

in my own far off land. Oh! had I wedded him, I had been happy and pure; but much I fear his death is added to my list of crimes!" She sighed deeply, and then became silent, and resumed the melancholy and abstracted air of one whom reason deserts for a time, and in this gloomy state she continued for many days, apparently forgetful of everything but some deep concentrated sorrow, that absorbed in its vortex every other thought and feeling.

CHAPTER XII.

"Kill me to-morrow—let me live to-night."

SHAKESPEARE.

THE fatal night when Montbelliard had convinced the distracted St. Amante that his wife was unfaithful, the treacherous slanderer decoyed the unsuspecting Victoria into a cave near the sea shore, under the pretence that her consort wished to communicate to her intelligence of the deepest importance, which he had just received from France. The unhappy lady entered the grotto as unconscious of her danger as the lamb of the slaughtering knife of the butcher; but the absence of her lord, and the reserve and singular expression of Montbelliard's downcast eye, excited suddenly her alarm; and she demanded in a tone of surprise, not unmingled with displeasure, "why he had brought her to such a lonely place under false pretences!"

"To obey the orders of an ungrateful man," was Montbelliard's brief reply.

A cry of surprise, amazement, and unbounded terror, burst from the lips of Donna Victoria, and she stood for a moment as if she were rooted to the spot; at length she regained the power of utterance, and cried:

"It is false! My Henri loves me dearly—prizes me beyond his own life. He would not—could not command my death——"

"Poor, deceived, injured lady," replied Montbelliard, in an under tone, as if forgetful of her presence, "would that the ruffian had chosen some other man to execute his cruel orders; but they are strict, and I must obey them. Lady," continued he, "you must prepare for death;" and he drew his sword, upon whose shining surface the moonbeams threw a ghastly glitter, that sent a thrill of mortal terror through the veins of the shuddering Spaniard, who caught his right arm, and clung to it with all the fearful energy of despair, exclaiming in a tone of frantic entreaty:

"Slay me not, Montbelliard, thus unprepared.

It is a dread, an awful thing, to die, without an hour's—a moment's warning!"

"Who dares to cross the will of St. Amante in Tortuga?" replied Montbelliard. "My life would pay the forfeit of my disobedience——"

"Oh, you wrong him!" answered the agitated Spaniard, "basely wrong him! He cannot be so cruel. No, no! he loves me too well to wish my death!"

The cold, sarcastic smile, that parted the lips of Montbelliard, brought horrible conviction to Victoria's mind; she wrung her hands, and gasped out:

"What have I done to merit such a doom? tell me, I conjure you, the cause of his displeasure?"

Montbelliard remained silent.

"Does he doubt my truth? Some one has slandered me, perhaps! Oh, let me live to plead my innocence! Spare me, to convince him that his suspicions are unfounded. Let me see him—speak to him once more!"

"Urge not such vain requests, unhappy lady—he does not doubt your honor—he loves another—adores Almeria Guarda, for whose sake he has resolved that you should die, that he may wed with her!"

Victoria loosened her frantic hold, and sank on the ground as motionless and unconscious as if the sword had already done its office.

Montbelliard raised her in his arms. "What! dead—quite dead!" cried he, as he anxiously regarded the pallid features of his victim. "Can there be indeed such faithful love in woman's bosom, that the bare idea of his infidelity should kill her like a mortal blow! Her form, so lately full of bounding life, is now cold and rigid as the rocky pillow on which it lies. My vengeance is only half accomplished if she dies; but soft, the vital spark is not quite extinct—her heart still beats—I feel her breath upon my cheek—she lives! still lives, to aid my great revenge! With care she may recover; and while I have her in my keeping, I hold a treasure more precious than all the riches of this western world. Tremble! thou fool! thou vain and blinded man! who left thy great inheritance to rob me of this little spot—to dispossess me of the poor honor of ruling a few rude savages and outcast men. Yes, Henri, dearly shalt thou rue the hour that brought thee to supplant the man whose childish days had felt thy power, and spurned thy cruel yoke!"

Montbelliard then bore the insensible Victoria to a place of safety, and during the weeks of mental aberration that followed her long swoon, attended her with the most assiduous care. Reason at length partially returned; but its wandering light only mialod the unhappy Spaniard, who was