

CHAPTER XXXVII.

After two days of rain, the weather cleared again.

It was a calm, sunshiny Sunday morning. The flat country round Benjulia's house wore its brightest aspect on that clear autumn day. Even the doctor's gloomy domestic establishment reflected in some degree the change for the better. When he rose that morning, Benjulia presented himself to his household in a character which they were little accustomed to see--the character of a good-humoured master. He astonished his silent servant by attempting to whistle a tune. "If you ever looked cheerful in your life," he said to the man, "look cheerful now. I'm going to take a holiday!"

After working incessantly--never leaving his laboratory; eating at his dreadful table; snatching an hour's rest occasionally on the floor--he had completed a series of experiments, with results on which he could absolutely rely. He had advanced by one step nearer towards solving that occult problem in brain disease, which had thus far baffled the investigations of medical men throughout the civilised world. If his present rate of progress continued, the lapse of another month might add his name to the names that remain immortal among physicians, in the Annals of Discovery.

So completely had his labours absorbed his mind that he only remembered the letters which Mrs. Gallilee had left with him, when he finished his breakfast on Sunday morning. Upon examination, there appeared no allusion in Ovid's correspondence to the mysterious case of illness which he had attended at Montreal. The one method now left, by which Benjulia could relieve the doubt that still troubled him, was to communicate directly with his friend in Canada. He decided to celebrate his holiday by taking a walk; his destination being the central telegraph office in London.

But, before he left the house, his domestic duties claimed attention. He issued his orders to the cook.

At three o'clock he would return to dinner. That day was to witness the celebration of his first regular meat for forty-eight hours past; and he expected the strictest punctuality. The cook--lately engaged--was a vigorous little woman, with fiery hair and a high colour. She, like the manservant, felt the genial influence of her master's amiability. He looked at her, for the first time since she had entered the house. A twinkling light showed itself furtively in his dreary gray eyes: he took a dusty old hand-screen from

the sideboard, and made her a present of it! "There," he said with his dry humour, "don't spoil your complexion before the kitchen fire." The cook possessed a sanguine temperament, and a taste to be honoured and encouraged--the taste for reading novels. She put her own romantic construction on the extraordinary compliment which the doctor's jesting humour had paid to her. As he walked out, grimly smiling and thumping his big stick on the floor, a new idea illuminated her mind. Her master admired her; her master was no ordinary man--it might end in his marrying her.

On his way to the telegraph office, Benjulia left Ovid's letters at Mrs. Gallilee's house.

If he had personally returned them, he would have found the learned lady in no very gracious humour. On the previous day she had discovered Carmina and Miss Minerva engaged in a private conference--without having been able even to guess what the subject under discussion between them might be. They were again together that morning. Maria and Zo had gone to church with their father; Miss Minerva was kept at home by a headache. At that hour, and under those circumstances, there was no plausible pretence which would justify Mrs. Gallilee's interference. She seriously contemplated the sacrifice of a month's salary, and the dismissal of her governess without notice.

When the footman opened the door, Benjulia handed in the packet of letters. After his latest experience of Mrs. Gallilee, he had no intention of returning her visit. He walked away without uttering a word.

The cable took his message to Mr. Morphew in these terms:--"Ovid's patient at Montreal. Was the complaint brain disease? Yes or no." Having made arrangements for the forwarding of the reply from his club, he set forth on the walk back to his house.

At five minutes to three, he was at home again. As the clock struck the hour, he rang the bell. The man-servant appeared, without the dinner. Benjulia's astonishing amiability--on his holiday--was even equal to this demand on its resources.

"I ordered roast mutton at three," he said, with terrifying tranquillity. "Where is it?"

"The dinner will be ready in ten minutes, sir."

"Why is it not ready now?"

"The cook hopes you will excuse her, sir. She is a little behindhand to-day."

"What has hindered her, if you please?"

The silent servant--on all other occasions the most impenetrable of human beings--began to tremble. The doctor had, literally, kicked a man out of the house who had tried to look through the laboratory skylight. He had turned away a female servant at half an hour's notice, for forgetting to shut the door, a second time in one day. But what were these highhanded proceedings, compared with the awful composure which, being kept waiting for dinner, only asked what had hindered the cook, and put the question politely, by saying, "if you please"?

"Perhaps you were making love to her?" the doctor suggested, as gently as ever.

This outrageous insinuation stung the silent servant into speech. "I'm incapable of the action, sir!" he answered indignantly; "the woman was reading a story."

Benjulia bent his head, as if in acknowledgment of a highly satisfactory explanation. "Oh? reading a story? People who read stories are said to have excitable brains. Should you call the cook excitable?"

"I should, sir! Most cooks are excitable. They say it's the kitchen fire."

"Do they? You can go now. Don't hurry the cook--I'll wait."

He waited, apparently following some new train of thought which highly diverted him. Ten minutes passed--then a quarter of an hour then another five minutes. When the servant returned with the dinner, the master's private reflections continued to amuse him: his thin lips were still widening grimly, distended by his formidable smile.

On being carved, the mutton proved to be underdone. At other times, this was an unpardonable crime in Benjulia's domestic code of laws. All he said now was, "Take it away." He dined on potatoes, and bread and cheese. When he had done, he was rather more amiable than ever. He said, "Ask the cook to come and see me!"

The cook presented herself, with one hand on her palpitating heart, and the other holding her handkerchief to her eyes.

"What are you crying about?" Benjulia inquired; "I haven't scolded you, have I?" The cook began an apology; the doctor pointed to a chair. "Sit down, and recover yourself." The cook sat down, faintly smiling through her tears. This otherwise incomprehensible reception of a person who had kept the dinner waiting twenty minutes, and who had not done the mutton properly even then (taken in connection with the master's complimentary inquiries, reported downstairs by the footman), could bear but one interpretation. It wasn't every woman who had her beautiful hair, and her rosy complexion. Why had she not thought of going upstairs first, just to see whether she looked her best in the glass? Would he begin by making a confession? or would he begin by kissing her?

He began by lighting his pipe. For a while he smoked placidly with his eye on the cook. "I hear you have been reading a story," he resumed. "What is the name of it?"

"'Pamela; or Virtue Rewarded,' sir."

Benjulia went on with his smoking. The cook, thus far demure and downcast, lifted her eyes experimentally. He was still looking at her. Did he want encouragement? The cook cautiously offered a little literary information,

"The author's name is on the book, sir. Name of Richardson."

The information was graciously received, "Yes; I've heard of the name, and heard of the book. Is it interesting?"

"Oh, sir, it's a beautiful story! My only excuse for being late with the dinner--"

"Who's Pamela?"

"A young person in service, sir. I'm sure I wish I was more like her! I felt quite broken-hearted when you sent the mutton down again; and you so kind as to overlook the error in the roasting--"

Benjulia stopped the apology once more. He pursued his own ends with a penitent cook, just as he pursued his own ends with a vivisected animal. Nothing moved him out of his appointed course, in the one or in the other. He returned to Pamela.

"And what becomes of her at the end of the story?" he asked.

The cook simpered. "It's Pamela who is the virtuous young person, sir. And so the story comes true--Pamela, or Virtue Rewarded."

"Who rewards her?"

Was there ever anything so lucky as this? Pamela's situation was fast becoming the cook's situation. The bosom of the vigorous little woman began to show signs of tender agitation--distributed over a large surface. She rolled her eyes amorously. Benjulia puffed out another mouthful of smoke. "Well," he repeated, "who rewards Pamela?"

"Her master, sir."

"What does he do?"

The cook's eyes sank modestly to her lap. The cook's complexion became brighter than ever.

"Her master marries her, sir."

"Oh?"

That was all he said. He was not astonished, or confused, or encouraged--he simply intimated that he now knew how Pamela's master had rewarded Pamela. And, more dispiriting still, he took the opportunity of knocking the ashes out of his pipe, and filled it, and lit it again. If the cook had been one of the few miserable wretches who never read novels, she might have felt her fondly founded hopes already sinking from under her. As it was, Richardson sustained her faith in herself; Richardson reminded her that Pamela's master had hesitated, and that Pamela's Virtue had not earned its reward on easy terms. She stole another look at the doctor. The eloquence of women's eyes, so widely and justly celebrated in poetry and prose, now spoke in the cook's eyes. They said, "Marry me, dear sir, and you shall never have underdone mutton again." The hearts of other savages have been known to soften under sufficient influences--why should the scientific savage, under similar pressure, not melt a little too? The doctor took up the talk again: he made a kind allusion to the cook's family circumstances.

"When you first came here, I think you told me you had no relations?"

"I am an orphan, sir."

"And you had been some time out of a situation, when I engaged you?"

"Yes, sir; my poor little savings were nearly at an end!" Could he resist that pathetic picture of the orphan's little savings--framed, as it were, in a delicately-designed reference to her fellow-servant in the story? "I was as poor as Pamela," she suggested softly.

"And as virtuous," Benjulia added.

The cook's eloquent eyes said, "Thank you, sir."

He laid down his pipe. That was a good sign, surely? He drew his chair nearer to her. Better and better! His arm was long enough, in the new position, to reach her waist. Her waist was ready for him.

"You have nothing in particular to do, this afternoon; and I have nothing particular to do." He delivered himself of this assertion rather abruptly. At the same time, it was one of those promising statements which pave the way for anything. He might say, "Having nothing particular to do to-day--why shouldn't we make love?" Or he might say, "Having nothing particular to do to-morrow--why shouldn't we get the marriage license?" Would he put it in that way? No: he made a proposal of quite another kind. He said, "You seem to be fond of stories. Suppose I tell you a story?"

Perhaps, there was some hidden meaning in this. There was unquestionably a sudden alteration in his look and manner; the cook asked herself what it meant.

If she had seen the doctor at his secret work in the laboratory, the change in him might have put her on her guard. He was now looking (experimentally) at the inferior creature seated before him in the chair, as he looked (experimentally) at the other inferior creatures stretched under him on the table.

His story began in the innocent, old-fashioned way.

"Once upon a time, there was a master and there was a maid. We will call the master by the first letter of the alphabet--Mr. A. And we will call the maid by the second letter--Miss B."

The cook drew a long breath of relief. There was a hidden meaning in the doctor's story. The unfortunate woman thought to herself, "I have not only

got fine hair and a beautiful complexion; I am clever as well!" On her rare evenings of liberty, she sometimes gratified another highly creditable taste, besides the taste for reading novels. She was an eager play-goer. That notable figure in the drama--the man who tells his own story, under pretence of telling the story of another person--was no unfamiliar figure in her stage experience. Her encouraging smile made its modest appearance once more. In the very beginning of her master's story, she saw already the happy end.

"We all of us have our troubles in life," Benjulia went on; "and Miss B. had her troubles. For a long time, she was out of a situation; and she had no kind parents to help her. Miss B. was an orphan. Her little savings were almost gone."

It was too distressing. The cook took out her handkerchief, and pitied Miss B. with all her heart.

The doctor proceeded.

"But virtue, as we know when we read 'Pamela,' is sure of its reward. Circumstances occurred in the household of Mr. A. which made it necessary for him to engage a cook. He discovered an advertisement in a newspaper, which informed him that Miss B. was in search of a situation. Mr. A. found her to be a young and charming woman. Mr. A. engaged her." At that critical part of the story, Benjulia paused. "And what did Mr. A. do next?" he asked.

The cook could restrain herself no longer. She jumped out of her chair, and threw her arms round the doctor's neck.

Benjulia went on with his story as if nothing had happened.

"And what did Mr. A. do next?" he repeated. "He put his hand in his pocket--he gave Miss B. a month's wages--and he turned her out of the house. You impudent hussy, you have delayed my dinner, spoilt my mutton, and hugged me round the neck! There is your money. Go."

With glaring eyes and gaping mouth, the cook stood looking at him, like a woman struck to stone. In a moment more, the rage burst out of her in a furious scream. She turned to the table, and snatched up a knife. Benjulia wrenched it from her hand, and dropped back into his chair completely overpowered by the success of his little joke. He did what he had never done within the memory of his oldest friend--he burst out laughing. "This has been a holiday!" he said. "Why haven't I got somebody with me to enjoy it?"

At that laugh, at those words, the cook's fury in its fiercest heat became frozen by terror. There was something superhuman in the doctor's diabolical joy. Even he felt the wild horror in the woman's eyes as they rested on him.

"What's the matter with you?" he asked. She muttered and mumbled--and, shrinking away from him, crept towards the door. As she approached the window, a man outside passed by it on his way to the house. She pointed to him; and repeated Benjulia's own words:

"Somebody to enjoy it with you," she said.

She opened the dining-room door. The man-servant appeared in the hall, with a gentleman behind him.

The gentleman was a scrupulously polite person. He looked with alarm at the ghastly face of the cook as she ran past him, making for the kitchen stairs. "I'm afraid I intrude on you at an unfortunate time," he said to Benjulia. "Pray excuse me; I will call again."

"Come in, sir." The doctor spoke absently, looking towards the hall, and thinking of something else.

The gentleman entered the room.

"My name is Mool," he said. "I have had the honour of meeting you at one of Mrs. Gallilee's parties."

"Very likely. I don't remember it myself. Take a seat."

He was still thinking of something else. Modest Mr. Mool took a seat in confusion. The doctor crossed the room, and opened the door.

"Excuse me for a minute," he said. "I will be back directly."

He went to the top of the kitchen stairs, and called to the housemaid. "Is the cook down there?"

"Yes, sir."

"What is she doing?"

"Crying her heart out."

Benjulia turned away again with the air of a disappointed man. A violent moral shock sometimes has a serious effect on the brain--especially when it is the brain of an excitable woman. Always a physiologist, even in those rare moments when he was amusing himself, it had just struck Benjulia that the cook--after her outbreak of fury--might be a case worth studying. But, she had got relief in crying; her brain was safe; she had ceased to interest him. He returned to the dining-room.