

That very evening Bianca visited the cell of Alberti; she had been there once before,—it was to receive his last embrace. Now she looked round on the gloomy courts, and smiled. Joyfully she passed on to the massy doors, which separated her from him whom she loved, and the grating of the bolts no longer sounded harshly. Ernest heard with astonishment the cry of delight, with which Bianca threw herself on his bosom. He looked in vain for explanation to his mother, and the Father Antonio, who slowly entered the cell. He moved not as she unwound her slender arms, and looked up tenderly, but almost reproachfully, in his face.

“My love,” she said, “I am very bold; but it was not always thus. Do you look coldly on me? Dear, dear Ernest! must I remind you of our long plighted affection? Are you still silent? Then I must plead the cause which has so often made you eloquent. I do not blush,” she said, “to make my request;” while a deepening blush spread over her downcast face, and completely belied her assertion. “Will you not understand me? Will you not recall the time when I should have waited like a bashful maid, to be entreated like all bashful maids? then you have often called me too reserved. But now,” she exclaimed, fixing her ardent and innocent gaze upon him, “a wife offers her hand to her husband. Dear Ernest! will you not take this hand?”

She smiled and held out her small white hand. He took it; he pressed it to his lips, and continued to hold it trembling in his own.

“My sweet Bianca,” he said, and as he looked at her the tears streamed from his eyes, “I was prepared for this. I knew that you would speak as you do now. It is heart-breaking to see you here, to hear you speak as I knew you would. I almost wish you had been less true, less like yourself. Ah! how can I refuse the slightest of your chaste favours! But I must be firm. We must part. My love, I will not speak of poverty, although the change would be too hard for you, a young and delicate girl, of high rank, accustomed to affluence and to ease. But, Bianca, you are a woman; and shall a tender, helpless woman be doomed to pine away in dark and horrid caverns, whose very air is poison?”

“Alberti,” said she, with eager earnestness, “have not the miners wives?”

“It may be so,” he replied; “but those women must be poor neglected wretches, injured to the sorrows and hardships of their life; they must be almost callous to distress.”

Bianca looked at him as if she had not heard him rightly; her tall figure seemed to dilate into

unusual majesty; her whole face beamed with intelligence as she spoke.

“And do you think, Ernest, that cold and deadened feeling can produce that fortitude, that patient heavenly fortitude, which the gospel, the spirit of God, alone inspires? Dearest, when I become your partner, the happy partner of your misery, I think not of my woman’s weakness; (and yet I hardly believe that it would fail.) No; I look to another arm for strength, to Him who now supports the burden of all His children’s sorrow. He will hear our prayers, and He will never forsake us. A miner’s hut may be a very happy home: it must be so to me, for my happiness is to remain with you. Would you have me wretched with my wealth and titles? I am pleading for my own happiness,—not so much for yours. Must I plead in vain?”

It was not her language, it was the almost unearthly eloquence of tone and manner that gave to the words of the Lady Bianca, an effect which it seemed impossible to resist. When she finished speaking, her hand extended to Ernest, and her face, as she leaned forward, turning alternately to the aged countess and the friar, her eyes shining with the light of expression, and the pure blood flowing in tides of richer crimson to her cheek and parted lips, lips on which a silent and trembling eloquence still hung, they all sat gazing on her in speechless astonishment. A stray sunbeam had darted through the narrow window of the cell, and the stream of light, as Bianca moved, fell upon her extended hand.

When Ernest saw the pale transparent red, which her slender fingers assumed, as the sunbeam shone through them, he thought with horror, that the blood now giving its pure clearness to her fair skin, and flowing so freely and freshly through her delicate frame, would in the mine’s poisonous atmosphere become thick and stagnant: he thought how soon the lustre of her eyes would be quenched, and the light elastic step of youth, the life which seemed exultant in the slight and graceful form of Bianca, would be palsied forever.

Ernest was eager to speak, but the old priest interrupted him, by proposing that nothing should be finally settled till the evening of the fourth ensuing day. Then the Lady Bianca, he observed, would have had more time to consider the plan she had formed: and till then the young count would be permitted to remain in Vienna.

“I will consent; but on this one condition,” said Bianca, “that my proposal, bold as it is, shall not be then opposed, if, as you say, my resolution be not changed. You know, dear Ernest, that I cannot change.”