

# Toxin

By OUIDA.

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### CHAPTER III.

She turned to Andreis, who at that moment came along the sands of the beach, his hands filled with spoils from the blossoming hedges—sprung to him as when, a little child on the staircase in the dusk, she had run to reach the shelter of a warmed and lighted room. He was of her own country, her own age, her own temperament; he carried about him a sense of gladness, an atmosphere of youth; he was of her own rank; he was as rich as she and richer. There was no leaven of self-seeking in the love he bore her; the passion she had roused in him was pure of any alloy. It was the love of the poets and the singers. If she accepted it, her path from youth to age would be like one of those flowering meadows of his own Sletta, which fill the cloudless day with verdure.

She knew that her foot was ready to tread the narcissus-filled grass, but by an unaccountable indecision and caprice she would not let him invite her thither. She continually evaded or eluded the final words which would have invited them or parted them. "Have you given up your appointment?" he asked once, directly.

Damer merely answered: "No." He did not offer any explanation; but he continued to stay on in Venice, though he had removed from the fine apartments occupied by his friend to a house on the Fondamenta Nuova, where he had hired two chambers.

Andreis, who was very generous and had always a grateful and uneasy sense of unmet obligations, vainly urged him to remain at his hotel. But Damer, somewhat risibly, refused.

"I cannot pursue any studies there," he replied.

The house he had chosen was obscure and uninviting, standing amidst the clang of coppersmiths' hammers and the stench of iron foundries in what was once the most patrician and beautiful quarter of Venice, and which is now befouled, blackened, filled with smoke, and clamour, and violence, where once the rose terraces and the elms-covered pergola ran down to the lagoon and the marble stairs were white as snow under silken awnings.

"What do you do there?" Veronica wished to ask him; but she never did so; she felt vaguely afraid as a woman of the middle age would have feared to ask a magician what he did with his talents and his spheres.

Although the eyes of lovers are proverbially washed by the collyrium of jealousy, those of Andreis were blind to the passion which Damer, like himself, had conceived. The reserve and power of self-restraint in Damer were extreme, and served to screen secret from the not very discerning mind of his companion. Moreover, the pride of race which was born and bred in Andreis rendered it impossible for him to suspect that he possessed a rival in one who was, however mentally superior, so far socially inferior, to himself and to the norms he loved.

That a man who was going to receive a stipend as a teacher in a German university could hit his eyes to Veronica Laranzina would have seemed wholly impossible to one who had been reared in patrician and aristocratic habits. He never noticed how frequently Damer watched him and her when they were together, listened from afar to their conversation, and invariably interrupted them at any moment when their words turned on more tender or familiar themes. He was himself tenderly, passionately, romantically enamored; his temper was full of a romance to which he could not even give adequate expression; his love for her had the timidity of a sensitive nascent passion; he was pained and chafed by the manner in which she avoided the definite declaration of it, but he did not for a moment trace it to its right cause—the magnetic influence which Damer had upon her, the hesitation which was given her by vague hypnotic suggestion. If any looker-on had warned him he would have laughed and said that days of magic were past.

Damer read the young man's heart like an open book and he knew that it was wholly filled with the image of Veronica. He had never liked Andreis; he had no liking for youth or for physical beauty, or for kindness and sweetness and simplicity of character. Such qualities were not in tune with

him; they were no more to him than the soft, thick fur of the cat in his laboratory, which he stripped off her body that he might lay bare her spinal cord; the pretty, warm skin was nothing to science.

He had loved the life of Andreis because it had interested him and recompensed him to do so; he had traveled with him for a year because it suited him financially to do so; but he had never liked him, he had never been touched by one of the many generous and delicate acts of the young man, nor by the trust which the mother of Andreis continually expressed in her letters to himself. Where jealousy sits on the threshold of the soul, goodness and kindness and faith knock vainly for admittance. Ravy is hated in embryo and only waits in the womb of time for birth.

One day Veronica asked him to go and see an old servant of the Laranzina household who was very ill and in hospital; they had begged him not to go to the hospital, but he had wished to do so, and had been allowed to fulfill his wish. Damer went to see him. He found the man at death's door with cancer of the food and air passages.

"If he be not operated on he will die in a week," said Damer.

"The surgeons acquiesced."

"Will Hanson recover?" asked Veronica, when he returned and told her on what they had decided.

"In his present state he cannot live a week," replied Damer, evasively.

"Does he wish for the operation?"

"He can be no judge. He cannot know his own condition."

"But it will be fearful suffering."

"He will be under anæsthesia."

"But will he recover?"

"Madame, I am not the master of fate."

"But what is probable?"

"What is certain is that the man will die if left as he is."

He performed the operation next day. The man ceased to breathe as it was ended; the shock to the nervous system had killed him. When Veronica heard that he was dead she burst into tears.

"Oh! why, oh, why" she said passionately to Damer, later in the day, "if you knew he must die, did you torture him in his last moments?"

"I gave him a chance," he replied, indifferently. "Anyhow he would never have survived the operation more than a few weeks."

"Why did you torture him with it then?" said Veronica, indignantly.

"It was a rare and almost unique opportunity. I have solved by it a doubt which has never been solved before and never could have been without a human subject."

She shrank from him in horror.

"You are a wicked man," she said, faintly.

"I fear I have done it wrong," he added. "I am already rather late for a conference at the hospital."

They were about to part—Damer to pass underneath the bridge, Andreis to pursue his way to a coppersmith's workshop, when a weak, infantine cry smote on their ears, echoed by other shrill cries.

"Some children were playing on the black barges which were laden with freckles and coal. They were small creatures, half naked in the warm air and sportive as young rabbits. They ran, leaped, climbed the piles of fuel, caught each other and wrestled, and laughed with mad laughter. There was only one who did not join in the games, a little boy who lay languidly and motionless on some sacks, and watched the others with heavy eyes.

As their gondola passed under that wall the sporting children, growing colder and colder, rushed in their course past and over the little sick boy, and jostled him so roughly that they pushed him over the edge of the barge, and he fell, with a shrill cry, into the water. The others, frightened at what had befallen them, gathered together, whistling and afraid. In a second the child disappeared. The fallen child disappeared. The water hereabouts is thick and dark, and sewage flows unheeded into it. It was in that instant of his fall that his cry, his shrieks of his companions, rose shrilly on the morning silence. In a second Andreis had sprung from the gondola, dived for the child, who had drifted underneath the barge, and brought him up in his arms. He was a child of some 5 years old, with a pretty pale face and naked limbs; his small, curly head fell in exhaustion on the young man's shoulder, his ragged clothes were dripping.

Damer looked at him with professional insight. "That boy is ill," he said to Andreis. "You had better put him out of your arms."

"Poor little man!" said Andreis, gently, holding the child close. "What shall we do with him? We cannot leave him here with only these children."

"You are wet through yourself. You must go to your hotel," said Damer. Andreis was still standing in the water. At that moment a woman rose

and more than one rich person of the Veneto entreated his examination, and were submitted to his treatment.

Andreis saw but little of him in the daytime, but most evenings in prima sera they met in the Palazzo Laranzina. Then Damer spoke little, but he spoke with effect; and when he was silent, it seemed to this young mistress of the house that his silence was eloquently eloquent; for it appeared always to say to her: "What a mindless creature you are! What a mindless creature you are!"

"You play with your happiness," said her duenna, angrily, to her.

"I do not play, indeed," she answered, seriously, but said no more.

Even in broad daylight, and on the sunlit waters of the lagoon, as she saw in the distance the foundry flames and factory smoke of the Fondamenta, where Damer's tower stood, she shuddered in the hot midsummer moon. It seemed as if often when she looked at the eyes of the strange Englishman she could see her and lay silence on her lips and terror on her heart. It was but a morbid fancy—she knew that; but she could not shake off the impression. Even when far out on the green waves of the Adriatic when Venice had long dropped away out of sight, the chillness and oppression of the hallucination remained with her.

As summer drew on Andreis decided if he could not persuade her to promise herself to him in Venice he would follow her to the hills above Cadara, and there decide his fate. He had little doubt that he would succeed before the summer should have wholly fled.

He went out one day to make some purchases of glass and metal works for himself to take to the Venetian hotel where he was staying. He thought that when they were completed it would be but courtesy to go and tell Damer that he himself was about to leave the city, and offer him his yacht to go in, if he desired it, to Trieste. The indulgent kindness of Andreis made him wish to part friends with a man to whom he considered that he owed his life.

He bade his gondolier steer northwards to the Fondamenta. In passing the Ponte del Paradiso, a sandalo, in which there was one person alone, fouled his own in the narrow channel, and that solitary person was Damer.

"I was just going to your apartments," cried Andreis while his gondolier swore as his prow grazed the wall of Palazzo Nani.

"I am going to the hospital, and shall not be at home till dark," replied Damer, anxiously.

"I was coming to tell you that I am about to leave Venice."

"And are going to Gorizia, no doubt," said Damer, with a dark, brief smile.

"I may be and I may not," replied Andreis, in a tone which implied that whoever he was he would be the husband of anyone. "Anyhow, I am led to say that the schooner is entirely at your disposition if you remain here or if you cross to Trieste."

"Thanks. Yachts are rich men's toys for which I have no use," answered Damer, without saying where he was going or what he intended to do, and yamers to her docks in Messina, if you do not require her yourself."

"You might be a little more polite," said Andreis, half angrily, half jestingly. "I should be glad to do you any services."

"Poor men cannot accept such services."

"Why do you constantly speak of your poverty? You have intellect; that is much rarer than riches."

"And much less esteemed," said Damer, with that brief, dull smile which always depressed and troubled Andreis. "I fear I cannot do any good."

"I am already rather late for a conference at the hospital."

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up from the cabin of the farthest barge and came leaping wildly from one barge to another, screaming: "The child! the child! my Carlo!"

She was his mother, Andreis saw, as her outstretched arms and slipped some money into the little ragged shirt.

"I will come and see how he is in an hour," he said to her, amidst her prayers and blessings. "He is not well. You must take care of him—not leave him alone."

The child opened his eyes and smiled. Andreis stooped and kissed him. "Go home by yourself. I will stay and see what is the matter with him," said Damer. Andreis went. Damer, bidding the woman go before him, walked over the barges until he reached the one in which she had a sort of rude deck-house or cabin, in which she and five children lived. There he examined the little boy.

"A sore throat," he said, simply. "I will bring you remedies."

He halted a passing gondola, and went to his house in the Fondamenta. "What is amiss with him?" said Andreis, later in the day.

"You would have done better to leave him in the canal water," replied Damer. "He is a weak little thing; he has never had any decent food; he will never recover."

"But what is it?"

"A sore throat," replied Damer, as he had replied to the mother.

"They went both to the Ca' Laranzina that evening. There were several people there; the night was very warm; the tall lilies and palms on the balcony glistened in the light of a full moon; there was music. Veronica held out the lute to Andreis.

"Alas! You must forgive me. I am rather homesick. I have no voice," he answered, with regret.

"I heard of what you did this morning," she murmured, in a low tone. "Your gondolier told me. Perhaps you have taken a chill. I will go and see the little child tomorrow."

"We will go together," he replied, in the same soft whisper, while his hand touched hers in seeming only to take the lute. Damer saw the gesture where he sat in the embrasure of a window speaking of a frontier question of his passing through Venice.

When they left the house, two or three other men accompanied them on to the water-steps. Warm though as the night was, Andreis shivered a little as he wrapped his overcoat round him. "I could bear my sables," Damer said, as he descended the stairs. Damer

looked at him in the moonlight, which was clear as the light of early morning. "You should not plunge into sewage water and embrace little beggars," he said, coldly, as he accompanied one of the Venetian gentlemen whose palace was near the Fondamenta, and who had offered him a seat in his gondola. Andreis, refusing the entreaties of his companions to go and sup with them at Florian's, went to his rooms at the hotel. He had a flood of happiness at the well-spring of his heart, but in his body he felt feverish and cold.

At parting from her he had arranged with Veronica that they should go at that hour to see the little child of the Bridge of Paradise.

As he stood on the steps and was about to descend Damer touched him on the arm.

"You are going to take the Countess Laranzina to the sea, is that so?"

"Yes," said Andreis, with a haughty accent; he did not like the tone of authority in which he was addressed.

"I forbid you to do so, then," said Damer. "She would only see a dead body, and that body infectious with disease."

Andreis was pained.

"Is the little thing dead?" he said, in a hushed voice. "Dead already?"

"He died twenty minutes ago. He had been ill for three days."

"Poor little pretty thing!" murmured Andreis. "I am sorry. I will go to the mother."

You had better go to your bed. You are unwell. You did a foolish act yesterday."

"I am quite well. When I require your advice I will ask it," said Andreis, impatiently, as he entered his gondola and went to the house of Veronica. Damer, standing on the steps of the house looking after him with a gaze which would have killed him could a look have slain.

Her house was bright in the morning radiance, the green water lapping its marbles, the lilies and palms fresh from the garden's dew, the doors standing open showing the blossoming acacias in the garden behind.

She came to him at once in one of the smaller salons.

"I am ready," she said, gayly. "Look! I have got these fruits and toys for your little wall."

Then something in his expression caught her gladness.

"What is it?" she asked.

"The child is dead," said Andreis.

"Oh, how sad!" She put down the little gifts she had prepared on a table near her; she was tender-hearted and quickly moved; the tears came into her eyes for the little boy whom she had never seen.

Andreis drew nearer to her.

"Mia cara," he murmured. "Do not play with me any longer. Death is so near us always. I have told you a hundred times that I love you. I will make

you so happy if you will trust to me. Tell me—tell me—"

She was softened by emotion, conquered by the answering passion which was in her; she did not speak, but her breast heaved, her lips trembled; she let him take her hands.

"You will be mine—mine—mine!" he cried, in delicious joy.

"I love you," she answered, in a voice so low that it was like the summer breeze blowing softly over the lilies. "Hush! Leave me! Go now. Come back at three. I shall be alone."

The doors were open and the windows; in a further chamber two liveried servants stood; approaching through the ante-room was the figure of the major-domo of the palace.

Andreis pressed her hands to his lips and left her. He was dizzy from ecstasy, or so he thought, as the busts and statues of the entrance hall reeled and swam before his sight, and his limbs were numb and nervous; he thought that if one of his gondoliers had not caught and held him, he would have fallen headlong down the water-steps.

(To Be Continued.)

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