

being informed that the castle was beset by a band of robbers, headed by a chief, who though recently added to their number, was the terror of the district, did his countenance betray any emotion except what might be gathered from a slight—very slight elevation of the eye-brow.

He replied, that he did not think the place would hold out for half an hour against the force by which it was beleaguered; and, therefore, although the character of the band was little security for their abstinence from violence, even should they be quietly admitted, yet as resistance would infallibly tend to bloodshed, he should counsel an immediate surrender.

Alberto, who, to do him justice, would gladly have struck a blow in defence of the old walls, shrugged his shoulders, and departed to give the requisite instructions. The windows of the apartment in which the interview we have described took place, opened upon a sort of small lawn, or grass-plot, over which the robbers must necessarily pass in their way to that part of the building which was occupied by the ladies and their affrighted household.

The merchant, after an ineffectual attempt to calm the fears of Bianca and Emilia, stepped out upon the lawn, as if with the intention of parleying with the assailants on their arrival. In a few minutes the castle gates were thrown open, and the band were not long in finding their way to the spot on which Rolandi was standing. They rushed forward, and, regardless of their pledge for the safety of the inhabitants of the castle, expressed great indignation at the delay, trifling as it was, which had preceded their admission. A shriek from one of the females within, for a moment caused the merchant to turn his head in the direction whence it proceeded. Meanwhile the chief of the robbers, who was a few yards in advance of his band, had approached, and was about to seize the merchant. The latter turned slowly round, and fixed his cold, stern eye upon his assailant.

The effect upon the robber captain was perfectly electrical. His weapon, which he had raised with his right hand, as he prepared to grasp the merchant with his left, dropped to the earth, and he quailed beneath the glance of the other, like a lashed hound.

Rolandi spoke not a word, nor did he deign the bandit another look; but, waving his hand, as if to command his absence, turned away, and, without revisiting the apartment occupied by his hostess and her terrified companions, betook himself to his own.

The bandit captain watched the retreat of the mysterious being by whom he had been so unaccountably overawed, and it was not until Rolandi had disappeared that the other seemed able to draw his breath. The first use which he made of his partially recovered faculties, was to collect his followers, who had witnessed the scene with an astonishment scarcely inferior in degree to their leader's terror, and, in a few minutes, the castle was entirely clear of the unwelcome visitors, and the gate closed upon them. A few murmurs, of disappointment, indeed, escaped them in their retreat; but these were instantly silenced by their commander, who, submissive as was his demeanour before the man who had so unexpectedly confronted him, appeared to hold undisputed sovereignty over his band.

"Well, Bianca," said Emilia, on the following morning, while they were taking their accustomed stroll in the castle garden, "what think you of our guest now?"

"I scarcely know what to think of him," was the reply; "he is a most extraordinary person, and, independently of the gratitude which, in common with yourself, I entertain towards him for his well-timed and almost miraculous interposition in our favour, last evening, I do not hesitate to acknowledge that he has interested me greatly. That he is no common character is quite evident; but who he is that thus, by a glance of his eye, can overawe and disperse a band of the most desperate robbers that ever infested the country, passes my powers of conjecture. What think you he is?"

"I have thought much on the subject," answered the other, "and hitherto have hit upon but one solution of the riddle."

"And what may that be?" inquired Bianca.

"That he is the captain of the band of which the worthy, who headed the expedition of last night, was only the lieutenant; and that we owe our preservation to an interference prompted by gratitude for the shelter and succour which we have afforded to the self-styled merchant Rolandi."

"I should be sorry, very sorry," exclaimed Bianca, "if your explanation of the mystery be the true one; and yet appearances, I confess, are much in favour of your theory."

"Nay, cousin," was the rejoinder, "only think how romantic it would be to have a lover in the chief of a gallant band of freebooters!"

"Romance, Emilia," said the other, "can never consecrate crime; and were my interest for this stranger far deeper than it is, it would, were your conjectures correct, be absorbed in abhorrence of his guilt."

A turn in their walk suddenly disclosed to them the subject of their conversation, reclining on a step which formed part of the pedestal of an ancient urn.

"Here he is," cried the volatile Emilia; "and fast asleep, as I

live! Merchant or no merchant, I will win a pair of gloves!" and without giving a thought either to the hazard or the impropriety of the action, she touched his forehead lightly with her lips, and, the next instant, was flying down the avenue with the swiftness of a fawn.

"You are a sad girl," said Bianca; and if you make not a steadier wife than you are a mistress, I fear your hero, as you call him, will have a sorry bargain of you."

"Nevertheless," rejoined the other, "in a graver tone, "I would that that were all he has to apprehend." "What mean you?" inquired Bianca.

"I have more than once," resumed Emilia, "hinted to you my suspicions that the meetings which, within the last year, have been held under this roof, and at which our very respectable guardian has presided, are not altogether for objects which the state would approve. I have remarked, moreover, that the society of the worthies who compose the conclave, is exceedingly repugnant to Lorenzo; whose sole inducement in accepting of the marchese's hospitalities if such they can be termed, may be referred to a certain madcap, who shall be nameless. I have too much confidence in his loyalty and good sense to suppose that he would deliberately lend himself to any treasonable design; and therefore I hope that these assemblages are merely for the purposes of a faction, to which Lorenzo gives no other sanction than may be inferred from his being often found in their company."

"I observed," said Bianca, "that, on the last two or three occasions on which he has visited the castle, he has been more than ordinarily reserved, and that he has lost much of his wonted elasticity of spirits."

The ladies returned to their apartment, and saw nothing more of the stranger. Towards the evening, a messenger arrived with intelligence that the marchese, with his sons and a party of friends, would reach the castle on the afternoon of the following day. This news was little calculated for the consolation of the fair cousins: who, independently of the annoyance which the odious attentions of the marchese's eldest son occasioned to the one, and the uneasiness caused to the other by her lover's participation in such society, had every reason to apprehend the most disagreeable consequences from the presence of the stranger guest.

In proportion then to the intensity of their fears on this subject, was the delight with which they heard, at nightfall, that the merchant had decamped, without beat of drum. True it is, he had greatly overpaid the hospitality he had received, by his signal deliverance of them from the incursion of the freebooters, but the ladies were somewhat at a loss to account for his want of courtesy in not making, or at least leaving his adieus.

The cousins retired to their respective chambers, between which, however, there was a direct communication. The surprise, not altogether unmingled with alarm, with which Emilia beheld upon her toilette a pair of white gloves the reader will be at no loss to conceive. They were of silk, and of exquisitely curious workmanship. A note accompanied them, which was as follows:

"If thou hast a friend in whom thou takest more than a sister's interest, and there be a snare in his path, let him wear these gloves as a lady's favour, in his cap, and they will deliver him in the hour of danger."

"ROLANDI."

With a burning blush upon her cheek, and her heart bounding with agitation, Emilia rushed into the adjoining chamber, where she found her cousin under the influence of as much surprise and scarcely less confusion; for Bianca had also discovered upon her toilette a note. It enclosed a leaf of ivy and a sprig of myrtle, and ran thus:

"Farewell! Thanks for thy courtesy! If, among the expected arrivals, there be an individual whose presence is obnoxious to thee, cause the ivy leaf to be placed on his plate, in his goblet, or between the leaves of his missal; and, be he at meat or mass, at the banquet or the altar, full or fasting, he will put the Arno between you in half an hour, and never cross it again. Thou hast already witnessed my power; and if, in a recurring season of perplexity or peril, thou wouldst prove it again, place the myrtle on thy bosom in the morning, and, before the eastern turret of the castle hath spanned the moat with its shadow, I will be with thee."

"ROLANDI."

"What think you now?" inquired Bianca of her cousin, when they had sufficiently recovered from the surprise into which these singular and mysterious communications had thrown them.

"That the stranger might have found better pastime than playing upon the credulity of two simple maidens," was the reply.

"I do not believe that such was his purpose," remarked Bianca.

"Why, surely, my grave cousin does not suppose that these tokens possess the virtues ascribed to them by the stranger?" exclaimed the younger lady.

"Doubtless," said the other, "you will laugh at my credulity, when I tell you that I will put one of them to the test, on the first occasion on which the marchese compels our presence at his boisterous banquet, and that I conclude, will not be long after his return."

Agreeably to his previous announcement, the marchese made his appearance on the following afternoon, accompanied by a somewhat larger party than he usually brought with him; and in honour of whom he ordered a splendid banquet to be prepared, at which, as Bianca had anticipated, the ladies' presence was requested in terms equivalent to a command.

Repugnant as such a scene must necessarily have been to a delicate and high minded woman, it was rendered doubly disgusting by the fulsome attentions which Vinzentio, the marchese's eldest son thought proper to address to her whom he was pleased to consider as his betrothed bride. Nor did these attentions become more tolerable as the banquet proceeded. At last, the natural insolence of his disposition becoming excited by the deep potations with which he had qualified the viands, he called for another cup of wine, and challenged the company to pledge him to the health of his intended bride.

The cheek of Bianca blushed a deeper crimson at this new insult; and, but that she was anxiously waiting the issue of the experiment she was about to make of Rolandi's talisman, she would have instantly quitted the banqueting room.

Vinzentio rose, and calling upon his comrades to follow his example, he took the wine from the hand of Alberto, and lifted it to the level of his lip; when, at the instant that he was about to do honour to the toast, his eye became fixed upon the goblet, as though an asp had been coiled within it, and dashing it untasted upon the floor, he hurried from the hall with a precipitation which left no time for question. None having been aware of the presence of the ivy leaf in the cup, besides the two cousins, and Alberto, who had contrived, unperceived, to place it there, it was not recognised as the cause of Vinzentio's agitation; and thus the marchese and his guests were utterly at a loss to account for the freak of his hopeful heir on any other score than that of madness. The occurrence had the effect of abruptly terminating the banquet; and Bianca and her cousin gladly availed themselves of the opportunity to retire to their own apartment.

"What says my infidel cousin now?" was the triumphant exclamation of Bianca, as soon as she found herself alone with Emilia. "That your phoenix of merchants has proved himself to be an impostor," was the reply.

"As how?" inquired the other, with somewhat of asperity. "Why," rejoined Emilia, "that the merchant is no merchant at all."

"Nay," said Bianca, "there I agree with you; but I hope you have given up your bandit-chief theory."

"Yes," was the answer, "but in favour of one which you will scarcely prefer to it."

"And what may that be?" asked Bianca.

"That he is either a devil or an angel," responded Emilia.

"That is rather a wide guess, my cousin," resumed Bianca; "but let me ask you, has the result of this evening's experiment determined you on proving the virtue of the gloves?"

"Surely," replied Emilia, "if I can prevail upon Lorenzo to accept the gift."

"Which you will scarcely do by informing him of the mode in which they were won," remarked the other, as the cousins parted for the night.

On the following day, towards evening, Bianca, rather to her annoyance than her surprise, received a message from the marchese, requesting her to attend him in his closet. Well assured that if she did not go to him, the privacy of her own apartment would be invaded, she obeyed, and found him pacing the room, and with a troubled and perplexed expression of countenance. He motioned her to a seat, but remained standing while he spoke. "Bianca," said he, "I must be plain with you. Think not that the exultation which you vainly endeavoured to conceal last night, when Vinzentio so abruptly left us, escaped my observation. Whether you had any knowledge of, or participation in the cause of his departure, I know not, nor do I care; but your triumph will be short. His brother remains, and to-morrow's setting sun shall see you his bride."

"It shall rather gild my grave!" was the firm reply of the spirited girl.

"That grave shall be a living one then," was the rejoinder, "if I be not obeyed."

"My sainted parent," returned Bianca, "in an evil hour for his daughter's peace, made you the guardian of my wealth; but he gave you no power in the disposal of my hand."

"I did not send for you," responded the other, "to argue the matter, but to decide it. You go not forth from this place alive, but as the bride of your cousin Francesco. Choose you, therefore, between sitting as mistress of these halls, or becoming the sole tenant of the western turret, whence—it was once a tradition of your family—none who entered it against their will, ever came forth alive."

"You needed not to have told me that I am in your power," was the determined response of the damsel; "I know it, and with that knowledge declare to you that I would rather live the companion of the newt and the toad, than the bride of your ruffian son!"

The spirit of a long line of ancestors flashing in her indignant eyes as she thus spoke, she turned from him, and was in the act