

cloak round my head, and lead me till I am at some distance from the entrance of these caverns. I will never betray you."

Ernest from that time had no intercourse with the banditti, but he still remained among the mountains which they haunted, never molested by them. Once he ventured from his retreat to a town at some distance from it; and he learnt there, that search had been made, and was still making for him, by the imperial command. With some difficulty he effected his return to the mountains of Istria. In the magnificent solitudes of woods and waters, he learnt to examine his own heart, and to meditate on the follies and faults which had diverted his mind from higher and more ennobling subjects. It was there that he was seized by the imperial troops. He declared in vain, that he had no connexion with the banditti which had been taken. He was brought with them, and as one of them, to Vienna.

The Countess Alberti, with her young and lively friend, used every exertion to prevent the execution of Ernest; but the verdict appeared irrevocable. The day, the dreadful day of death was fixed, and they implored an audience of the empress: the aged mother, the betrothed wife, lay at her feet in speechless agony; they entreated, they clung to her in the delirium of their grief. Their gentle sovereign wept with them, she endeavoured to console them; but although her whole frame trembled, and her voice faltered with agitation, as she replied to their entreaties, her answer left them quite hopeless. They obtained, however, permission to see the prisoner once before his execution, and even this had been hitherto denied to every one.

An unforeseen circumstance saved the life of Alberti. The captain of the banditti, who had not been taken with his companions, heard that Ernest was condemned to die. He had been once a man of honor himself; and he gave himself up to justice, relating clearly every particular of the count's refusal to join his band. The sentence was changed. Was it a merciful change? the noble and gallant Count Ernest was condemned in the prime of youthful manhood to become a workman for life, in the quicksilver mines of Idria.

The first surprise, which made known to the aged countess her son's safety, was joyful; but her grief soon returned as she thought upon the dreadful termination which still awaited all her hopes for him. But Bianca was young and ardent, and the worst that could now happen was a joy to her. She devoted her whole heart, and every energy of her mind, to a plan which

she instantly resolved to execute. Since her childhood she had been a privileged favourite with Maria Theresa, but she now dreaded the opposition of her royal mistress to her intention. After mature deliberation, she decided that the most certain method of succeeding would be to confide her plan to the empress herself, before it could be told to her by any other person.

The Countess Florenheim was beloved as his own child by the good and venerable confessor of Maria Theresa. She went to him, and he listened to her kindly, and with earnest attention. He was accustomed to examine the principles of actions, rather than their effects; to consider whether they were really right, not whether they might be approved according to worldly opinions.

The Father Antonio left the countess in doubt as to his opinion; but a few hours after his departure, he again visited the Florenheim palace, and he brought with him a message from the empress. She commanded the immediate presence of the Countess Bianca at the imperial palace. The confessor declined answering any of Bianca's anxious questions: and departed, declaring his intention of seeing her when she returned from the empress.

The young countess ordered her carriage, and in a short time after she had received the imperial summons, she was admitted into the private apartments of her sovereign. She remained alone for a sufficient time to perplex herself with attempting to discover why she had been summoned to the presence of the empress. Maria Theresa appeared; she was simply dressed, and unattended; she smiled as she bowed her head to Bianca, and then sat down, fixing the full gaze of her eyes on the blushing countenance of the young countess. She spoke at once on the subject which the latter was most interested about.

"I have been conversing with the Father Antonio," she said; "you, Countess Bianca, were the subject of our conference. I have requested your presence; for, although I am your friend, I would now speak to you as your monarch; as such, I ask not your confidence. Tell me only, have you considered, do you know, that if you accompany the disgraced Count Alberti to the mines of Idria, you must literally share his fortunes? You will be, from the moment that you become his wife, simply the wife of an Idrian miner. Your title, your estates, all your rank and wealth will be forfeited. You will be forced to perform even the duties of a menial servant to your husband.

"Countess Bianca of Florenheim," she proceeded, "can you, dare you undertake such a