

CHAPTER XXV.

On the twelfth of August, Carmina heard from Ovid again. He wrote from Montreal; describing the presentation of that letter of introduction which he had once been tempted to destroy. In the consequences that followed the presentation--apparently harmless consequences at the time--the destinies of Ovid, of Carmina, and of Benjulia proved to be seriously involved.

Ovid's letter was thus expressed:

"I want to know, my love, if there is any other man in the world who is as fond of his darling as I am of you? If such a person exists, and if adverse circumstances compel him to travel, I should like to ask a question. Is he perpetually calling to mind forgotten things, which he ought to have said to his sweetheart before he left her?

"This is my case. Let me give you an instance.

"I have made a new friend here--one Mr. Morpew. Last night, he was so kind as to invite me to a musical entertainment at his house. He is a medical man; and he amuses himself in his leisure hours by playing on that big and dreary member of the family of fiddles, whose name is Violoncello. Assisted by friends, he hospitably cools his guests, in the hot season, by the amateur performance of quartets. My dear, I passed a delightful evening. Listening to the music? Not listening to a single note of it. Thinking of You.

"Have I roused your curiosity? I fancy I can see your eyes brighten; I fancy I can hear you telling me to go on!

"My thoughts reminded me that music is one of the enjoyments of your life. Before I went away, I ought to have remembered this, and to have told you that the manager of the autumn concerts at the opera-house is an old friend of mine. He will be only too glad to place a box at your disposal, on any night when his programme attracts your notice; I have already made amends for my forgetfulness, by writing to him by this mail. Miss Minerva will be your companion at the theatre. If Mr. Le Frank (who is sure to be on the free list) pays you a visit in your box, tell him from me to put a wig on his bald head, and to try if that will make him look like an honest man!

"Did I forget anything else before my departure? Did I tell you how precious you are to me? how beautiful you are to me? how entirely worthless my life

is without you? I dare say I did; but I tell it all over again--and, when you are tired of the repetition, you have only to let me know.

"In the meanwhile, have I nothing else to say? have I no travelling adventures to relate? You insist on hearing of everything that happens to me; and you are to have your own way before we are married, as well as after. My sweet Carmina, your willing slave has something more serious than common travelling adventures to relate--he has a confession to make. In plain words, I have been practising my profession again, in the city of Montreal!

"I wonder whether you will forgive me, when you are informed of the circumstances? It is a sad little story; but I am vain enough to think that my part in it will interest you. I have been a vain man, since that brightest and best of all possible days when you first made your confession--when you said that you loved me.

"Look back in my letter, and you will see Mr. Morphey mentioned as a new friend of mine, in Canada. I became acquainted with him through a letter of introduction, given to me by Benjulia.

"Say nothing to anybody of what I am now going to tell you--and be especially careful, if you happen to see him, to keep Benjulia in the dark. I sincerely hope you will not see him. He is a hard-hearted man--and he might say something which would distress you, if he knew of the result which has followed his opening to me the door of his friend's house.

"Mr. Morphey is a worthy busy old gentleman, who follows his professional routine, and whose medical practice consists principally in bringing infant Canadians into the world. His services happened to be specially in request, at the time when I made his acquaintance. He was called away from his table, on the day after the musical party, when I dined with him. I was the only guest--and his wife was left to entertain me.

"The good lady began by speaking of Benjulia. She roundly declared him to be a brute--and she produced my letter of introduction (closed by the doctor's own hand, before he gave it to me) as a proof. Would you like to read the letter, too? Here is a copy:--'The man who brings this is an overworked surgeon, named Ovid Vere. He wants rest and good air. Don't encourage him to use his brains; and give him information enough to take him, by the shortest way, to the biggest desert in Canada.' You will now understand that I am indebted to myself for the hospitable reception which has detained me at Montreal.

"To return to my story. Mr. Morpew's services were again in request, ten minutes after he had left the house. This time the patient was a man--and the messenger declared that he was at the point of death.

"Mrs. Morpew seemed to be at a loss what to do. 'In this dreadful case,' she said, 'death is a mercy. What I cannot bear to think of is the poor man's lonely position. In his last moments, there will not be a living creature at his bedside.'

"Hearing this, I ventured to make some inquiries. The answers painted such a melancholy picture of poverty and suffering, and so vividly reminded me of a similar case in my own experience, that I forgot I was an invalid myself, and volunteered to visit the dying man in Mr. Morpew's place.

"The messenger led me to the poorest quarter of the city and to a garret in one of the wretchedest houses in the street. There he lay, without anyone to nurse him, on a mattress on the floor. What his malady was, you will not ask to know. I will only say that any man but a doctor would have run out of the room, the moment he entered it. To save the poor creature was impossible. For a few days longer, I could keep pain in subjection, and could make death easy when it came.

"At my next visit he was able to speak.

"I discovered that he was a member of my own profession--a mulatto from the Southern States of America, by birth. The one fatal event of his life had been his marriage. Every worst offence of which a bad woman can be guilty, his vile wife had committed--and his infatuated love clung to her through it all. She had disgraced and ruined him. Not once, but again and again he had forgiven her, under circumstances which degraded him in his own estimation, and in the estimation of his best friends. On the last occasion when she left him, he had followed her to Montreal. In a fit of drunken frenzy, she had freed him from her at last by self-destruction. Her death affected his reason. When he was discharged from the asylum, he spent his last miserable savings in placing a monument over her grave. As long as his strength held out, he made daily pilgrimages to the cemetery. And now, when the shadow of death was darkening over him, his one motive for clinging to life, his one reason for vainly entreating me to cure him, still centred in devotion to the memory of his wife. 'Nobody will take care of her grave,' he said, 'when I am gone.'

"My love, I have always thought fondly of you. After hearing this miserable

story, my heart overflowed with gratitude to God for giving me Carmina.

"He died yesterday. His last words implored me to have him buried in the same grave with the woman who had dishonoured him. Who am I that I should judge him? Besides, I shall fulfil his last wishes as a thank-offering for You.

"There is still something more to tell.

"On the day before his death he asked me to open an old portmanteau--literally, the one thing that he possessed. He had no money left, and no clothes. In a corner of the portmanteau there was a roll of papers, tied with a piece of string--and that was all.

"I can make you but one return,' he said; 'I give you my book.'

"He was too weak to tell me what the book was about, or to express any wish relative to its publication. I am ashamed to say I set no sort of value on the manuscript presented to me--except as a memorial of a sad incident in my life. Waking earlier than usual this morning, I opened and examined my gift for the first time.

"To my amazement, I found myself rewarded a hundredfold for the little that I had been able to do. This unhappy man must have been possessed of abilities which (under favouring circumstances) would, I don't hesitate to say, have ranked him among the greatest physicians of our time. The language in which he writes is obscure, and sometimes grammatically incorrect. But he, and he alone, has solved a problem in the treatment of disease, which has thus far been the despair of medical men throughout the whole civilised world.

"If a stranger was looking over my shoulder, he would be inclined to say, This curious lover writes to his young lady as if she was a medical colleague! We understand each other, Carmina, don't we? My future career is an object of interest to my future wife. This poor fellow's gratitude has opened new prospects to me; and who will be so glad to hear of it as you?

"Before I close my letter, you will expect me to say a word more about my health. Sometimes I feel well enough to take my cabin in the next vessel that sails for Liverpool. But there are other occasions, particularly when I happen to over-exert myself in walking or riding, which warn me to be careful and patient. My next journey will take me inland, to the mighty plains and forest of this grand country. When I have breathed the health-giving air of those

regions, I shall be able to write definitely of the blessed future day which is to unite us once more.

"My mother has, I suppose, given her usual conversazione at the end of the season. Let me hear how you like the scientific people at close quarters, and let me give you a useful hint. When you meet in society with a particularly positive man, who looks as if he was sitting for his photograph, you may safely set that man down as a Professor.

"Seriously, I do hope that you and my mother get on well together. You say too little of each other in your letters to me, and I am sometimes troubled by misgivings. There is another odd circumstance, connected with our correspondence, which sets me wondering. I always send messages to Miss Minerva; and Miss Minerva never sends any messages back to me. Do you forget? or am I an object of perfect indifference to your friend?

"My latest news of you all is from Zo. She has sent me a letter, in one of the envelopes that I directed for her when I went away. Miss Minerva's hair would stand on end if she could see the blots and the spelling. Zo's account of the family circle (turned into intelligible English), will I think personally interest you. Here it is, in its own Roman brevity--with your pretty name shortened to two syllables: 'Except Pa and Car, we are a bad lot at home.' After that, I can add nothing that is worth reading.

"Take the kisses, my angel, that I leave for you on the blank morsel of paper below, and love me as I love you. There is a world of meaning, Carmina, even in those commonplace words. Oh, if I could only go to you by the mail steamer, in the place of my letter!"