

presence will surely at once snap the slender thread of his life. This thought induced me to hurry into the adjoining room, in order to hinder the new-comer, whoever he might be, from entering. Or opening the door, which I did unnoticed, an unexpected sight stopped me on the threshold. Round a table placed near a blazing fire, sat three men, and two lovely girls: they were the relatives who, I have before said, attended Don Andrea in the beginning of his illness. Vials of the choicest kinds, and bottles of wine, which seemed to pass unceasingly from hand to hand, strewed the table. Whilst this picture starting out in full relief, and coloured like one of Titian's, rivetted my eyes, I heard the handsomest of the two girls ask with gentle voice—"Supposing our uncle recovers, how much longer, think you, can he live?" She spoke these words in accents so full of pity and of love, that one might have supposed her heart was bursting with sorrow instead of beating high with joy. Inconceivable cunning of woman, who can persuade her victim of her love, even whilst through her he perishes, as the serpent who fascinates whilst he strangles! At the lady's question, the youth sitting opposite to her, laid down his glass, and coming behind the fair speaker, impressed on her neck with his lips, dyed deep with wine, a loud and rude kiss.—"Cheer up, pretty cousin," he said; then added—"Hark ye, lovely Charlotte, two glasses more of wine, or an hour's sleep, and you will have forgotten this burning kiss of mine. Well, Don Andrea will be cold before that kiss leaves your memory." Then taking up her glass, which had been just filled, he quaffed it off at a draught, to punish her, as he said, for having kept his throat so long dry.—I thus stood on the confines of two different worlds, the one blooming with life, the other a prey to death; even as in a cabinet of coins we find the bold outline and firm stamp of the day by the side of the traceless image of a thousand ages back. I looked from the one to the other, gazed and gazed again, and, sooth to say, traced little difference there! After having long examined, and dwelt upon this singular contrast of the dying man on one side, and the group of revellers on the other, I proceeded towards the living world, and manifesting no surprise at their orgies, communicated Don Andrea's wishes respecting the new-comer, who was then mounting the stair. Scarcely had the words passed my lips, when a loud and hollow crash rung through the apartment. At that sound a hundred thoughts rushed in a second's space tumultuously through my mind. I hastened into the adjoining room, and my cry of horror quickly brought the gay party after me, flocking raven-like to their prey. A dreadful spectacle was presented to our eyes. Don Andrea lay extended at the foot of the cabinet, on which, during his illness, he had ever kept his eyes watchfully fixed. We raised him up, and laid him on his bed. He was dead. No vestige of life remained, save that his eyes, although dull and glazed, were open. From a fracture on his temple oozed drops of blood, which trickling down his face, already livid by the touch of death, rendered him yet more ghastly. One of the ladies, moved by pity, or perhaps through consciousness that the dead could not return to life, dipped a towel in water, and began to wash away the "gouts of blood,"—but those open eyes dismayed her. Then one of the nephews, the last who arrived, closed the eye-lids of the corpse, and drew them over the pupils, as a cowl is drawn over a tansured skull. The *compassionate* lady again betook herself to her task, and whilst wiping between the wrinkles of the gaunt and haggard cheek, down which the blood had found its way, the mouth of the dead body half-opened, and displayed something shining within. The lady stood with uplifted and motionless hand as if thunder-struck—he who held the candle starting back let it fall, and the rest shrank in horror from the bed. Having relighted the candle, I asked for the nurse, who had withdrawn into the next room to drive off sleep by the aid of the gastronomic remnants of the *inconsolable* relatives, to help me to open the mouth so far as to extract the object we saw within. With her assistance I drew out a key, forcing along with it pieces of flesh; since in his agony, or for its better security, the wretched being had half swallowed it. A horrible thought had taken possession of the dying miser, and gnawed his heart, as did the Count Ugolino the skull of the Archbishop Ruggieri. He had feared that his nephews would seize his treasure whilst he lived; and this idea stung him to madness. In the delirium of his agony Don Andrea, like a spectre issuing from a tomb, having collected all his strength for one last effort, had risen from his bed, dragged himself to the cabinet, which was his coffer, taken the key, and endeavoured to conceal it in his own throat, as an ape hides a date in the pouch of his cheeks. His strength had then deserted him, and falling down, with his head dashed on the floor at the foot of his idol, he breathed his last.