

## **CHAPTER IX.**

Time had advanced to midnight, after the reading of the Will--and Ovid was at home.

The silence of the quiet street in which he lived was only disturbed by the occasional rolling of carriage wheels, and by dance-music from the house of one of his neighbours who was giving a ball. He sat at his writing-table, thinking. Honest self-examination had laid out the state of his mind before him like a map, and had shown him, in its true proportions, the new interest that filled his life.

Of that interest he was now the willing slave. If he had not known his mother to be with her, he would have gone back to Carmina when the lawyer left the house. As it was, he had sent a message upstairs, inviting himself to dinner, solely for the purpose of seeing Carmina again--and he had been bitterly disappointed when he heard that Mr. and Mrs. Gallilee were engaged, and that his cousin would take tea in her room. He had eaten something at this club, without caring what it was. He had gone to the Opera afterwards, merely because his recollections of a favourite singing-lady of that season vaguely reminded him of Carmina. And there he was, at midnight, on his return from the music, eager for the next opportunity of seeing his cousin, a few hours hence--when he had arranged to say good-bye at the family breakfast-table.

To feel this change in him as vividly as he felt it, could lead to but one conclusion in the mind of a man who was incapable of purposely deceiving himself. He was as certain as ever of the importance of rest and change, in the broken state of his health. And yet, in the face of that conviction, his contemplated sea-voyage had already become one of the vanished illusions of his life!

His friend had arranged to travel with him, that morning, from London to the port at which the yacht was waiting for them. They were hardly intimate enough to trust each other unreservedly with secrets. The customary apology for breaking an engagement was the alternative that remained. With the paper on his desk and with the words on his mind, he was yet in such a strange state of indecision that he hesitated to write the letter!

His morbidly-sensitive nerves were sadly shaken. Even the familiar record of the half-hour by the hall clock startled him. The stroke of the bell was

succeeded by a mild and mournful sound outside the door--the mewing of a cat.

He rose, without any appearance of surprise, and opened the door.

With grace and dignity entered a small black female cat; exhibiting, by way of variety of colour, a melancholy triangular patch of white over the lower part of her face, and four brilliantly clean white paws. Ovid went back to his desk. As soon as he was in his chair again, the cat jumped on his shoulder, and sat there purring in his ear. This was the place she occupied, whenever her master was writing alone. Passing one day through a suburban neighbourhood, on his round of visits, the young surgeon had been attracted by a crowd in a by-street. He had rescued his present companion from starvation in a locked-up house, the barbarous inhabitants of which had gone away for a holiday, and had forgotten the cat. When Ovid took the poor creature home with him in his carriage, popular feeling decided that the unknown gentleman was "a rum 'un." From that moment, this fortunate little member of a brutally-slandered race attached herself to her new friend, and to that friend only. If Ovid had owned the truth, he must have acknowledged that her company was a relief to him, in the present state of his mind.

When a man's flagging purpose is in want of a stimulant, the most trifling change in the circumstances of the moment often applies the animating influence. Even such a small interruption as the appearance of his cat rendered this service to Ovid. To use the common and expressive phrase, it had "shaken him up." He wrote the letter--and his patient companion killed the time by washing her face.

His mind being so far relieved, he went to bed--the cat following him upstairs to her bed in a corner of the room. Clothes are unwholesome superfluities not contemplated in the system of Nature. When we are exhausted, there is no such thing as true repose for us until we are freed from our dress. Men subjected to any excessive exertion--fighting, rowing, walking, working--must strip their bodies as completely as possible, or they are not equal to the call on them. Ovid's knowledge of his own temperament told him that sleep was not to be hoped for, that night. But the way to bed was the way to rest notwithstanding, by getting rid of his clothes.

With the sunrise he rose and went out.

He took his letter with him, and dropped it into the box in his friend's door. The sooner he committed himself to the new course that he had taken, the

more certain he might feel of not renewing the miserable and useless indecision of the past night. "Thank God, that's done!" he said to himself, as he heard the letter fall into the box, and left the house.

After walking in the Park until he was weary, he sat down by the ornamental lake, and watched the waterfowl enjoying their happy lives.

Wherever he went, whatever he did, Carmina was always with him. He had seen thousands of girls, whose personal attractions were far more remarkable--and some few among them whose manner was perhaps equally winning. What was the charm in the little half-foreign cousin that had seized on him in an instant, and that seemed to fasten its subtle hold more and more irresistibly with every minute of his life? He was content to feel the charm without caring to fathom it. The lovely morning light took him in imagination to her bedside; he saw her sleeping peacefully in her new room. Would the time come when she might dream of him? He looked at his watch. It was seven o'clock. The breakfast-hour at Fairfield Gardens had been fixed for eight, to give him time to catch the morning train. Half an hour might be occupied in walking back to his own house. Add ten minutes to make some change in his dress--and he might set forth for his next meeting with Carmina. No uneasy anticipation of what the family circle might think of his sudden change of plan troubled his mind. A very different question occupied him. For the first time in his life, he wondered what dress a woman would wear at breakfast time.

He opened his house door with his own key. An elderly person, in a coarse black gown, was seated on the bench in the hall. She rose, and advanced towards him. In speechless astonishment, he confronted Carmina's faithful companion--Teresa.

"If you please, I want to speak to you," she said, in her best English. Ovid took her into his consulting-room. She wasted no time in apologies or explanations. "Don't speak!" she broke out. "Carmina has had a bad night."

"I shall be at the house in half an hour!" Ovid eagerly assured her.

The duenna shook her forefinger impatiently. "She doesn't want a doctor. She wants a friend, when I am gone. What is her life here? A new life, among new people. Don't speak! She's frightened and miserable. So young, so shy, so easily startled. And I must leave her--I must! I must! My old man is failing fast; he may die, without a creature to comfort him, if I don't go back. I could tear my hair when I think of it. Don't speak! It's my business to speak. Ha! I know, what I know. Young doctor, you're in love with Carmina!"

I've read you like a book. You're quick to see, sudden to feel--like one of my people. Be one of my people. Help me."

She dragged a chair close to Ovid, and laid her hand suddenly and heavily on his arm.

"It's not my fault, mind; I have said nothing to disturb her. No! I've made the best of it. I've lied to her. What do I care? I would lie like Judas Iscariot himself to spare Carmina a moment's pain. It's such a new life for her--try to see it for yourself--such a new life. You and I shook hands yesterday. Do it again. Are you surprised to see me? I asked your mother's servants where you lived; and here I am--with the cruel teeth of anxiety gnawing me alive when I think of the time to come. Oh, my lamb! my angel! she's alone. Oh, my God, only seventeen years old, and alone in the world! No father, no mother; and soon--oh, too soon, too soon--not even Teresa! What are you looking at? What is there so wonderful in the tears of a stupid old fool? Drops of hot water. Ha! ha! if they fall on your fine carpet here, they won't hurt it. You're a good fellow; you're a dear fellow. Hush! I know the Evil Eye when I see it. No more of that! A secret in your ear--I've said a word for you to Carmina already. Give her time; she's not cold; young and innocent, that's all. Love will come--I know, what I know--love will come."

She laughed--and, in the very act of laughing, changed again. Fright looked wildly at Ovid out of her staring eyes. Some terrifying remembrance had suddenly occurred to her. She sprang to her feet.

"You said you were going away," she cried. "You said it, when you left us yesterday. It can't be! it shan't be! You're not going to leave Carmina, too?"

Ovid's first impulse was to tell the whole truth. He resisted the impulse. To own that Carmina was the cause of his abandonment of the sea-voyage, before she was even sure of the impression she had produced on him, would be to place himself in a position from which his self-respect recoiled. "My plans are changed," was all he said to Teresa. "Make your mind easy; I'm not going away."

The strange old creature snapped her fingers joyously. "Good-bye! I want no more of you." With those cool and candid words of farewell, she advanced to the door--stopped suddenly to think--and came back. Only a moment had passed, and she was as sternly in earnest again as ever.

"May I call you by your name?" she asked.

"Certainly!"

"Listen, Ovid! I may not see you again before I go back to my husband. This is my last word--never forget it. Even Carmina may have enemies!"

What could she be thinking of? "Enemies--in my mother's house!" Ovid exclaimed. "What can you possibly mean?"

Teresa returned to the door, and only answered him when she had opened it to go.

"The Evil Eye never lies," she said. "Wait--and you will see."