

at once the servant of the Count Alberti, and dismissed her attendants. How often did she tremble, how often did she turn pale with horror, during that short interview! Ernest had fought with his general officer, against the positive commands of the empress; the general had been mortally wounded, and Alberti was disgraced; a high reward was set upon his life. He had, however, escaped, but his servant knew not whither.

Many months passed away, months of doubt and sorrow to the hapless Bianca. The young deserter was never heard of; and the festive magnificence which had flashed for a moment in the palace of the countess, entirely disappeared. All Vienna talked of her engagement with Ernest, and many pronounced the engagement to be dissolved. It was said, that the empress had herself forbidden the young countess to think of the disgraced Alberti. Bianca was certainly commanded to appear at court, and she did not refuse. Many of the young courtiers determined to pay more than usual attention to the very beautiful and very wealthy heiress. She appeared, but none presumed to insult her sorrow with their addresses: her real, artless grief, invested her with a dignity which no one dared to infringe upon. She did not attempt to conceal how severely the blow had fallen upon her; but her grief, though silent, and seeming to claim no interest, was quietly majestic. Calm and pale, she stood among the ladies of the court, an object of respect and admiration even to the empress herself.

A year passed away. The general whom Alberti had wounded was not dead, but he had met with so many relapses that his recovery was still pronounced uncertain. Bianca continued a quiet mourner, but now her alliance was sought by many of the noblest houses of Austria; gently, but firmly, every proposal was declined. For the first time, the empress interested herself in the suit of the prince, one of Bianca's enthusiastic admirers. The young countess did not repel the confidence which her sovereign sought; she disclosed with affecting earnestness the feelings of her heart, and the principles on which she acted: before she quitted the empress, she perceived that her feelings were understood,—she guessed that her principles were approved.

The mother of the Count Alberti was living; and still presided over the household of her son. The Countess Bianca was now a constant visiter at the Alberti palace; and a few days after the above-mentioned interview with the empress, the aged countess and Bianca were conversing almost cheerfully together: they were elated with hope,

for the petitions which had been presented in behalf of Ernest seemed to be successful. The empress had herself written to the Countess Alberti; the letter was in Bianca's hand. Suddenly a person entered the saloon: it was the old and faithful servant of Alberti; he told them news that almost overwhelmed them. The young count had returned; he had been brought to Vienna with a gang of desperate banditti; he was said to be the captain of men who were out-laws, robbers, and murderers.

"Alas! alas!" exclaimed the old countess, and she gazed with a look of heart-broken sorrow on a magnificent portrait of her late husband; "is this to be the end of the house of Alberti? Your only son, my beloved Conrad, the child of our hopes, will he prove a shame to his father's name? It is well you are not here; it is enough that I survive to witness our disgrace."

"Ernest will never disgrace you," cried Bianca, eagerly. "We know him much better," she added, clasping the trembling hands of the countess, with tender affection; "there is much to be explained in this story. Dear, rash Ernest!" she faltered, leaning her head on his mother's shoulder, and burst into tears. "We know him better: he may be wild and faulty, but *he* will never disgrace any one."

"He never will, you are right," replied the countess; "I spoke hastily. I ought to hope, I ought to believe, better things of my beloved son. Daughter of my love, I was very wrong to doubt him for a moment; you judge him rightly. Bless you, bless you, my sweet Bianca."

Alberti has been indeed brought to Vienna among the banditti of Istria; every proof was strong against him. He was condemned to be broken on the wheel, and there seemed no hope that the sentence would be mitigated. Ernest himself told an improbable story about his not being connected with the banditti; but nobody listened to it, and he mentioned it no more. Bianca and his mother did believe him. The account was perfectly true.

Ernest had seen his antagonist fall, and he stood in stupified horror, with the bloody sword in his hand; a cold and sickening chill crept through his frame, and thought and memory seemed to forsake him. The friend who had accompanied him to the spot where the duel was fought, roused him from his reckless stupor: he conjured, he commanded him to fly. Ernest heeded him not, but rushed to the place where the wounded general was lying: he had swooned, and the ashy paleness of death was already on his countenance. Ernest flung himself on the ground and groaned with anguish. The general