breathed mysteriously from the fluttering leaves. Still forgetful of the outward world, he wandered slowly up the street; living in the old scenes; thinking, not unhappily now, the old thoughts.

Where, in all London, could he have found a solitude more congenial to a dreamer in daylight?

The broad district, stretching northward and eastward from the British Museum, is like the quiet quarter of a country town set in the midst of the roaring activities of the largest city in the world. Here, you can cross the road, without putting limb or life in peril. Here, when you are idle, you can saunter and look about, safe from collision with merciless straight-walkers whose time is money, and whose destiny is business. Here, you may meet undisturbed cats on the pavement, in the full glare of noontide, and may watch, through the railings of the squares, children at play on grass that almost glows with the lustre of the Sussex Downs. This haven of rest is alike out of the way of fashion and business; and is yet within easy reach of the

one and the other. Ovid paused in a vast and silent square. If his little cousin had lived, he might perhaps have seen his children at play in some such secluded place as this.

The birds were singing blithely in the trees. A tradesman's boy, delivering fish to the cook, and two girls watering flowers at a window, were the only living creatures near him, as he roused himself and looked around.

Where was the College? Where were the Curator and the Specimen? Those questions brought with them no feeling of anxiety or surprise. He turned, in a half-awakened way, without a wish or a purpose--turned, and listlessly looked back.

Two foot-passengers, dressed in mourning garments, were rapidly approaching him. One of them, as they came nearer, proved to be an aged woman. The other was a girl.

He drew aside to let them pass. They looked at him with the lukewarm curiosity of strangers, as they went by. The girl's eyes and his met. Only the glance of an instant--and its influence held him for life.

She went swiftly on, as little impressed by the chance meeting as the old woman at her side. Without stopping to think--without being capable of thought--Ovid followed them. Never before had he done what he was doing now; he was, literally, out of himself. He saw them ahead of him, and he saw nothing else.

Towards the middle of the square, they turned aside into a street on the left. A concert-hall was in the street--with doors open for an afternoon performance. They entered the hall. Still out of himself, Ovid followed them.