

him to a remote chamber, and leaving a lighted lamp on the table, went to acquaint the Countess with his return.

The Visconte, unlacing his helm, laid it aside, and threw himself on a seat to await the coming of Ermelinda. Twenty-five years had passed since their last eventful meeting. How many a change of good and evil fortune had happened to each since then! With what heart could he meet her first glance, full of reproof, as no doubt it would be, for the death of her father, and for her present desolation and distress! He listened intently for her approach, and the slightest murmur or rustle caused his heart to beat, with greater anxiety and agitation than ever it had done on the eve of his most important battles.

He had not to wait long. In a short time the door opened gently, and a female figure appeared, clad in a loose white robe: a bright but fleeting scarlet tinged a countenance usually pale as marble; a slight ray of hope, dashed with alarm, shone in eyes red and swollen with tears and watching. Marco did not at first recognise Ermelinda with certainty, so much had time, and still more affliction, wrought a change on her: although he had started to his feet in the expectation of meeting the mother of Beatrice, he was not sufficiently assured of her identity to address her, and both stood silent, till the countess, with downcast eyes, and in low and trembling tones exclaimed—"Is it thou, Marco?" It was the same gentle voice, the same sweet sound, the same celestial harmony that had so enchanted him in youth; he eagerly raised his eyes anew to her face, almost hoping to see there the fresh beauty of his young love; but as suddenly lowering them, he stood with a saddened air, without venturing a reply.

"Is it thou," pursued Ermelinda, "come in person to give me new life? Heaven reward thee for it! I ever said in mine heart—when he knows the grief he hath occasioned, his manly and generous heart will not harden itself against it."

These words struck the chief at once with shame and confusion for himself, and the tenderest pity for the unfortunate mother.

"I good! I generous!" he repeated in a voice almost choked with emotion; "for pity's sake, Ermelinda, cease this cruel mockery! I—I am a wretch—a madman!"

"No, no! say not so, Marco! The Lord pardon thee, as I have long done! The joy thou givest me at this moment almost recompenses for all my past anguish. Say—where is my daughter? when shall I see her?"

"Have ye heard nothing from the minstrel since he again went in search of her?" eagerly enquired Marco.

"The minstrel, say'st thou? No! he hath not returned, and I begin to fear—. But thou—askest thou of me?"

"I understand thee, Ermelinda!" answered the Visconte. "Thou believest that I have caused Beatrice to be carried off; but 'tis not so. I have —."

"*Santa Maria!* what sayest thou? Where is she then? Pardon me, Marco! 'tis not that I doubt thy word, but hast thou not already almost confessed it to me. And besides, I have long known what thy sentiments were towards my poor girl."

"Listen to me," said Marco, speaking at first slowly and hoarsely, but becoming quicker and more excited as he proceeded. "Listen to me, Ermelinda! Yes! 'tis true—I loved thy daughter—loved her with an all-absorbing passion. 'Twas thine image impressed on her countenance—twas thy soul seemingly transfused into her, that fascinated and blinded me. Oh that I could have made her mine! Once I experienced the ineffable sweetness of such an hope; but that moment passed rapidly away. A secret poison rushed through my blood and distracted my mind, when I learned that her heart was already given to another. 'Twere vain to tell thee by what steps of grief and despair I was at length brought to the madness of aiming at the life of my beloved, my faithful, my generous kinsman. I tremble to think how near I was to imbruing in his blood this hand, which he hath so often pressed with the sincere affection of a son!"

"Speak ye of Ottorino?"

"Yes! The unknown knight who overthrew him at the tournament, was the wretch who now stands before thee."

The countess raised her eyes compassionately to the face of the Visconte, and was about to speak; but he proceeded with increasing self-reproach:

"No! first listen to all. Thou knowest that at that time I went to a distance from Milan; but thou knowest not that I left behind me an iniquitous commission. I gave instructions to a knave here to prevent the nuptials of Ottorino with thy daughter; my gold, in his hands, purchased a traitor, even in your family, one of your most trusted servitors. I repent, Ermelinda! that I gave no command for the abduction of Beatrice, nor had the least knowledge of it; but the scoundrel to whom I had given the matter in charge may have overpassed his commands by the perpetration of this nefarious deed. But in any case I must confess myself a villain—a wicked, hardened —."

"No, no, Marco! for pity's sake cease such language! Thou dost not deserve such epithets even from thyself; no! he is no hardened wretch