CHAPTER XX.

The wise ancient who asserted that "Time flies," must have made that remarkable discovery while he was in a state of preparation for a journey. When are we most acutely sensible of the shortness of life? When do we consult our watches in perpetual dread of the result? When does the night steal on us unawares, and the morning take us by surprise? When we are going on a journey.

The remaining days of the week went by with a rush. Ovid had hardly time to ask himself if Friday had really come, before the hours of his life at home were already numbered.

He had still a little time to spare when he presented himself at Fairfield Gardens late in the afternoon. Finding no one in the library, he went up to the drawing-room. His mother was alone, reading.

"Have you anything to say to me, before I tell Carmina that you are here?" Mrs. Gallilee put that question quietly, so far as her voice was concerned. But she still kept her eyes on her book. Ovid knew that she was offering him his first and last chance of speaking plainly, before he went away. In Carmina's interests he spoke.

"Mother," he said, "I am leaving the one person in the world who is most precious to me, under your care."

"Do you mean," Mrs. Gallilee asked, "that you and Carmina are engaged to be married?"

"I mean that; and I am not sure that you approve of the engagement. Will you be plainer with me than you were on the last occasion when we spoke on this subject?"

"When was that?" Mrs. Gallilee inquired.

"When you and I were alone for a few minutes, on the morning when I breakfasted here. You said it was quite natural that Carmina should have attracted me; but you were careful not to encourage the idea of a marriage between us. I understood that you disapproved of it--but you didn't plainly tell me why."

"Can women always give their reason?"

"Yes--when they are women like you."

"Thank you, my dear, for a pretty compliment. I can trust my memory. I think I hinted at the obvious objections to an engagement. You and Carmina are cousins; and you belong to different religious communities. I may add that a man with your brilliant prospects has, in my opinion, no reason to marry unless his wife is in a position to increase his influence and celebrity. I had looked forward to seeing my clever son rise more nearly to a level with persons of rank, who are members of our family. There is my confession, Ovid. If I did hesitate on the occasion to which you have referred, I have now, I think, told you why."

"Am I to understand that you hesitate still?" Ovid asked.

"No." With that brief reply she rose to put away her book.

Ovid followed her to the bookcase. "Has Carmina conquered you?" he said.

She put her book back in its place. "Carmina has conquered me," she answered.

"You say it coldly."

"What does that matter, if I say it truly?"

The struggle in him between hope and fear burst its way out. "Oh, mother, no words can tell you how fond I am of Carmina! For God's sake take care of her, and be kind to her!"

"For your sake," said Mrs. Gallilee, gently correcting the language of her excitable son, from her own protoplastic point of view. "You do me an injustice if you feel anxious about Carmina, when you leave her here. My dead brother's child, is my child. You may be sure of that." She took his hand, and drew him to her, and kissed his forehead with dignity and deliberation. If Mr. Mool had been present, during the registration of that solemn pledge, he would have been irresistibly reminded of the other ceremony, which is called signing a deed.

"Have you any instructions to give me?" Mrs. Gallilee proceeded. "For instance, do you object to my taking Carmina to parties? I mean, of course, parties which will improve her mind."

He fell sadly below his mother's level in replying to this. "Do everything you can to make her life happy while I am away." Those were his only instructions.

But Mrs. Gallilee had not done with him yet. "With regard to visitors," she went on, "I presume you wish me to be careful, if I find young men calling here oftener than usual?"

Ovid actually laughed at this. "Do you think I doubt her?" he asked. "The earth doesn't hold a truer girl than my little Carmina!" A thought struck him while he said it. The brightness faded out of his face; his voice lost its gaiety. "There is one person who may call on you," he said, "whom I don't wish her to see."

"Who is he?"

"Unfortunately, he is a man who has excited her curiosity. I mean Benjulia."

It was now Mrs. Gallilee's turn to be amused. Her laugh was not one of her foremost fascinations. It was hard in tone, and limited in range--it opened her mouth, but it failed to kindle any light in her eyes. "Jealous of the ugly doctor!" she exclaimed. "Oh, Ovid, what next?"

"You never made a greater mistake in your life," her son answered sharply.

"Then what is the objection to him?" Mrs. Gallilee rejoined.

It was not easy to meet that question with a plain reply. If Ovid asserted that Benjulia's chemical experiments were assumed--for some reason known only to himself--as a cloak to cover the atrocities of the Savage Science, he would only raise the doctor in his mother's estimation. If, on the other hand, he described what had passed between them when they met in the Zoological Gardens, Mrs. Gallilee might summon Benjulia to explain the slur which he had indirectly cast on the memory of Carmina's mother--and might find, in the reply, some plausible reason for objecting to her son's marriage. Having rashly placed himself in this dilemma, Ovid unwisely escaped from it by the easiest way. "I don't think Benjulia a fit person," he said, "to be in the company of a young girl."

Mrs. Gallilee accepted this expression of opinion with a readiness, which would have told a more suspicious man that he had made a mistake. Ovid had roused the curiosity--perhaps awakened the distrust--of his clever

mother.

"You know best," Mrs. Gallilee replied; "I will bear in mind what you say." She rang the bell for Carmina, and left the room. Ovid found the minutes passing slowly, for the first time since the day had been fixed for his departure. He attributed this impression to his natural impatience for the appearance of his cousin--until the plain evidence of the clock pointed to a delay of five endless minutes, and more. As he approached the door to make inquiries, it opened at last. Hurrying to meet Carmina, he found himself face to face with Miss Minerva!

She came in hastily, and held out her hand without looking at him.

"Forgive me for intruding on you," she said, with a rapidity of utterance and a timidity of manner strangely unlike herself. "I'm obliged to prepare the children's lessons for to-morrow; and this is my only opportunity of bidding you good-bye. You have my best wishes--my heartfelt wishes--for your safety and your health, and--and your enjoyment of the journey. Good-bye! good-bye!"

After holding his hand for a moment, she hastened back to the door. There she stopped, turned towards him again, and looked at him for the first time. "I have one thing more to say," she broke out. "I will do all I can to make Carmina's life pleasant in your absence." Before he could thank her, she was gone.

In another minute Carmina came in, and found Ovid looking perplexed and annoyed. She had passed Frances on the stairs--had there been any misunderstanding between Ovid and the governess?

"Have you seen Miss Minerva?" she asked.

He put his arm round her, and seated her by him on the sofa. "I don't understand Miss Minerva," he said. "How is it that she came here, when I was expecting You?"

"She asked me, as a favour, to let her see you first; and she seemed to be so anxious about it that I gave way. I didn't do wrong, Ovid--did I?"

"My darling, you are always kind, and always right! But why couldn't she say good-bye (with the others) downstairs? Do you understand this curious woman?"

"I think I do." She paused, and toyed with the hair over Ovid's forehead. "Miss Minerva is fond of you, poor thing," she said innocently.

"Fond of me?"

The surprise which his tone expressed, failed to attract her attention. She quietly varied the phrase that she had just used.

"Miss Minerva has a true regard for you--and knows that you don't return it," she explained, still playing with Ovid's hair. "I want to see how it looks," she went on, "when it's parted in the middle. No! it looks better as you always wear it. How handsome you are, Ovid! Don't you wish I was beautiful, too? Everybody in the house loves you; and everybody is sorry you are going away. I like Miss Minerva, I like everybody, for being so fond of my dear, dear hero. Oh, what shall I do when day after day passes, and only takes you farther and farther away from me? No! I won't cry. You shan't go away with a heavy heart, my dear one, if I can help it. Where is your photograph? You promised me your photograph. Let me look at it. Yes! it's like you, and yet not like you. It will do to think over, when I am alone. My love, it has copied your eyes, but it has not copied the divine kindness and goodness that I see in them!" She paused, and laid her head on his bosom. "I shall cry, in spite of my resolution, if I look at you any longer. We won't look--we won't talk--I can feel your arm round me--I can hear your heart. Silence is best. I have been told of people dying happily; and I never understood it before. I think I could die happily now." She put her hand over his lips before he could reprove her, and nestled closer to him. "Hush!" she said softly; "hush!"

They neither moved nor spoke: that silent happiness was the best happiness, while it lasted. Mrs. Gallilee broke the charm. She suddenly opened the door, pointed to the clock, and went away again.

The cruel time had come. They made their last promises; shared their last kisses; held each other in the last embrace. She threw herself on the sofa, as he left her--with a gesture which entreated him to go, while she could still control herself. Once, he looked round, when he reached the door--and then it was over.

Alone on the landing, he dashed the tears away from his eyes. Suffering and sorrow tried hard to get the better of his manhood: they had shaken, but had not conquered him. He was calm, when he joined the members of the family, waiting in the library.

Perpetually setting an example, Mrs. Gallilee ascended her domestic pedestal as usual. She favoured her son with one more kiss, and reminded him of the railway. "We understand each other, Ovid--you have only five minutes to spare. Write, when you get to Quebec. Now, Maria! say good-bye."

Maria presented herself to her brother with a grace which did honour to the family dancing-master. Her short farewell speech was a model of its kind.

"Dear Ovid, I am only a child; but I feel truly anxious for the recovery of your health. At this favourable season you may look forward to a pleasant voyage. Please accept my best wishes." She offered her cheek to be kissed--and looked like a young person who had done her duty, and knew it.

Mr. Gallilee--modestly secluded behind the window curtains--appeared, at a sign from his wife. One of his plump red hands held a bundle of cigars. The other clutched an enormous new travelling-flask--the giant of its tribe.

"My dear boy, it's possible there may be good brandy and cigars on board; but that's not my experience of steamers--is it yours?" He stopped to consult his wife. "My dear, is it yours?" Mrs. Gallilee held up the "Railway Guide," and shook it significantly. Mr. Gallilee went on in a hurry. "There's some of the right stuff in this flask, Ovid, if you will accept it. Five-and-forty years old--would you like to taste it? Would you like to taste it, my dear?" Mrs. Gallilee seized the "Railway Guide" again, with a terrible look. Her husband crammed the big flask into one of Ovid's pockets, and the cigars into the other. "You'll find them a comfort when you're away from us. God bless you, my son! You don't mind my calling you my son? I couldn't be fonder of you, if I really was your father. Let's part as cheerfully as we can," said poor Mr. Gallilee, with the tears rolling undisguisedly over his fat cheeks. "We can write to each other--can't we? Oh dear! dear! I wish I could take it as easy as Maria does. Zo! come and give him a kiss, poor fellow. Where's Zo?"

Mrs. Gallilee made the discovery--she dragged Zo into view, from under the table. Ovid took his little sister on his knee, and asked why she had hidden herself.

"Because I don't want to say good-bye!" cried the child, giving her reason with a passionate outbreak of sorrow that shook her from head to foot. "Take me with you, Ovid, take me with you!" He did his best to console her, under adverse circumstances. Mrs. Gallilee's warning voice sounded like a knell--"Time! time!" Zo's shrill treble rang out louder still. Zo was determined to write to Ovid, if she was not allowed to go with him. "Pa's going to write to

you--why shouldn't I?" she screamed through her tears. "Dear Zoe, you are too young," Maria remarked. "Damned nonsense!" sobbed Mr. Gallilee; "she shall write!" "Time, time!" Mrs. Gallilee reiterated. Taking no part in the dispute, Ovid directed two envelopes for Zo, and quieted her in that way. He hurried into the hall; he glanced at the stairs that led to the drawing-room. Carmina was on the landing, waiting for a farewell look at him. On the higher flight of stairs, invisible from the hall, Miss Minerva was watching the scene of departure. Reckless of railways and steamers, Ovid ran up to Carmina. Another and another kiss; and then away to the house-door, with Zo at his heels, trying to get into the cab with him. A last kind word to the child, as they carried her back to the house; a last look at the familiar faces in the doorway; a last effort to resist that foretaste of death which embitters all human partings--and Ovid was gone!