CHAPTER XII.

In the first place, the stranger was almost tall enough to be shown as a giant; he towered to a stature of six feet six inches, English measure. If his immense bones had been properly covered with flesh, he might have presented the rare combination of fine proportions with great height. He was so miserably--it might almost be said, so hideously--thin that his enemies spoke of him as "the living skeleton." His massive forehead, his great gloomy gray eyes, his protuberant cheek-bones, overhung a fleshless lower face naked of beard, whiskers, and moustache. His complexion added to the startling effect which his personal appearance produced on strangers. It was of the true gipsy-brown, and, being darker in tone than his eyes, added remarkably to the weird look, the dismal thoughtful scrutiny, which it was his habit to fix on persons talking with him, no matter whether they were worthy of attention or not. His straight black hair hung as gracelessly on either side of his hollow face as the hair of an American Indian. His great dusky hands, never covered by gloves in the summer time, showed amber-coloured nails on bluntly-pointed fingers, turned up at the tips. Those tips felt like satin when they touched you. When he wished to be careful, he could handle the frailest objects with the most exquisite delicacy. His dress was of the recklessly loose and easy kind. His long frock-coat descended below his knees; his flowing trousers were veritable bags; his lean and wrinkled throat turned about in a widely-opened shirt-collar, unconfined by any sort of neck-tie. He had a theory that a head-dress should be solid enough to resist a chance blow--a fall from a horse, or the dropping of a loose brick from a house under repair. His hard black hat, broad and curly at the brim, might have graced the head of a bishop, if it had not been secularised by a queer resemblance to the bell-shaped hat worn by dandies in the early years of the present century. In one word he was, both in himself and in his dress, the sort of man whom no stranger is careless enough to pass without turning round for a second look. Teresa, eyeing him with reluctant curiosity, drew back a step, and privately reviled him (in the secrecy of her own language) as an ugly beast! Even his name startled people by the outlandish sound of it. Those enemies who called him "the living skeleton" said it revealed his gipsy origin. In medical and scientific circles he was well and widely known as--Doctor Benjulia.

Zo ran away with his bamboo stick. After a passing look of gloomy indifference at the duenna, he called to the child to come back.

She obeyed him in an oddly indirect way, as if she had been returning

against her will. At the same time she looked up in his face, with an absence of shyness which showed, like the snatching away of his stick, that she was familiarly acquainted with him, and accustomed to take liberties. And yet there was an expression of uneasy expectation in her round attentive eyes. "Do you want it back again?" she asked, offering the stick.

"Of course I do. What would your mother say to me, if you tumbled over my big bamboo, and dashed out your brains on this hard gravel walk?"

"Have you been to see Mama?" Zo asked.

"I have not been to see Mama--but I know what she would say to me if you dashed out your brains, for all that."

"What would she say?"

"She would say--Doctor Benjulia, your name ought to be Herod."'

"Who was Herod?"

"Herod was a Royal Jew, who killed little girls when they took away his walking-stick. Come here, child. Shall I tickle you?"

"I knew you'd say that," Zo answered.

When men in general thoroughly enjoy the pleasure of talking nonsense to children, they can no more help smiling than they can help breathing. The doctor was an extraordinary exception to this rule; his grim face never relaxed--not even when Zo reminded him that one of his favourite recreations was tickling her. She obeyed, however, with the curious appearance of reluctant submission showing itself once more. He put two of his soft big finger-tips on her spine, just below the back of her neck, and pressed on the place. Zo started and wriggled under his touch. He observed her with as serious an interest as if he had been conducting a medical experiment. "That's how you make our dog kick with his leg," said Zo, recalling her experience of the doctor in the society of the dog. "How do you do it?"

"I touch the Cervical Plexus," Doctor Benjulia answered as gravely as ever.

This attempt at mystifying the child failed completely. Zo considered the unknown tongue in which he had answered her as being equivalent to lessons. She declined to notice the Cervical Plexus, and returned to the little

terrier at home. "Do you think the dog likes it?" she asked.

"Never mind the dog. Do you like it?"

"I don't know."

Doctor Benjulia turned to Teresa. His gloomy gray eyes rested on her, as they might have rested on any inanimate object near him--on the railing that imprisoned the birds, or on the pipes that kept the monkey-house warm. "I have been playing the fool, ma'am, with this child," he said; "and I fear I have detained you. I beg your pardon." He pulled off his episcopal hat, and walked grimly on, without taking any further notice of Zo.

Teresa made her best courtesy in return. The magnificent civility of the ugly giant daunted, while it flattered her. "The manners of a prince," she said, "and the complexion of a gipsy. Is he a nobleman?"

Zo answered, "He's a doctor,"--as if that was something much better.

"Do you like him?" Teresa inquired next.

Zo answered the duenna as she had answered the doctor: "I don't know."

In the meantime, Ovid and his cousin had not been unobservant of what was passing at a little distance from them. Benjulia's great height, and his evident familiarity with the child, stirred Carmina's curiosity.

Ovid seemed to be disinclined to talk of him. Miss Minerva made herself useful, with the readiest politeness. She mentioned his odd name, and described him as one of Mrs. Gallilee's old friends. "Of late years," she proceeded, "he is said to have discontinued medical practice, and devoted himself to chemical experiments. Nobody seems to know much about him. He has built a house in a desolate field--in some lost suburban neighbourhood that nobody can discover. In plain English, Dr. Benjulia is a mystery."

Hearing this, Carmina appealed again to Ovid.

"When I am asked riddles," she said, "I am never easy till the answer is guessed for me. And when I hear of mysteries, I am dying to have them revealed. You are a doctor yourself. Do tell me something more!"

Ovid might have evaded her entreaties by means of an excuse. But her eyes

were irresistible: they looked him into submission in an instant.

"Doctor Benjulia is what we call a Specialist," he said. "I mean that he only professes to treat certain diseases. Brains and nerves are Benjulia's diseases. Without quite discontinuing his medical practice, he limits himself to serious cases--when other doctors are puzzled, you know, and want him to help them. With this exception, he has certainly sacrificed his professional interests to his mania for experiments in chemistry. What those experiments are, nobody knows but himself. He keeps the key of his laboratory about him by day and by night. When the place wants cleaning, he does the cleaning with his own hands."

Carmina listened with great interest: "Has nobody peeped in at the windows?" she asked.

"There are no windows--only a skylight in the roof."

"Can't somebody get up on the roof, and look in through the skylight?"

Ovid laughed. "One of his men-servants is said to have tried that experiment," he replied.

"And what did the servant see?"

"A large white blind, drawn under the skylight, and hiding the whole room from view. Somehow, the doctor discovered him--and the man was instantly dismissed. Of course there are reports which explain the mystery of the doctor and his laboratory. One report says that he is trying to find a way of turning common metals into gold. Another declares that he is inventing some explosive compound, so horribly destructive that it will put an end to war. All I can tell you is, that his mind (when I happen to meet him) seems to be as completely absorbed as ever in brains and nerves. But, what they can have to do with chemical experiments, secretly pursued in a lonely field, is a riddle to which I have thus far found no answer.

"Is he married?" Carmina inquired.

The question seemed to amuse Ovid. "If Doctor Benjulia had a wife, you think we might get at his secrets? There is no such chance for us--he manages his domestic affairs for himself."

"Hasn't he even got a housekeeper?"

"Not even a housekeeper!"

While he was making that reply, he saw the doctor slowly advancing towards them. "Excuse me for one minute," he resumed; "I will just speak to him, and come back to you."

Carmina turned to Miss Minerva in surprise.

"Ovid seems to have some reason for keeping the tall man away from us," she said. "Does he dislike Doctor Benjulia?"

But for restraining motives, the governess might have gratified her hatred of Carmina by a sharp reply. She had her reasons--not only after what she had overheard in the conservatory, but after what she had seen in the Gardens--for winning Carmina's confidence, and exercising over her the influence of a trusted friend. Miss Minerva made instant use of her first opportunity.

"I can tell you what I have noticed myself," she said confidentially. "When Mrs. Gallilee gives parties, I am allowed to be present--to see the famous professors of science. On one of these occasions they were talking of instinct and reason. Your cousin, Mr. Ovid Vere, said it was no easy matter to decide where instinct ended and reason began. In his own experience, he had sometimes found people of feeble minds, who judged by instinct, arrive at sounder conclusions than their superiors in intelligence, who judged by reason. The talk took another turn--and, soon after, Doctor Benjulia joined the guests. I don't know whether you have observed that Mr. Gallilee is very fond of his stepson?"

Oh, yes! Carmina had noticed that. "I like Mr. Gallilee," she said warmly; "he is such a nice, kind-hearted, natural old man."

Miss Minerva concealed a sneer under a smile. Fond of Mr. Gallilee? what simplicity! "Well," she resumed, "the doctor paid his respects to the master of the house, and then he shook hands with Mr. Ovid; and then the scientific gentlemen all got round him, and had learned talk. Mr. Gallilee came up to his stepson, looking a little discomposed. He spoke in a whisper--you know his way?--'Ovid, do you like Doctor Benjulia? Don't mention it; I hate him.' Strong language for Mr. Gallilee, wasn't it? Mr. Ovid said, 'Why do you hate him?' And poor Mr. Gallilee answered like a child, 'Because I do.' Some ladies came in, and the old gentleman left us to speak to them. I ventured to say to Mr. Ovid, 'Is that instinct or reason?' He took it quite seriously. 'Instinct,' he said--'and it troubles me.' I leave you, Miss Carmina, to draw your own conclusion."

They both looked up. Ovid and the doctor were walking slowly away from them, and were just passing Teresa and the child. At the same moment, one of the keepers of the animals approached Benjulia. After they had talked together for a while, the man withdrew. Zo (who had heard it all, and had understood a part of it) ran up to Carmina, charged with news.

"There's a sick monkey in the gardens, in a room all by himself!" the child cried. "And, I say, look there!" She pointed excitedly to Benjulia and Ovid, walking on again slowly in the direction of the aviaries. "There's the big doctor who tickles me! He says he'll see the poor monkey, as soon as he's done with Ovid. And what do you think he said besides? He said perhaps he'd take the monkey home with him."

"I wonder what's the matter with the poor creature?" Carmina asked.

"After what Mr. Ovid has told us, I think I know," Miss Minerva answered. "Doctor Benjulia wouldn't be interested in the monkey unless it had a disease of the brain."