

CHAPTER XIII.

Ovid had promised to return to Carmina in a minute. The minutes passed, and still Doctor Benjulia held him in talk.

Now that he was no longer seeking amusement, in his own dreary way, by mystifying Zo, the lines seemed to harden in the doctor's fleshless face. A scrupulously polite man, he was always cold in his politeness. He waited to have his hand shaken, and waited to be spoken to. And yet, on this occasion, he had something to say. When Ovid opened the conversation, he changed the subject directly.

"Benjulia! what brings You to the Zoological Gardens?"

"One of the monkeys has got brain disease; and they fancy I might like to see the beast before they kill him. Have you been thinking lately of that patient we lost?"

Not at the moment remembering the patient, Ovid made no immediate reply. The doctor seemed to distrust his silence.

"You don't mean to say you have forgotten the case?" he resumed. "We called it hysteria, not knowing what else it was. I don't forgive the girl for slipping through our fingers; I hate to be beaten by Death, in that way. Have you made up your mind what to do, on the next occasion? Perhaps you think you could have saved her life if you had been sent for, now?"

"No, indeed, I am just as ignorant--"

"Give ignorance time," Benjulia interposed, "and ignorance will become knowledge--if a man is in earnest. The proper treatment might occur to you to-morrow."

He held to his idea with such obstinacy that Ovid set him right, rather impatiently. "The proper treatment has as much chance of occurring to the greatest ass in the profession," he answered, "as it has of occurring to me. I can put my mind to no good medical use; my work has been too much for me. I am obliged to give up practice, and rest--for a time."

Not even a formal expression of sympathy escaped Doctor Benjulia. Having been a distrustful friend so far, he became an inquisitive friend now. "You're

going away, of course," he said. "Where to? On the Continent? Not to Italy--if you really want to recover your health!"

"What is the objection to Italy?"

The doctor put his great hand solemnly on his young friend's shoulder. "The medical schools in that country are recovering their past reputation," he said. "They are becoming active centres of physiological inquiry. You will be dragged into it, to a dead certainty. They're sure to try what they can strike out by collision with a man like you. What will become of that overworked mind of yours, when a lot of professors are searching it without mercy? Have you ever been to Canada?"

"No. Have you?"

"I have been everywhere. Canada is just the place for you, in this summer season. Bracing air; and steady-going doctors who leave the fools in Europe to pry into the secrets of Nature. Thousands of miles of land, if you like riding. Thousands of miles of water, if you like sailing. Pack up, and go to Canada."

What did all this mean? Was he afraid that his colleague might stumble on some discovery which he was in search of himself? And did the discovery relate to his own special subject of brains and nerves? Ovid made an attempt to understand him.

"Tell me something about yourself, Benjulia," he said. "Are you returning to your regular professional work?"

Benjulia struck his bamboo stick emphatically on the gravel-walk. "Never! Unless I know more than I know now."

This surely meant that he was as much devoted to his chemical experiments as ever? In that case, how could Ovid (who knew nothing of chemical experiments) be an obstacle in the doctor's way? Baffled thus far, he made another attempt at inducing Benjulia to explain himself.

"When is the world to hear of your discoveries?" he asked.

The doctor's massive forehead gathered ominously into a frown, "Damn the world!" That was his only reply.

Ovid was not disposed to allow himself to be kept in the dark in this way. "I

suppose you are going on with your experiments?" he said.

The gloom of Benjulia's grave eyes deepened: they stared with a stern fixedness into vacancy. His great head bent slowly over his broad breast. The whole man seemed to be shut up in himself. "I go on a way of my own," he growled. "Let nobody cross it."

After that reply, to persist in making inquiries would only have ended in needlessly provoking an irritable man. Ovid looked back towards Carmina. "I must return to my friends," he said.

The doctor lifted his head, like a man awakened. "Have I been rude?" he asked. "Don't talk to me about my experiments. That's my raw place, and you hit me on it. What did you say just now? Friends? who are your friends?" He rubbed his hand savagely over his forehead--it was a way he had of clearing his mind. "I know," he went on. "I saw your friends just now. Who's the young lady?" His most intimate companions had never heard him laugh: they had sometimes seen his thin-lipped mouth widen drearily into a smile. It widened now. "Whoever she is," he proceeded, "Zo wonders why you don't kiss her."

This specimen of Benjulia's attempts at pleasantry was not exactly to Ovid's taste. He shifted the topic to his little sister. "You were always fond of Zo," he said.

Benjulia looked thoroughly puzzled. Fondness for anybody was, to all appearance, one of the few subjects on which he had not qualified himself to offer an opinion. He gave his head another savage rub, and returned to the subject of the young lady. "Who is she?" he asked again.

"My cousin," Ovid replied as shortly as possible.

"Your cousin? A girl of Lady Northlake's?"

"No: my late uncle's daughter."

Benjulia suddenly came to a standstill. "What!" he cried, "has that misbegotten child grown up to be a woman?"

Ovid started. Words of angry protest were on his lips, when he perceived Teresa and Zo on one side of him, and the keeper of the monkeys on the other. Benjulia dismissed the man, with the favourable answer which Zo had already reported. They walked on again. Ovid was at liberty to speak.

"Do you know what you said of my cousin, just now?" he began.

His tone seemed to surprise the doctor. "What did I say?" he asked.

"You used a very offensive word. You called Carmina a 'misbegotten child.' Are you repeating some vile slander on the memory of her mother?"

Benjulia came to another standstill. "Slander?" he repeated--and said no more.

Ovid's anger broke out. "Yes!" he replied. "Or a lie, if you like, told of a woman as high above reproach as your mother or mine!"

"You are hot," the doctor remarked, and walked on again. "When I was in Italy--" he paused to calculate, "when I was at Rome, fifteen years ago, your cousin was a wretched little rickety child. I said to Robert Graywell, 'Don't get too fond of that girl; she'll never live to grow up.' He said something about taking her away to the mountain air. I didn't think, myself, the mountain air would be of any use. It seems I was wrong. Well! it's a surprise to me to find her--" he waited, and calculated again, "to find her grown up to be seventeen years old." To Ovid's ears, there was an inhuman indifference in his tone as he said this, which it was impossible not to resent, by looks, if not in words. Benjulia noticed the impression that he had produced, without in the least understanding it. "Your nervous system's in a nasty state," he remarked; "you had better take care of yourself. I'll go and look at the monkey."

His face was like the face of the impenetrable sphinx; his deep bass voice droned placidly. Ovid's anger had passed by him like the passing of the summer air. "Good-bye!" he said; "and take care of those nasty nerves. I tell you again--they mean mischief."

Not altogether willingly, Ovid made his apologies. "If I have misunderstood you, I beg your pardon. At the same time, I don't think I am to blame. Why did you mislead me by using that detestable word?"

"Wasn't it the right word?"

"The right word--when you only wanted to speak of a poor sickly child! Considering that you took your degree at Oxford--"

"You could expect nothing better from the disadvantages of my education,"

said the doctor, finishing the sentence with the grave composure that distinguished him. "When I said 'misbegotten,' perhaps I ought to have said 'half-begotten'? Thank you for reminding me. I'll look at the dictionary when I get home."

Ovid's mind was not set at ease yet. "There's one other thing," he persisted, "that seems unaccountable." He started, and seized Benjulia by the arm. "Stop!" he cried, with a sudden outburst of alarm.

"Well?" asked the doctor, stopping directly. "What is it?"

"Nothing," said Ovid, recoiling from a stain on the gravel walk, caused by the remains of an unlucky beetle, crushed under his friend's heavy foot. "You trod on the beetle before I could stop you."

Benjulia's astonishment at finding an adult male human being (not in a lunatic asylum) anxious to spare the life of a beetle, literally struck him speechless. His medical instincts came to his assistance. "You had better leave London at once," he suggested. "Get into pure air, and be out of doors all day long." He turned over the remains of the beetle with the end of his stick. "The common beetle," he said; "I haven't damaged a Specimen."

Ovid returned to the subject, which had suffered interruption through his abortive little act of mercy. "You knew my uncle in Italy. It seems strange, Benjulia, that I should never have heard of it before."

"Yes; I knew your uncle; and," he added with especial emphasis, "I knew his wife."

"Well?"

"Well, I can't say I felt any particular interest in either of them. Nothing happened afterwards to put me in mind of the acquaintance till you told me who the young lady was, just now.

"Surely my mother must have reminded you?"

"Not that I can remember. Women in her position don't much fancy talking of a relative who has married"--he stopped to choose his next words. "I don't want to be rude; suppose we say married beneath him?"

Reflection told Ovid that this was true. Even in conversation with himself (before the arrival in England of Robert's Will), his mother rarely mentioned

her brother--and still more rarely his family. There was another reason for Mrs. Gallilee's silence, known only to herself. Robert was in the secret of her debts, and Robert had laid her under heavy pecuniary obligations. The very sound of his name was revolting to his amiable sister: it reminded her of that humiliating sense, known in society as a sense of gratitude.

Carmina was still waiting--and there was nothing further to be gained by returning to the subject of her mother with such a man as Benjulia. Ovid held out his hand to say good-bye.

Taking the offered hand readily enough, the doctor repeated his odd question--"I haven't been rude, have I?"--with an unpleasant appearance of going through a form purely for form's sake. Ovid's natural generosity of feeling urged him to meet the advance, strangely as it had been made, with a friendly reception.

"I am afraid it is I who have been rude," he said. "Will you go back with me, and be introduced to Carmina?"

Benjulia made his acknowledgments in his own remarkable way. "No, thank you," he said, quietly, "I'd rather see the monkey."