CHAPTER XIX.

The lapse of a few hours exercised no deteriorating influence on Mrs. Gallilee's amiability.

On the next day, thanks to his mother's interference, Ovid was left in the undisturbed enjoyment of Carmina's society. Not only Miss Minerva, but even Mr. Gallilee and the children, were kept out of the way with a delicately-exercised dexterity, which defied the readiest suspicion to take offence. In one word, all that sympathy and indulgence could do to invite Ovid's confidence, was unobtrusively and modestly done. Never had the mistress of domestic diplomacy reached her ends with finer art.

In the afternoon, a messenger delivered Benjulia's reply to Mrs. Gallilee's announcement of her son's contemplated journey--despatched by the morning's post. The doctor was confined to the house by an attack of gout. If Ovid wanted information on the subject of Canada, Ovid must go to him, and get it. That was all.

"Have you ever been to Doctor Benjulia's house?" Carmina asked.

"Never."

"Then all you have told me about him is mere report? Now you will find out the truth! Of course you will go?"

Ovid felt no desire to make a voyage of exploration to Benjulia's house--and said so plainly. Carmina used all her powers of persuasion to induce him to change his mind. Mrs. Gallilee (superior to the influence of girlish curiosity) felt the importance of obtaining introductions to Canadian society, and agreed with her niece. "I shall order the carriage," she said, assuming a playfully despotic tone; "and, if you don't go to the doctor--Carmina and I will pay him a visit in your place."

Threatened, if he remained obstinate, with such a result as this, Ovid had no alternative but to submit.

The one order that could be given to the coachman was to drive to the village of Hendon, on the north-western side of London, and to trust to inquiries for the rest of the way. Between Hendon and Willesden, there are pastoral solitudes within an hour's drive of Oxford Street--wooded lanes and wild-

flowers, farms and cornfields, still unprofaned by the devastating brickwork of the builder of modern times. Following winding ways, under shadowing trees, the coachman made his last inquiry at a roadside public-house. Hearing that Benjulia's place of abode was now within half a mile of him, Ovid set forth on foot; leaving the driver and the horses to take their ease at their inn.

He arrived at an iron gate, opening out of a lonely lane.

There, in the middle of a barren little field, he saw Benjulia's house--a hideous square building of yellow brick, with a slate roof. A low wall surrounded the place, having another iron gate at the entrance. The enclosure within was as barren as the field without: not even an attempt at flower-garden or kitchen-garden was visible. At a distance of some two hundred yards from the house stood a second and smaller building, with a skylight in the roof, which Ovid recognised (from description) as the famous laboratory. Behind it was the hedge which parted Benjulia's morsel of land from the land of his neighbour. Here, the trees rose again, and the fields beyond were cultivated. No dwellings, and no living creatures appeared. So near to London--and yet, in its loneliness, so far away--there was something unnatural in the solitude of the place.

Led by a feeling of curiosity, which was fast degenerating into suspicion, Ovid approached the laboratory, without showing himself in front of the house. No watch-dog barked; no servant appeared on the look-out for a visitor. He was ashamed of himself as he did it, but (so strongly had he been impressed by Carmina's observation of the doctor) he even tried the locked door of the laboratory, and waited and listened! It was a breezy summer-day; the leaves of the trees near him rustled cheerfully. Was there another sound audible? Yes--low and faint, there rose through the sweet woodland melody a moaning cry. It paused; it was repeated; it stopped. He looked round him, not quite sure whether the sound proceeded from the outside or the inside of the building. He shook the door. Nothing happened. The suffering creature (if it was a suffering creature) was silent or dead. Had chemical experiment accidentally injured some living thing? Or--?

He recoiled from pursuing that second inquiry. The laboratory had, by this time, become an object of horror to him. He returned to the dwelling-house.

He put his hand on the latch of the gate, and looked back at the laboratory. He hesitated.

That moaning cry, so piteous and so short-lived, haunted his ears. The idea

of approaching Benjulia became repellent to him. What he might afterwards think of himself--what his mother and Carmina might think of him--if he returned without having entered the doctors' house, were considerations which had no influence over his mind, in its present mood. The impulse of the moment was the one power that swayed him. He put the latch back in the socket. "I won't go in," he said to himself.

It was too late. As he turned from the house a manservant appeared at the door--crossed the enclosure--and threw the gate open for Ovid, without uttering a word.

They entered the passage. The speechless manservant opened a door on the right, and made a bow, inviting the visitor to enter. Ovid found himself in a room as barren as the field outside. There were the plastered walls, there was the bare floor, left exactly as the builders had left them when the house was finished. After a short absence, the man appeared again. He might be depressed in spirits, or crabbed in temper: the fact remained that, even now, he had nothing to say. He opened a door on the opposite side of the passage--made another bow--and vanished.

"Don't come near me!" cried Benjulia, the moment Ovid showed himself.

The doctor was seated in an inner corner of the room; robed in a long black dressing-gown, buttoned round his throat, which hid every part of him below his fleshless face, except his big hands, and his tortured gouty foot. Rage and pain glared in his gloomy gray eyes, and shook his clenched fists, resting on the arms of an easy chair. "Ten thousand red-hot devils are boring ten thousand holes through my foot," he said. "If you touch the pillow on my stool, I shall fly at your throat." He poured some cooling lotion from a bottle into a small watering-pot, and irrigated his foot as if it had been a bed of flowers. By way of further relief to the pain, he swore ferociously; addressing his oaths to himself, in thunderous undertones which made the glasses ring on the sideboard.

Relieved, in his present frame of mind, to have escaped the necessity of shaking hands, Ovid took a chair, and looked about him. Even here he discovered but little furniture, and that little of the heavy old-fashioned sort. Besides the sideboard, he perceived a dining-table, six chairs, and a dingy brown carpet. There were no curtains on the window, and no pictures or prints on the drab-coloured walls. The empty grate showed its bleak black cavity undisguised; and the mantelpiece had nothing on it but the doctor's dirty and strong-smelling pipe. Benjulia set down his watering-pot, as a sign that the paroxysm of pain had passed away. "A dull place to live in, isn't it?"

In those words he welcomed the visitor to his house.

Irritated by the accident which had forced him into the repellent presence of Benjulia, Ovid answered in a tone which matched the doctor on his own hard ground.

"It's your own fault if the place is dull. Why haven't you planted trees, and laid out a garden?"

"I dare say I shall surprise you," Benjulia quietly rejoined; "but I have a habit of speaking my mind. I don't object to a dull place; and I don't care about trees and gardens."

"You don't seem to care about furniture either," said Ovid.

Now that he was out of pain for awhile, the doctor's innate insensibility to what other people might think of him, or might say to him, resumed its customary torpor in its own strangely unconscious way. He seemed only to understand that Ovid's curiosity was in search of information about trifles. Well, there would be less trouble in giving him his information, than in investigating his motives. So Benjulia talked of his furniture.

"I dare say you're right," he said. "My sister-in-law--did you know I had a relation of that sort?--my sister-in-law got the tables and chairs, and beds and basins. Buying things at shops doesn't interest me. I gave her a cheque; and I told her to furnish a room for me to eat in, and a room for me to sleep in--and not to forget the kitchen and the garrets for the servants. What more do I want?"

His intolerable composure only added to his guest's irritability.

"A selfish way of putting it," Ovid broke out. "Have you nobody to think of but yourself?"

"Nobody--I am happy to say."

"That's downright cynicism, Benjulia!"

The doctor reflected. "Is it?" he said. "Perhaps you may be right again. I think it's only indifference, myself. Curiously enough my brother looks at it from your point of view--he even used the same word that you used just now. I suppose he found my cynicism beyond the reach of reform. At any rate, he left off coming here. I got rid of him on easy terms. What do you

say? That inhuman way of talking is unworthy of me? Really I don't think so. I'm not a downright savage. It's only indifference."

"Does your brother return your indifference? You must be a nice pair, if he does!"

Benjulia seemed to find a certain dreary amusement in considering the question that Ovid had proposed. He decided on doing justice to his absent relative.

"My brother's intelligence is perhaps equal to such a small effort as you suggest," he said. "He has just brains enough to keep himself out of an asylum for idiots. Shall I tell you what he is in two words? A stupid sensualist--that's what he is. I let his wife come here sometimes, and cry. It doesn't trouble me; and it seems to relieve her. More of my indifference--eh? Well, I don't know. I gave her the change out of the furniture-cheque, to buy a new bonnet with. You might call that indifference, and you might be right once more. I don't care about money. Will you have a drink? You see I can't move. Please ring for the man."

Ovid refused the drink, and changed the subject. "Your servant is a remarkably silent person," he said.

"That's his merit," Benjulia answered; "the women-servants have quarrelled with every other man I've had. They can't quarrel with this man. I have raised his wages in grateful acknowledgment of his usefulness to me. I hate noise."

"Is that the reason why you don't keep a watch-dog?"

"I don't like dogs. They bark."

He had apparently some other disagreeable association with dogs, which he was not disposed to communicate. His hollow eyes stared gloomily into vacancy. Ovid's presence in the room seemed to have become, for the time being, an impression erased from his mind. He recovered himself, with the customary vehement rubbing of his head, and turned the talk to the object of Ovid's visit.

"So you have taken my advice," he said. "You're going to Canada, and you want to get at what I can tell you before you start. Here's my journal. It will jog my memory, and help us both."

His writing materials were placed on a movable table, screwed to his chair. Near them lay a shabby-looking book, guarded by a lock. Ten minutes after he had opened his journal, and had looked here and there through the pages, his hard intellect had grasped all that it required. Steadily and copiously his mind emptied its information into Ovid's mind; without a single digression from beginning to end, and with the most mercilessly direct reference to the traveller's practical wants. Not a word escaped him, relating to national character or to the beauties of Nature. Mrs. Gallilee had criticized the Falls of Niagara as a reservoir of wasted power. Doctor Benjulia's scientific superiority over the woman asserted itself with magnificent ease. Niagara being nothing but useless water, he never mentioned Niagara at all.

"Have I served your purpose as a guide?" he asked. "Never mind thanking me. Yes or no will do. Very good. I have got a line of writing to give you next." He mended his quill pen, and made an observation. "Have you ever noticed that women have one pleasure which lasts to the end of their lives?" he said. "Young and old, they have the same inexhaustible enjoyment of society; and, young and old, they are all alike incapable of understanding a man, when he says he doesn't care to go to a party. Even your clever mother thinks you want to go to parties in Canada." He tried his pen, and found it would do--and began his letter.

Seeing his hands at work, Ovid was again reminded of Carmina's discovery. His eyes wandered a little aside, towards the corner formed by the pillar of the chimney-piece and the wall of the room. The big bamboo-stick rested there. A handle was attached to it, made of light-coloured horn, and on that handle there were some stains. Ovid looked at them with a surgeon's practised eye. They were dry stains of blood. (Had he washed his hands on the last occasion when he used his stick? And had he forgotten that the handle wanted washing too?)

Benjulia finished his letter, and wrote the address. He took up the envelope, to give it to Ovid--and stopped, as if some doubt tempted him to change his mind. The hesitation was only momentary. He persisted in his first intention, and gave Ovid the letter. It was addressed to a doctor at Montreal.

"That man won't introduce you to society," Benjulia announced, "and won't worry your brains with medical talk. Keep off one subject on your side. A mad bull is nothing to my friend if you speak of Vivisection."

Ovid looked at him steadily, when he uttered the last word. Benjulia looked back, just as steadily at Ovid.

At the moment of that reciprocal scrutiny, did the two men suspect each other? Ovid, on his side, determined not to leave the house without putting his suspicions to the test.

"I thank you for the letter," he began; "and I will not forget the warning."

The doctor's capacity for the exercise of the social virtues had its limits. His reserves of hospitality were by this time near their end.

"Is there anything more I can do for you?" he interposed.

"You can answer a simple question," Ovid replied. "My cousin Carmina--"

Benjulia interrupted him again: "Don't you think we said enough about your cousin in the Gardens?" he suggested.

Ovid acknowledged the hint with a neatness of retort almost worthy of his mother. "You have your own merciful disposition to blame, if I return to the subject," he replied. "My cousin cannot forget your kindness to the monkey."

"The sooner she forgets my kindness the better. The monkey is dead."

"I am glad to hear it."

"Why?"

"I thought the creature was living in pain."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that I heard a moaning--"

"Where?"

"In the building behind your house."

"You heard the wind in the trees."

"Nothing of the sort. Are your chemical experiments ever made on animals?"

The doctor parried that direct attack, without giving ground by so much as a hair's breadth.

"What did I say when I gave you your letter of introduction?" he asked. "I said, A mad bull is nothing to my friend, if you speak to him of Vivisection. Now I have something more to tell you. I am like my friend." He waited a little. "Will that do?" he asked.

"Yes," said Ovid; "that will do."

They were as near to an open quarrel as two men could be: Ovid took up his hat to go. Even at that critical moment, Benjulia's strange jealousy of his young colleague--as a possible rival in some field of discovery which he claimed as his own--showed itself once more. There was no change in his tone; he still spoke like a judicious friend.

"A last word of advice," he said. "You are travelling for your health; don't let inquisitive strangers lead you into talk. Some of them might be physiologists."

"And might suggest new ideas," Ovid rejoined, determined to make him speak out this time.

Benjulia nodded, in perfect agreement with his guest's view.

"Are you afraid of new ideas?" Ovid went on.

"Perhaps I am--in your head." He made that admission, without hesitation or embarrassment. "Good-bye!" he resumed. "My sensitive foot feels noises: don't bang the door."

Getting out into the lane again, Ovid looked at his letter to the doctor at Montreal. His first impulse was to destroy it.

As Benjulia had hesitated before giving him the letter, so he now hesitated before tearing it up.

Contrary to the usual practice in such cases, the envelope was closed. Under those circumstances, Ovid's pride decided him on using the introduction. Time was still to pass, before events opened his eyes to the importance of his decision. To the end of his life he remembered that Benjulia had been near to keeping back the letter, and that he had been near to tearing it up.