

while this roof covers me, and thy fiend-like gang hold me in thralldom."

"Pardon, Signor; thou art as fiery as though, like our chief, thou couldst boast a few drops of noble blood in thy veins—but hadst thou heard me through, I would have told thee that for this service, if thou wilt promise to perform it to the best of thy ability, I will risk all to open thy prison door, and conduct thee in safety through the wild passes of the mountains, till I leave thee at the gate of the Duke's palace."

"Sayest thou so?" exclaimed Annibal, bounding to his feet, as though the green turf were already beneath him, and the free blue sky bending its glorious canopy above him. "Be thou true to this pledge, and I swear to thee that when it is fulfilled, not another sun shall sink beyond these mountains, before thy father is again received and pardoned by his lord—and thou also,—I fear not to say it, if thou wilt but forsake this evil life, and return a penitent to the home thou hast abandoned; it shall be at thy pleasure to do so, and that too, with a well filled purse, as a slight guerdon for the service, which I feel that gold never can repay."

"Signor, I care not for reward!" said the boy. "It is enough if thou canst obtain for me the pardon of the Duke; for I am heart-weary of the life I lead, and would gladly, if it might be, return to his service, and atone to my aged father for the misery I have caused him."

"I will do for thee, as I have said, all thou canst ask, when thou shalt have kept thy word, and relieved me from this weary prison; and now tell me if thou knowest aught of the evil designs, which this Manfredi meditates against the Duke or the Lady Viola Du Conti?"

"I know only that his hatred to the Duke is deep and terrible, and that he often talks of vengeance, which he will one day take against him. I have thought, too, that he nurtured some fearful purpose against the liberty and honour of the Lady Viola; but I know not what, nor when nor how he will accomplish it. I must leave thee now, Signor; the hour of our evening meal is at hand, and my absence would create suspicion. I shall bring thee thy food tomorrow, and I will then tell thee at what hour thou mayst expect me at night."

"Thou wilt not fail me?"

"No, by all the saints! Good evening, Signor. Have courage; and, unless some misadventure occur, this shall be the last night of thy bondage and mine."

He took up his lamp and departed; and Annibal, too full of happy hopes to sleep, remained till the night had far advanced, wrapped in such glad visions as come only to those who, from the gloom of suffering and despair, awake to behold the dawning world of hope and joy.

It was the birth-night eve of the Lady Viola, and fair and noble forms filled the lordly halls of the palace. Among them, stood the young mistress of the fête, beautiful as a vision of the dawn, brightest amid all that was radiant and sparkling,—her exquisite form robed in splendour, and her young face dazzling in its own early and innocent beauty. Yet, surrounded by all that could minister to enjoyment and delight, a dim cloud shadowed her gentle brow, and she moved amid the music, and the performers, and the lights, the incense of praise and the homage of love, as one, whose thoughts were with other objects, whose spirit, wrapped in some deep dream, heeded not the outward world, but dwelt within, in silent commune with the absent and unseen. Yet, her smiles beamed kindly on her guests; and, though her tones were cold and passionless, she had answered, with gentle words, to the warm greetings of the many who proffered her admiring homage. She joined, too, in the dances, and her light and airy motions seemed, as ever, the realization of harmony and grace; but an observing eye might have seen that a weight pressed heavily on her heart, and that her step lacked somewhat of its wonted buoyancy.

In truth, since the capture of Annibal by the mountain bandits, Viola had become an altered being. For a few days the constant hope of his return supported her; but when that died away,—when the ransom demanded was paid, and failed to bring him; and when, day after day, no tidings of his fate came to cheer her, the uncertainty of her hopes and fears preyed upon her heart, stole its freshness from her cheek, and quenched in tears the glad light of her eye. The Duke read the cause of the change that had come over her only too well; but he forbore to speak of it, except, in general terms, he expressed his belief that no personal harm would befall Murano. Even this was some consolation to her; and, encouraged by a gleam of her former animation, he sought, in various ways, to cheer her, and chiefly to awaken her interest in the preparations for her approaching birth-night. But in vain. She entreated only that it might be suffered to pass without notice or rejoicing. To this, however, her father would not consent, since he looked forward to its festivities, as a means of awaking her to new interests, and so dissolving the charm which now wrapped her in its spell.

And so the night came,—and passively she suffered orient pearls to be enwreathed in her dark hair,—and joylessly she mingled with the gay throng, and answered to their light and mirthful words, and laid her small hand coldly in the palm of many a noble knight, who led her, with a proud smile and a throbbing heart, through the mazes of the graceful dance. During the whole evening, there was one who