

CHAPTER XI.

On entering the Zoological Gardens, Ovid turned at once to the right, leading Carmina to the aviaries, so that she might begin by seeing the birds. Miss Minerva, with Maria in dutiful attendance, followed them. Teresa kept at a little distance behind; and Zo took her own erratic course, now attaching herself to one member of the little party, and now to another.

When they reached the aviaries the order of march became confused; differences in the birds made their appeal to differences in the taste of the visitors. Insatiably eager for useful information, that prize-pupil Maria held her governess captive at one cage; while Zo darted away towards another, out of reach of discipline, and good Teresa volunteered to bring her back. For a minute, Ovid and his cousin were left alone. He might have taken a lover's advantage even of that small opportunity. But Carmina had something to say to him--and Carmina spoke first.

"Has Miss Minerva been your mother's governess for a long time?" she inquired.

"For some years," Ovid replied. "Will you let me put a question on my side? Why do you ask?"

Carmina hesitated--and answered in a whisper, "She looks ill-tempered."

"She is ill-tempered," Ovid confessed. "I suspect," he added with a smile, "you don't like Miss Minerva."

Carmina attempted no denial; her excuse was a woman's excuse all over: "She doesn't like me."

"How do you know?"

"I have been looking at her. Does she beat the children?"

"My dear Carmina! do you think she would be my mother's governess if she treated the children in that way? Besides, Miss Minerva is too well-bred a woman to degrade herself by acts of violence. Family misfortunes have very materially lowered her position in the world."

He was reminded, as he said those words, of the time when Miss Minerva

had entered on her present employment, and when she had been the object of some little curiosity on his own part. Mrs. Gallilee's answer, when he once asked why she kept such an irritable woman in the house, had been entirely satisfactory, so far as she herself was concerned: "Miss Minerva is remarkably well informed, and I get her cheap." Exactly like his mother! But it left Miss Minerva's motives involved in utter obscurity. Why had this highly cultivated woman accepted an inadequate reward for her services, for years together? Why--to take the event of that morning as another example--after plainly showing her temper to her employer, had she been so ready to submit to a suddenly decreed holiday, which disarranged her whole course of lessons for the week? Little did Ovid think that the one reconciling influence which adjusted these contradictions, and set at rest every doubt that grew out of them, was to be found in himself. Even the humiliation of watching him in his mother's interest, and of witnessing his devotion to another woman, was a sacrifice which Miss Minerva could endure for the one inestimable privilege of being in Ovid's company.

Before Carmina could ask any more questions a shrill voice, at its highest pitch of excitement, called her away. Zo had just discovered the most amusing bird in the Gardens--the low comedian of the feathered race--otherwise known as the Piping Crow.

Carmina hurried to the cage as if she had been a child herself. Seeing Ovid left alone, the governess seized her chance of speaking to him. The first words that passed her lips told their own story. While Carmina had been studying Miss Minerva, Miss Minerva had been studying Carmina. Already, the same instinctive sense of rivalry had associated, on a common ground of feeling, the two most dissimilar women that ever breathed the breath of life.

"Does your cousin know much about birds?" Miss Minerva began.

The opinion which declares that vanity is a failing peculiar to the sex is a slander on women. All the world over, there are more vain men in it than vain women. If Ovid had not been one of the exceptions to a general rule among men, or even if his experience of the natures of women had been a little less limited, he too might have discovered Miss Minerva's secret. Even her capacity for self-control failed, at the moment when she took Carmina's place. Those keen black eyes, so hard and cold when they looked at anyone else--flamed with an all-devouring sense of possession when they first rested on Ovid. "He's mine. For one golden moment he's mine!" They spoke--and, suddenly, the every-day blind was drawn down again; there was nobody present but a well-bred woman, talking with delicately implied deference to a distinguished man.

"So far, we have not spoken of the birds," Ovid innocently answered.

"And yet you seemed to be both looking at them!" She at once covered this unwary outbreak of jealousy under an impervious surface of compliment. "Miss Carmina is not perhaps exactly pretty, but she is a singularly interesting girl."

Ovid cordially (too cordially) agreed. Miss Minerva had presented her better self to him under a most agreeable aspect. She tried--struggled--fought with herself--to preserve appearances. The demon in her got possession again of her tongue. "Do you find the young lady intelligent?" she inquired.

"Certainly!"

Only one word--spoken perhaps a little sharply. The miserable woman shrank under it. "An idle question on my part," she said, with the pathetic humility that tries to be cheerful. "And another warning, Mr. Vere, never to judge by appearances." She looked at him, and returned to the children.

Ovid's eyes followed her compassionately. "Poor wretch!" he thought. "What an infernal temper, and how hard she tries to control it!" He joined Carmina, with a new delight in being near her again. Zo was still in ecstasies over the Piping Crow. "Oh, the jolly little chap! Look how he cocks his head! He mocks me when I whistle. Buy him," cried Zo, tugging at Ovid's coat tails in the excitement that possessed her; "buy him, and let me take him home with me!"

Some visitors within hearing began to laugh. Miss Minerva opened her lips; Maria opened her lips. To the astonishment of both of them the coming rebuke proved to be needless.

A sudden transformation to silence and docility had made a new creature of Zo, before they could speak--and Ovid had unconsciously worked the miracle. For the first time in the child's experience, he had suffered his coat tails to be pulled without immediately attending to her. Who was he looking at? It was only too easy to see that Carmina had got him all to herself. The jealous little heart swelled in Zo's bosom. In silent perplexity she kept watch on the friend who had never disappointed her before. Little by little, her slow intelligence began to realise the discovery of something in his face which made him look handsomer than ever, and which she had never seen in it yet. They all left the aviaries, and turned to the railed paddocks in which the larger birds were assembled. And still Zo followed so quietly, so silently, that

her elder sister--threatened with a rival in good behaviour--looked at her in undisguised alarm.

Incited by Maria (who felt the necessity of vindicating her character) Miss Minerva began a dissertation on cranes, suggested by the birds with the brittle-looking legs hopping up to her in expectation of something to eat. Ovid was absorbed in attending to his cousin; he had provided himself with some bread, and was helping Carmina to feed the birds. But one person noticed Zo, now that her strange lapse into good behaviour had lost the charm of novelty. Old Teresa watched her. There was something plainly troubling the child in secret; she had a mind to know what it might be.

Zo approached Ovid again, determined to understand the change in him if perseverance could do it. He was talking so confidentially to Carmina, that he almost whispered in her ear. Zo eyed him, without daring to touch his coat tails again. Miss Minerva tried hard to go on composedly with the dissertation on cranes. "Flocks of these birds, Maria, pass periodically over the southern and central countries of Europe"--Her breath failed her, as she looked at Ovid: she could say no more. Zo stopped those maddening confidences; Zo, in desperate want of information, tugged boldly at Carmina's skirts this time.

The young girl turned round directly. "What is it, dear?"

With big tears of indignation rising in her eyes, Zo pointed to Ovid. "I say!" she whispered, "is he going to buy the Piping Crow for you?"

To Zo's discomfiture they both smiled. She dried her eyes with her fists, and waited doggedly for an answer. Carmina set the child's mind at ease very prettily and kindly; and Ovid added the pacifying influence of a familiar pat on her cheek. Noticed at last, and satisfied that the bird was not to be bought for anybody, Zo's sense of injury was appeased; her jealousy melted away as the next result. After a pause--produced, as her next words implied, by an effort of memory--she suddenly took Carmina into her confidence.

"Don't tell!" she began. "I saw another man look like Ovid."

"When, dear?" Carmina asked--meaning, at what past date.

"When his face was close to yours," Zo answered--meaning, under what recent circumstances.

Ovid, hearing this reply, knew his small sister well enough to foresee

embarrassing results if he allowed the conversation to proceed. He took Carmina's arm, and led her a little farther on.

Miss Minerva obstinately followed them, with Maria in attendance, still imperfectly enlightened on the migration of cranes. Zo looked round, in search of another audience. Teresa had been listening; she was present, waiting for events. Being herself what stupid people call "an oddity," her sympathies were attracted by this quaint child. In Teresa's opinion, seeing the animals was very inferior, as an amusement, to exploring Zo's mind. She produced a cake of chocolate, from a travelling bag which she carried with her everywhere. The cake was sweet, it was flavoured with vanilla, and it was offered to Zo, unembittered by advice not to be greedy and make herself ill. Staring hard at Teresa, she took an experimental bite. The wily duenna chose that propitious moment to present herself in the capacity of a new audience.

"Who was that other man you saw, who looked like Mr. Ovid?" she asked; speaking in the tone of serious equality which is always flattering to the self-esteem of children in intercourse with elders. Zo was so proud of having her own talk reported by a grown-up stranger, that she even forgot the chocolate. "I wanted to say more than that," she announced. "Would you like to hear the end of it?" And this admirable foreign person answered, "I should very much like."

Zo hesitated. To follow out its own little train of thought, in words, was no easy task to the immature mind which Miss Minerva had so mercilessly overworked. Led by old Dame Nature (first of governesses!) Zo found her way out of the labyrinth by means of questions.

"Do you know Joseph?" she began.

Teresa had heard the footman called by his name: she knew who Joseph was.

"Do you know Matilda?" Zo proceeded.

Teresa had heard the housemaid called by her name: she knew who Matilda was. And better still, she helped her little friend by a timely guess at what was coming, presented under the form of a reminder. "You saw Mr. Ovid's face close to Carmina's face," she suggested.

Zo nodded furiously--the end of it was coming already.

"And before that," Teresa went on, "you saw Joseph's face close to Matilda's face."

"I saw Joseph kiss Matilda!" Zo burst out, with a scream of triumph. "Why doesn't Ovid kiss Carmina?"

A deep bass voice, behind them, answered gravely: "Because the governess is in the way." And a big bamboo walking-stick pointed over their heads at Miss Minerva. Zo instantly recognised the stick, and took it into her own hands.

Teresa turned--and found herself in the presence of a remarkable man.