

only a poor weak woman, and you see the effect the mere thought of the voyage has upon me."

Carmen was indeed trembling like an aspen and large tears rolled down her cheeks.

"I am indeed sorry to see you in such a state, my dear Annunziata," said Oliver, "without being able to comfort and reassure you. I trust, however, that your unreasonable fears will leave you, and that on reflection you will be more calm. Bear in mind that you are about to assist in the accomplishment of your father's last wishes. Bear in mind too that you will be able to kneel at his tomb, where from above Don José Rovero and Philip Le Vaillant will look down upon you and bless you."

"Oliver," murmured Carmen entreatingly, "Oliver, I beseech you, give up the idea of taking me with you."

"I have said once already that I will not leave you behind."

"Then give up the idea of going."

"It is useless to hope such a thing. It must be undertaken and carried out."

"Oliver, you are cruel! You have no pity for me!"

"Am I cruel and pitiless because I refuse to leave you?"

"Then you have made up your mind?"

"Irrevocably."

Carmen dried her tears and drew herself up. An expression of firmness settled on her face.

"Very well," she said in a short, hard voice. "If your mind is made up, so is mine. If your will is unyielding, so shall mine be. I will not go."

Carmen expected that this declaration of war would be followed by a burst of rage from her husband. It was not, however.

"I think you are mistaken," was all Oliver said, with a quiet smile on his lips.

"Do you mean to say that you will make me so?"

"I shall do it very unwillingly; but do it I will."

"What! will you even use force?"

"Even use force if it is necessary."

With a cry of rage and a look of deadly hate Carmen started up and confronted her husband.

"Ah!" she cried, "you are dropping the mask at last! You never loved me! In your eyes I am not your wife! I am not your equal! I am your slave! Your slave whom you would drive about at the end of the lash!"

"The wife is the slave of her husband," said Oliver imperturbably, "both by the law of God and the law of man. It only depends on her to make her slavery very pleasant and happy."

Carmen said nothing. Her head was sunk on her breast. Oliver watched her pityingly.

"You are right," said the Gitana at last, raising her head. "The man is the stronger, and it is useless for his slave to rise against him. My rebellion just now was foolish. You have made me see that. It shall not occur again. I accept the part you would have me take. I have no longer any will of my own. I will do as you like. When shall we start?"

"To-morrow."

Carmen shivered. "You are very late in warning me," she said. "I have much to get ready for such a long voyage, and I shall hardly have time."

"You have the rest of the day before you and the whole of to-morrow, for we shall only sail when the tide is on the turn at ten in the evening. If your baggage is ready at eight it will be in plenty of time."

"Very well. Then I am free until to-morrow evening?"

"You are always free."

"Like the slave," retorted Carmen bitterly, "with a chain at his ankle and his master's brand on his shoulder."

Oliver made no answer. With a smile he bowed to his wife and left the room.

"Well," murmured Carmen when she was alone, "the die is cast. It only remains to act. After all it will be his doing."

So saying she struck two blows on a small gong that stood on the table. A waiting-woman made her appearance.

"Tell Don Gusman," said the mistress, "that I wish to see him immediately."

In a few moments Morales entered the room. He found his sister seated at a small table where she was writing with feverish haste.

"Wait," she said without stopping, "I have finished."

Two papers lay before her. One she placed in her bosom, the other she folded in the form of a letter. Then rising she turned to Morales.

"Santa Maria!" cried the Spaniard, "you are as pale as death! What is the matter?"

"The matter is, my poor Morales, that we are lost!"

"Lost!" cried the Gitano in consternation.

"Almost without hope."

"Has your husband discovered everything?"

"That would be nothing."

"What could be worse?"

"Oliver goes away to-morrow and takes me with him."

"Whither?"

"To Havana."

"To Havana!" exclaimed Morales clasping his hands. "Merely! You are right, we are indeed lost."

"If the voyage were to take place," continued Carmen, "Oliver would know the whole truth an hour after we landed. He would have no pity for me, the false Annunziata. He would give me up to justice, and I should spend the rest of my days in prison."

"And even," put in Morales, "if Oliver were to be satisfied with turning you out of the house,

you would be sure to fall into the clutches of that tiger Quirino."

"You see what a dreadful situation we are in."

"Alas, yes. But is there no way of preventing the voyage?"

"None. I have begged, entreated, implored in vain. Oliver is inflexible."

"What do you intend doing?"

"I have two projects."

"What are they?"

Carmen handed Morales the paper folded in letter-form. "This is the first," she said.

"What is this?" asked Morales.

"A letter that you must take to the Marquis de Grancey. I must see him, and tell him all. He can save me."

"Oliver will follow you."

"Bah! The Marquis can easily hide me in Paris. He is a powerful nobleman, and can easily throw the police off the scent, if there is any chase."

"Very fine, but would he agree to do so?"

"He would."

"Supposing he were to refuse?"

"I have a second means of escape."

"What is that?"

"Suicide!" exclaimed the Spaniard horror-stricken.

"What else could I do?"

"You would not have the courage to do it when the time came."

"I am sure I should. Besides I count on you to help me."

"You count on me, you unhappy girl! Do you suppose I would take your life?"

"No. Do not be afraid, it is not that I want of you."

"What then, pray?"

"I know that you are acquainted with certain poisons which do their work without giving pain."

Morales shook his head decidedly.

"Do not deny it, Morales," continued his sister. "I have heard you scores of times brag of your skill in toxicology. You would do me a great service in getting me one of these poisons."

"Don't think of it! Anything else but that!"

"Do you refuse?"

"I do, distinctly."

"For what reason?"

"The best reason of all. You are my sister after all. A brother cannot help his sister to kill herself—it's against nature!"

"So you have your scruples, eh?"

"Indeed I have."

"You, Morales! You who in Havana wanted to assassinate Quirino!"

"Bah! Quirino was not my brother! Caramba, I am a man like any other! There is something in blood after all!"

"So this then is what prevents you from helping me?"

"It is."

"In that case I will show you how to get rid of your scruples."

"I can't believe you."

"You shall see."

Carmen drew out the paper she had placed in her bosom and handed it to her brother.

"Read," she said.

Morales unfolded the paper and read as follows:

"My last will and testament.

"I give and bequeath to Senor Don Gusman Morales y Tullpano, as an acknowledgment of his life-long devotion, the two million livres I now possess and which were settled on me by the terms of my marriage contract.

"ANNUNZIATA LE VAILLANT.

"Havre, the 23rd Day of August, 1771."

Carmen remarked that her brother's eyes glistened with cupidity.

"Well, brother," she asked triumphantly, "are two million livres a sum large enough to induce you to overcome your scruples?"

"Sister," returned the Gitano with some embarrassment, "I have always loved money, I confess, but there are circumstances in which millions even lose their power. In the present case my conscience does not allow me to bestow a thought on my own interests."

Carmen shrugged her shoulders.

"Your conscience!" she cried mockingly.

"Don't come and talk to me about your conscience. Nonsense! You are playing a useless comedy. You think you can blind me with an appearance of disinterestedness in which you know I do not believe. In a word you only want to be persuaded to yield. So be it, I will persuade—and what is more, convince you. Think now, Morales; if I make up my mind to die it is only because it is impossible for me to live any longer. Remember too that that resolution is fixed, nothing can shake it. I will sooner plunge a knife into my heart than undertake this voyage to Havana. If I had no knife I would throw myself into the sea or dash my brains out against a wall. You see I am determined. You will, then, commit no crime in procuring me the poison I ask for; you will be doing a good action, perhaps the only good action of your lifetime. You will be rendering my death easy, not putting me to death. If you insist in your refusal, I will tear up this will. To-morrow you will have no sister and no two millions to console you for her loss. Now, be reasonable. You will not be doing what I ask for the sake of the money, but through pity for me and to spare my sufferings."

Morales made no reply. He was busy wiping imaginary tears from his eyes.

"Well," said Carmen at last, persuasively, "are we agreed?"

"Yes, but I thought it prudent not to answer him."

"You did right. I will be grateful for this. But this is not all. Is the poison ready?"

"It is ready."

"You have it with you?"

"Yes."

"Give it to me."

"Carmen, my sister, reflect."

"I have reflected. My mind is made up. A fight with George or death. Give me the poison."

Morales drew from his pocket a little phial, which Carmen seized with avidity and examined carefully.

It was half filled by a transparent liquor, resembling burned topaz and looking like Spanish wine.

"Well," said she, "this is death?"

"A pistol ball or a sword thrust is not more sure in its action."

"Is it instantaneous?"

"No. It requires two hours to work."

"What are the symptoms?"

"In the first half hour, no symptoms; then a calm sleep."

"Next?"

"Next? Why there is no awakening. That's all."

"How many drops are required to ensure death?"

"The dose which the bottle contains is not too strong."

"Are you certain it is sufficient?"

"Certain."

"Even for a man?"

"Alas!" murmured Morales with a deep sigh; "you are irresistible."

"Then you consent?"

"How can I refuse you?"

"You will give a sure poison?"

"A sure, painless poison, that will kill without fail; and withal such a poison as I would take myself were I in a strait such as this."

"And you will prepare it to-day?"

"I suppose I must, you are in such a hurry."

"When will you give it me?"

"This evening."

"After all, Morales, you are a good brother, and I am glad to know that after I am gone my two millions will fall into your hands."

Morales again wiped his eyes.

"Carmen," he cried in a pathetic tone, "don't speak of that money. You break my heart! Don't speak of it!"

And he added, without changing his tone:

"Are you quite sure, my poor sister, that the will will hold good?"

"I will answer for it," replied Carmen with a smile; "and I will give it you in exchange for the poison."

"Heaven grant," said Morales piously, "that I may never use it. I will first go to the Marquis with your letter and then—alas! alas!—I'll see about the poison."

XLII.

THE LAST MEETING.

Rather surprised at receiving a letter from Carmen asking an interview which was to take place only on the next day, George de Grancey suspected that something had gone wrong in the household of Le Vaillant.

The almost illegible character of the handwriting showed him that a feverish hand had traced the lines.

The Marquis discreetly questioned Morales. The Gitano was reserved and prudent in his replies. Indeed, he affirmed that he knew nothing.

"I have noticed, however, that our dear Annunziata is more preoccupied and thoughtful than usual, but I ignore the reasons of the change."

George informed Morales that from midnight he would wait for Carmen at the little house.

Morales lost not one moment on the way.

He went to all the druggists and apothecaries of the city.

In each shop, he bought strange substances; he had them ground to powder, weighed and carefully labelled.

When these purchases were made, he obtained from a glass dealer, two very small phials of unequal size, and he then repaired to the tavern of the *Silver Anchor*, where he had spent some days on his first arrival in Havre.

There he asked for a room, and ordered a coffee pot of new brass, and a brazier full of live coals.

He bolted the door, opened the window partially and devoted himself to certain concoctions of which we shall know more and more directly.

While this was going on, Carmen pretended to be making active preparations for departure. Large boxes were open under her eyes, and into these the chambermaids were packing linen.

A little before the supper hour, Oliver came to inquire about his wife. Carmen received him as usual, seeming to harbor no resentment against him for what took place in the morning.

Morales came in after supper and demanded to be received by his sister.

An affirmative answer was immediately given.

"What news?" asked the young woman, running to meet her brother.

"I saw the Marquis."

"His answer?"

"He will wait."

"Very well. Did he appear surprised?"

"A little. Surprised and uneasy."

"Did he question you?"

"Yes. But I thought it prudent not to answer him."

"You did right. I will be grateful for this. But this is not all. Is the poison ready?"

"It is ready."

"You have it with you?"

"Yes."

"Give it to me."

"Carmen, my sister, reflect."

"I have reflected. My mind is made up. A fight with George or death. Give me the poison."

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"Next?"

"Next? Why there is no awakening. That's all."

"How many drops are required to ensure death?"

"The dose which the bottle contains is not too strong."

"Are you certain it is sufficient?"

"Certain."

"Even for a man?"

"Yes, for a man," said Morales, astonished, and he added:

"Why that question?"

Carmen looked at him.

"Ah! I understand," he said, "I never thought of it before. The poison is not meant for you. It is for your husband. That is right; I approve you."

"Thank you."

"Oliver has no family. He has written no will. You will be his heir-at-law. We shall have fourteen millions to-morrow, if your hand trembles not."

"My hand will be firm. I do not desire the death of Oliver. It is George who will decide. If George carries me off, Oliver will live and I will not touch a hair of his head, for all his millions. But if I must do it, to save myself, I will kill him without hesitation or remorse."

"Admirable!" exclaimed Morales, "and now, my dear sister, I will make you a present."

Saying which, he drew from his pocket a second phial filled with a liquid of emerald blue.

"This is an antidote," said he.

"Thanks."

"At your service, sister."

"At midnight you will conduct me to George's house?"

"I will not fall."

XLIII.

THE LAST MEETING.

At nine o'clock, the Marquis repaired to the little house and there he waited.

At midnight, three light raps were heard on the door, and Carmen entered, trembling and pale.

"Annunziata, my darling," he exclaimed.

"What ails you?"

"A great peril besets me!"

"What is it?"

"They want to part us."

De Grancey was thrilled.

"My husband wants to take me on a long voyage which will last for months and years. To leave you, George, were death. I have not the courage to do it. To-morrow, when the vessel sets sail, I shall be with you, or in the cold winding sheet, I have a poison with me. I will use it."

De Grancey listened to Carmen as we sometimes listen to strange voices in dreams.

"Well, my beloved, we will not be separated. But tell me all, that I may know how to act."

She told him all.

He reflected; then took a resolution. He would carry her off; take her to Paris, where she could be hidden from the pursuits of Oliver.

"You consent to deliver me?" said Carmen.

"With all my soul."

"And we shall never part?"

"Never."

It was then agreed that at four o'clock, a chaise should be waiting on the outskirts of the town, to take her to Paris.

The interview closed. Carmen went off to finish her preparations for departure.

The Marquis remained in the hut for a time. At the end of a few moments, a knocking was heard at the door. He opened.

It was Oliver.

XLIII.

GOD DISPOSES.

"Marquis, my visit surprises you," said Le Vaillant, "but be assured that I know all."