

performer in the Circus. But she did it so prettily and bewitchingly that I was not the only one who had laid his love at her feet to be trampled on at her girlish pleasure. I had but poor health even then, and this was one source of Ninette's merry sarcasm.

"The Champion Athlete has not an athletic appearance," she used to say. "I fear the signor is weak in every way." And then, with her eyes full of radiant health, she would demurely recommend me a winter in the South—just because the winter was coming on, and we were in the North. "I *must* laugh at you, Ricardo," she would sometimes say; "I get so dreadfully tired of you unless I turn you into ridicule."

And I knew that she spoke truth.

I was thinking, as I ever was, of this love of mine, and wondering how Ninette would choose to treat me to-night, when, with my great-coat over my performing dress, I entered the manager's anteroom. I was late, for I had not been well enough to hasten, and all the company had assembled, lounging or bustling about according to their appointed tasks.

"Late, O Monarch of the Vibrating Wire," said Ninette, as I hesitated before her, looking at her half enthralled and half amused. She was leaning against the table, in her crimson velvet habit—for she had no wonderful feats to perform to-night—the little crimson cap, with its white feather, set coquettishly on one side of her bright, fair curls.

"You look," she continued, saucily, "as if you had risen from a sick bed to perform for the sick. How interesting!"

I moved into the dimly-lighted building which surrounded the tent, and looked in at the performance.

"The Circus is crowded," Ninette whispered, as she sauntered out with me. "I hardly ever remember our having such a crowd, Ricardo."

"And I hope we never shall have it again," I panted, unbuttoning my coat. "The place is stifling."

"O, I hope we shall," she laughed merrily, "I should like to see hundreds turned away from the doors, and no room left inside even for one child more."

Ah! Ninette, how soon you were to have your wish fulfilled!

"We shall have a splendid gift for the hospital," she continued; "but Ricardo, what do you think? A clergyman here, who was going to have a service in his church on Sunday especially for the Infirmary, has declined to do so now because we have taken up its cause. He thinks—he says—" Ninette's voice was low and puzzled here, and her eyes angry; "he says if it will accept money earned—so, his conscience does not allow him to give it money from God's house. Why don't you answer?" she went on, impetuously, as I paused. "Why don't you say something angry?"

"It isn't worth speaking of," I replied, though I think my heart was as hot as her own. "It is only worth laughing over."

And then Ninette, looking searchingly into my face, did laugh, her clear, happy laugh, though the puzzled look still shone in her bright, excited eyes.

"Yes; we shall send a worthy present to the hospital I hope, and trust, and believe," she continued, slowly, "but our help is only to lower it—or, at least," she went on, as I tried to interrupt her in hasty dissent, "good men think so."

"One man—and who *ought* to be good," I put in, contemptuously.

"One man," she rejoined, the puzzled look deepening again, "speaking for many who think as he does, and who understand this as we cannot. And yet—and yet—Ricardo, look at that mass of eager, expectant faces. Why do they come to see us—why do they encourage us—if we sin in

what we do? Why doesn't the world show us so in the only way which there would be no withstanding? Does this thought bewilder you too, Ricardo?"

It had bewildered me many and many a time, but I could not tell her so, for the very shadow of the fear that this life in which we were so much together might be wrong, made me shiver coldly. Her earnestness, which had been almost appealing, vanished suddenly. "Never mind," she said, with her quick laugh, tossing back the bright little head in its velvet cap, "All lives have their aching, troublesome moments I suppose. There! they are waiting for your first feat and your greatest. Go on, signor, and prosper."

With her pleasant words in my ears, I went in amid the deafening applause of the crowd, and, bowing slightly, walked coolly across the ring. I thought nothing of the mass of faces rising in rows, but I remembered that Ninette could see me, and that she had said I was helping in a good cause. I felt that I performed as I had hardly ever performed before, and the long applause was again and again renewed as I left the ring. What would Ninette say? Would she congratulate me? Passing through the dimly-lighted building outside the tent, where the horses waited, I caught sight of two figures standing aside in the shadow—Ninette and the gentleman whom we had met that morning—talking low and earnestly. I had often noticed him in the circus and noticed his evident admiration of Ninette, (but then did not every one gaze at her in admiration?) still I had never seen him out there among us before, and I started as I came up to them in the gloom. Ninette carelessly turned her eyes upon me for a moment, then went on talking; coquettishly and flippantly it seemed to me. I took her horse from the man who was bringing it forward, and myself led it towards her.

"Are you ready, Mademoiselle Ninette?" I asked, my voice trembling against my will.

"Ready? Why?" she inquired, with slow contempt.

"Allow me. O, pray allow me, Mademoiselle," exclaimed the stranger, starting forward. And Ninette, smiling, put her foot into his hand.

Seating herself in the saddle with the utmost ease, she carelessly, as it seemed, backed Black Hawk against me. "Signor Ricardo," she said, haughtily, "is this the spot where the gentlemen of our company usually rest between their exercises in the ring?" An ironical answer rose to my lips, but I withheld the words.

"Stand back, if you please, signor. Must you always follow me? always haunt me? Stand back."

With a quick change of voice, and a bright shy smile, she bent to take her little gilded whip as the officer handed it to her.

"Thanks, Monsieur le Capitaine." And whilst she bent gracefully, and seemed to be only stroking the neck of the splendid black horse, she reined him in, skilfully and imperceptibly, until he touched my shoulder.

"Gently! gently, my hawk," she said, feigning utter unconsciousness of my presence, "would you fly too soon?" Then, with a most demure little face, she cantered through the opening in the canvas.

"A most proud and bewitching little equestrian queen," said the young officer, appearing much amused by my discomfiture, "but, like old Rome, I suppose you can well 'bear the pride of her of whom yourself are proud!'"

I turned away without answering; and for the first time Ninette performed without my eyes following her graceful motions. The strange gentleman moved to the opening into the tent, but when she rode back, flushed and triumphant after her success, he came forward again eagerly. She drew up her lissome little figure with a dash of odd