

"What is your object?"

"I want to speak to you in private, without fear of being overheard."

"It was you, doubtless, who wished to see me to-day?"

"You are quite right, señor."

"How comes it that you, who are a perfect stranger to me, knew who I am?"

"The simplest thing in the world. The mistress of the house where you lived showed such ill-temper when I asked for you that I did not care to call again. So I watched near the house. I saw you come out and I followed you, waited for you again, and now I have found you."

"Very good. Go on first and I will follow you."

In ten minutes the two reached the avenues of the Lameda, which at that hour were crowded with promenaders. The mulatto led the way to the far end of the promenade and turned into a thicket of trees situated at a little distance from the road. In the centre of the enclosure was a stone bench on which the mulatto sat down.

"Come," she said, "now we can talk without fear of being disturbed."

"It must be something very important and very mysterious that you have to talk about, since you are so afraid of being overheard."

"It is the most important thing in the world."

"What may that be?"

"A lady's honor."

"So there is a lady in the case?"

"Yes."

"Am I acquainted with her?"

"No. But she knows you and wishes you well."

"Your mistress, no doubt?"

"You are right. Don't think, however, that I am a slave. I am her nurse. My devotion to her is boundless and I am proving it at this very moment."

"Where did she see me?"

"She will tell you, no doubt, when you ask her. I know nothing about it. I am charged with a mission and I fulfil it, that is all."

"Is your mistress young?"

"She is not eighteen yet."

"And beautiful?"

"A very pearl of beauty."

"Married or single?"

"Senor, you are asking too much. I cannot answer you."

"You are right. I was indiscreet. And what does this lady want with me?"

"A private interview."

"I am too much of a gentleman to refuse her."

"You are a Frenchman, señor, and that is enough."

"I am ready," cried Tancred; "go on. I would follow you were you to lead me to perdition."

"Not so fast, señor."

"Why?"

"The interview will not take place to-night."

"Not to-night," said the young man in a tone of profound disappointment. "What is your reason for thus putting off my happiness? I am longing to throw myself at the feet of your divine mistress."

"Do you think my mistress has no precautions to take? Bear in mind that this is a matter that concerns her honor and perhaps her life."

"Well, how long shall I be kept waiting? Will you keep me long in suspense?"

"No, if you do not refuse to take the oath I have to receive from you."

"What is its nature?"

"You must swear to me on your honor as a gentleman and your faith as a Christian that you are free and that your heart belongs to no other woman."

Tancred was silent an instant.

"What! do you hesitate, señor?" asked the mulatto.

"An oath, whatever be its nature, is a serious and a sacred thing, and I could not swear that I never loved a woman."

"My mistress does not ask about the past, that in no way concerns her. She only wishes to know if at the present time you are free and in love with no one."

Tancred considered. It seemed that when he heard of this unknown beauty who took such an interest in him the figure of Don José's daughter faded from his heart. Finally he concluded that he could conscientiously take the oath.

"On my honor as a gentleman," he said slowly, "and my faith as a Christian I swear that I am free and that my heart belongs to no one."

"Very good."

"And now, when will the interview take place?"

"To-morrow night."

"Who will guide me?"

"I will."

"And where shall I find you?"

"Here, at midnight."

"Why so late?"

"I beg you, señor, not to ask me questions which it is impossible for me to answer."

"Excuse me," said Tancred, "but the slightest delay is a diminution of my happiness."

"I am going to leave you now, señor."

"Already?"

"What pleasure do you find in my company?" asked the woman with a smile.

"You are a link between me and the unknown being whom I already feel that I love dearly."

"Ah! that is the Frenchman all over," murmured the mulatto.

Tancred drew two gold ounces from his pocket

and tried to slip them into his guide's hand. But the woman drew back.

"No, señor; my mistress is rich and generous. Not only does she let me want for nothing, but she overwhelms me with kindness. *Au revoir*, señor, and don't forget to-morrow night. At midnight exactly I shall be here with the keys of Paradise."

With these words the mulatto left the enclosure and disappeared in the throng of promenaders, leaving Tancred in a profound state of astonishment and extremely doubtful whether he was dreaming or not.

XV.

THE FIRST INTERVIEW.

We need scarcely say that Tancred hardly closed his eyes that night, and that the following day seemed to him as though it would never end. The seconds of that interminable day were as long to him as hours, and the hours seemed years.

The young man passed almost the whole time in consulting his watch, in counting the slowly passing minutes, and in picturing to himself the lovely being of whom he had made such an easy conquest.

At last the night came and though he still wanted several hours to the time of the rendezvous he set about dressing himself for the interview.

We will spare our readers the details of the toilet, the duties of which we may be sure were carefully performed. Shirt after shirt of fine Holland linen did he try on and pitilessly reject as not fine enough for the momentous occasion. Time after time he bathed his face and hands and sprinkled his dress with perfumed water.

At last this memorable toilet came to an end, and Tancred, richly dressed and duly scented, made his way with a jaunty air and expectation in his heart to the trysting-place. Alas, when he reached the little thicket the clocks were only striking eleven.

An hour to wait! The Lameda, which had been as crowded as usual until half-past ten, began to be deserted. The last *volante* had driven off, and not a palanquin was to be seen. A few loving couples strolling hand in hand and conversing in low, soft whispers, were the only persons in sight. At last the promenade was totally deserted.

The half-hour struck from the belfry of a neighboring convent.

"Half an hour more!" murmured Tancred.

"A century!"

Year by year even centuries pass away, and so minute by minute the half-hour dragged its slow length along.

At the first stroke of midnight a shadowy figure seemed to rise before the young man, and a voice which he recognized as that of the mulatto addressed him.

"I am punctual, you see, señor."

"At last!" cried Tancred.

"What! You surely don't accuse me of being late."

"No. But I was here before the time."

"Have you been here long, señor?"

"Yes, a long, long time. The day seemed an eternity to me. I was in misery the whole time."

"Wonderfully gallant, to be sure. But you must keep those pretty compliments for my mistress."

"Am I going to see her then? Oh, I can hardly believe my happiness!"

"It is true, nevertheless. My lady is waiting for you."

"Then let us be quick! Do not let us lose an instant!"

"Follow me then, señor."

"When shall we get there?"

"Before very long."

Followed by the expectant Frenchman the mulatto traversed the length of the deserted promenade and on reaching the extreme end produced a small metal whistle on which she blew a low prolonged note. A *volante* which had been in waiting hard by drove up softly. The lamp on either side of the carriage was, contrary to rule, unlit.

"Get in," whispered the woman.

Tancred needed no second invitation. He jumped into his place and was quickly joined by his guide. Without waiting for the word of command the calesero drove off.

Contrary to custom the driver had received his instructions beforehand. Sometimes he turned to the right, sometimes to the left, but these turnings and twistings were as frequent and so sudden that the young man was unable to keep track of the route.

At last the *volante* entered a kind of avenue lying between two rows of garden walls over which the branches of the trees within mingled their luxuriant foliage.

"Are we far off?" asked Tancred.

"Close by," whispered the mulatto. Then she added,

"Turn your face this way, señor."

The young man obeyed. As he did so he felt some silky material in contact with his forehead.

"What are you doing?" he asked.

"I am blindfolding you, señor."

"What for?"

"I have no answer to give you, except that it must be so."

A frightful suspicion crossed his mind. Instinctively he drew back.

"Arrima!" cried the mulatto.

The *volante* stopped.

"Senor," said she in a tone in which a tinge of contempt was just perceptible, "if you do not wish

to have your eyes bandaged, if you are afraid this is a trap set for you, you only have to say so. We will return to the spot whence we started, and when my mistress hears that you were afraid, she will in no way regret that she did not see you—she will utterly and completely forget you."

While the woman was speaking Tancred reddened with shame at his passing hesitation. "I have come too far," he thought, "to draw back. I may as well see the end of this affair. Besides, what have I to fear? No one in Havana knows me, and anyone taking the trouble of deceiving me into a trap would make but a poor business of it."

"Do as you like," he said to his companion, who immediately tied a silk handkerchief lightly over his eyes.

"The bandage will be undone when the time comes," she whispered, and added in a louder tone to the calesero,

"*Segua!*"

Once more the *volante* set off and in three or four minutes stopped again.

"Are we there?" inquired the young man.

"Yes. I will get out first. So, now lean on me and get down."

Tancred heard the creaking of a key turning in a lock and the groaning of a door moving heavily on its hinges. He had no time for reflection, for his guide seized him by the arm.

"Take care," she said, "there is a step. Now, all right. Come along, it is all clear now."

As he went on he could feel that he was walking on a gravel pathway, and every now and then a branch lightly brushed his face. He was evidently passing through a garden.

When the two had gone a hundred yards or so in this manner they stopped, while the mulatto whispered some instructions.

"Take care. Six steps to go up here."

At the top of the steps a second door was opened and Tancred stepped on what appeared to be heavy carpeting. Strange and sweet odours filled the air around him. Then he felt the woman withdraw her arm,

"Wait one moment," she said.

Several doors opened and shut, then all was silent. Three or four minutes after he heard the voice of the mulatto coming apparently from a distance.

"Now, señor, take off your bandage."

In a fever of anticipation the young man tore off the handkerchief and looked eagerly around him.

At first he saw nothing. The room was in perfect darkness.

Finally he remarked a faint track of light proceeding from the adjoining apartment. Carefully feeling his way he went to the door, and was hesitating to enter when a soft melodious voice gave him the necessary invitation,

"Come in, señor."

He opened the door, entered the room and stood dumb, amazed, dazzled at the sight that met his eyes.

In the centre of the apartment, which was magnificently furnished and faintly lit up by four wax-lights in rose-colored shades, hung a light hammock of aloe fibre, balanced on silken ropes.

In the hammock, in an attitude of charming nonchalance and grace, reclined a young girl of such ravishing beauty that the young officer's most brilliant flights of imagination were utterly surpassed.

When we say that this young girl was no other than Carmen our readers will need no description of her bewildering beauty, which was heightened by the surroundings about her and her elegant coquettish costume.

Her dress, which was of white gauze with broad purple stripes that resembled ribbons sewn on the virgin white material, was low in the neck and short in the waist, revealing an alabaster bust and an irreproachable ankle. Over her shoulders her jet black hair hung in heavy coils bringing out in deep relief the dazzling whiteness of her skin. On one side of her head she wore a deep red rose beside which her only ornaments were a coral necklet and bracelets which contrasted charmingly with her snowy neck and arms. One small foot, cased in a red morocco slipper hung easily over the side of the hammock, and in her right hand she lazily toyed with a fan of immaculate white feathers.

Such was the young girl as she appeared to Tancred's astonished gaze. At first he was on the point of throwing himself on his knees, for beauty such as this he could hardly believe to be mortal.

The young girl divined his thoughts, and a smile of triumph played an instant about her lips. For some moments she left him undisturbed in his ecstasy, enjoying to the full the embarrassment and admiration she caused. Then she spoke in French, in a slightly trembling tone, and with a pretty little accent that enhanced the charm of her voice.

"Come forward, Monsieur le Chevalier, I beg of you."

Tancred took a few steps forward and stammered:

"Oh, madam, I am dreaming. For pity's sake do not awake me yet! Let me dream a little longer. One minute of the celestial vision before me is better than a whole lifetime of reality."

"You are awake, Monsieur le Chevalier," replied the girl with another smile. "I am a reality—flesh and blood like yourself. If you want a proof here is my hand—that will convince you that I am no immaterial form."

The chevalier seized the slender, delicate hand that was held towards him, and kissed it with the utmost passion and respect.

"Are you perfectly convinced now?" asked Carmen.

"Yes, madam," replied Tancred. "I am unable to doubt the evidence you have given me. It is no longer a vision that I see; it is yourself—the most beautiful and the most adorable of women. Only, though, I am certain of my happiness, I confess my inability to understand it, so immense and so undeserved does it appear."

The girl pointed to a chair placed near the hammock.

"Sit down, Monsieur le Chevalier; we are going to have a good long chat. But first of all, I am extremely anxious to stand well with you, or I am afraid you have but a poor opinion of me."

"I!" said Tancred, indignantly energetic. "I judge you unfavorably! I swear to you, madam—"

"No need to swear it," interrupted Carmen. "It could not be otherwise. The means I have taken to bring about this interview place me in a false and most compromising position, and you are only indulgent to me on account of my beauty."

"Madam," said the young man eagerly, "I beseech you to believe that my respect for you equals my admiration."

Carmen shook her head gently, and continued,

"Your respect I cannot believe in. I know what I deserve, and I know you will grant me as much as I deserve, but only when you have heard what I have to tell you with all the frankness that my position renders necessary. First of all, chevalier, you must know who I am, for the very thought that you may take me for one of the class of adventurers who are so numerous in Havana causes me inexpressible pain. Oh! I can guess what you are going to say; but gallantry proves nothing. Let me proceed, I beg of you. Your turn will then come, and I promise you that I will listen with untiring patience, and will believe all that you may have to say to me."

A bewitching smile accompanied these last words. Tancred looked and listened in silence. Every word Carmen uttered sounded in his ears like a note of delightful music.

The girl continued,—

"I am eighteen, a Spaniard by birth. With the blood which flows in my veins is mingled some drops of the royal blood of the old conquerors of Spain. As to my fortune, I do not myself know what it is."

The girl's face wore a curious smile as she uttered this phrase, so capable of a double construction.

"I came into the world on the other side of the Pyrenees," she went on; "but though belonging to Spain by name and race, at heart I am French. I have always loved—adored, I should say rather—France, that great country whose heroes can rank in chivalry and bravery with the Cid of our legends. The French gentleman has always been in my eyes the perfect type of loyalty, courage and gallantry. When I was still all but a child I said to myself, 'The day that my heart is no longer my own it shall be given to a Frenchman.' What more can I say?" murmured Carmen, hiding her face behind her fan, "I saw you—you are a Frenchman—a gentleman—"

She could go no farther.

"And you loved me?" broke in Tancred.

"Oh, madam, in the name of mercy! in the name of pity, speak the word—speak it quickly! Until your lips have uttered it, I cannot believe in the reality of the happiness you lay before me."

A murmur escaped from Carmen's lips.

"I loved you," she said, veiling her eyes beneath their long lashes.

A moment's silence followed this confession. Carmen appeared to be struggling with her emotion. Her bosom heaved and her hand trembled in Tancred's grasp.

The young man sought in vain for words in which to express his joy. He was unable to utter a word. Finally the girl sufficiently overcame her emotion to be able to break the silence.

"In France, in Spain," she said, "anywhere else than in this country, where you have alighted as a bird of passage, I should have had twenty occasions—or I should have known how to make them—of meeting you. You would have remarked me, you would perhaps have loved me. I should not have been compelled to stoop to a means so painful to my pride and my modesty to bring you to my feet and to whisper in your ear the confession I have just made. But we are neither in Spain nor in France, but in Havana. I had no choice. I felt that I must see you or suffer cruelly, and perhaps for ever. Strong in the purity of my heart and the rectitude of my intentions, I ventured—ventured more, doubtless, than I ought to have done. Will you pardon me an error I have committed for you, and for your sake?"

"Pardon you!" exclaimed the Frenchman, kneeling at Carmen's feet. "The happiest of men pardon you who have made him so happy! Yet my happiness is mingled with much pain and many doubts. It seems too great, too sudden, too unexpected to be real. My head is in a whirl. I seem to be losing my senses. I find myself thinking that your love is a fiction, that for some unknown reason you are only toying with my heart, and that you will soon tire of it, despise it and cast it aside."

"My friend," said the young girl tenderly, "the doubt you express gives me infinite pain. Look at me. People say, and I believe it, that the eyes are the windows of the soul, come, what do you see there?"