

"What? I can do nothing else for thee than leave thee?"

"Ah, yes! thou canst render me a greater favour still. Thou canst save me from this mental anguish, restore me to my parents, and let me die in peace, in the arms of my poor mother!"

By this time the terrified Lauretta had joined her mistress, and doubting lest in her despair she should cast herself from the balcony, held her firmly by the robe; while Pelagrus endeavoured to persuade both, by his countenance and his actions, that there was no cause for alarm. As soon as Beatrice had finished, Lodrisio continued with inflexible cruelty:

"Nay, girl, nay! Thou askest too much. Listen to what I have to say. I see thou knowest more than I had thought; so much the better, we will understand each other sooner. Know then that Ottorino—he who was to have been thy spouse——"

"What of him—is he still living?" anxiously exclaimed she.

"Let me finish! living, or not living, it matters not." But seeing her intense agitation at these words, he added—"Be not alarmed, he is alive and well."

"I, too, can assure you of this," interposed Pelagrus. "He departs immediately, 'tis said, for the Holy Land."

"What! without me?" exclaimed Beatrice, "no, no, 'tis false! Cruel that ye are, why mock me thus? What evil have I ever done ye?"

Overcome with mental anguish, she buried her face in her hands and burst into tears; but quickly recovering herself, she hastily raised her head and glanced suspiciously around, lest any had in the mean time approached her unseen; but both intruders had kept their places.

"Weep on, poor girl!" said Lodrisio. "Truly in some sort I pity thee; thou hast liked him well for some time, and may be unwilling to tear him from thine heart. But never fear! thou wilt find Time stronger than Love. Besides, to speak plainly, if thou lovest Ottorino still, now is the time to show it; for know, that his life and his death are in thy hands."

"What say ye?" exclaimed Beatrice, struck with a new fear, "can I trust your words—is there no deceit hid under them? O tell me the truth!" she continued, clasping her hands before her breast; "I entreat thee with that anxiety and anguish with which, in the last moments of life thou wilt supplicate thy Supreme Judge for mercy and pardon! listen to my entreaties as thou would'st wish Him to hearken unto thine in that dread and inevitable hour! Tell me, by the eternal salvation or perdition of thy soul, if this

danger of Ottorino be real and pressing, and what I can do to save him."

Thus adjured, it was with hesitation that Lodrisio, hardened wretch as he was, replied:

"The danger is real—yes! I swear it by my soul's weal—and 'tis in thy power alone to save him."

"Where is he—what is his danger—how can I save him?"

"Calm thyself, poor damsel! Look not on me with these eyes of terror, but sit down and let us reason the matter quietly. Be not afraid of me, nor of any else; all will respect thee as a queen. Thou art mistress here—the castle is thine own."

"Indeed? Is this truly the fort of Castelletto? Am I really in the castle of my husband?"

"Have done with that word husband! Ottorino is no husband of thine."

To these harsh and cruel words, Beatrice made no reply, but gazed in speechless apprehension in the face of the speaker, while he continued:

"That mummery at Milan was no marriage at all; it was quite informal, and thou art still at liberty to bestow thine hand on whom thou wilt. Thou wouldst know in whose castle we are? It belongs to a great noble, a brave and powerful lord, before whom even princes bend reverently, and who himself bends only to thy beauty."

Lauretta seeing her mistress unable to speak, exclaimed in a trembling voice; "Heaven shield us! we are then——"

"At Rosate," interposed Lodrisio, "in the castle of Marco Visconti."

At the sound of these words the unhappy Beatrice fell fainting into the arms of Lauretta, and the weeping attendant bore her senseless form to the couch, repulsing, with the rudeness of despair, the efforts of the two ruffians to assist her.

CHAPTER XXX.

It was amidst a confused mixture of memories of the past and visions of the future, that Marco Visconti opened the letter which had been brought him by Lupo, and read as follows:

"Mauro!—A bereaved mother, casting herself at thy feet, bathing thine hand with her tears, conjures thee by whatever thou holdest most sacred in earth or in heaven, to restore her only child, the supreme joy, the last comfort of her unhappy days. I know that the mighty of the earth love to cloak their steps in darkness, and when they have consummated injustice, are wont, that they may appear blameless, to show themselves incensed by the complaints of the poor wretch they have wronged; but thou! No! thou hast a soul attuned to pity; thou knowest by experience what misfortune is, and thou wilt not refuse the prayer of a distressed woman."

"Marco! my daughter hath been taken from me. More than a fortnight since she disappeared, and where, or in whose hands she is, we know not. To thee I boldly