

apartment; and, laying her gently on her couch, she stopped to whisper a few words of comfort, and then left her, with the promise of speedily returning, muttering, as she descended the long flight of stairs:

"Saint Mary be her aid, poor smitten thing!—the early blight is upon her, for unless this youth be, as I sometimes fancy, other and nobler than he seem, my lord will never let her hand go where she has given her heart, and may I never live to see her fade away into an early grave. Heighho! that this should ever be,—the saints forefend it!" and with something between a sigh and a groan, she reached the bottom of the steps.

All was bustle and confusion in the servants' hall,—for the missive just received was known by its seal and superscription, to have come from the bandit chief; and, as Annibal was a general favorite in the household, curiosity and anxiety were awake to learn its contents. It had been immediately delivered to the duke, who sat alone in his library, busily engaged in writing. But, hastily casting his pen aside, he unfolded the letter, and scorn and anger darkened his brow as he perused its insulting contents. He raised his eyes as he finished it, and Bianca stood before him.

"Go, bid the lady Viola hither," he said; "I would speak with her."

The nurse moved reluctantly away, but paused at the door, and said, hesitatingly:

"She is in her chamber, my lord, and far from well—if there are any evil tidings of the young Murano, would it not be better to keep them from her till morning?"

"Pshaw!" said the duke, impatiently, "one would judge from thy caution, that his fate were a matter of mighty interest to her; but even if it be so, he is safe as yet, for aught I know. It is not of him I would speak, but of these insolent robbers, who think to dictate terms which, were my own child in their power, I should feel that I ought with scorn to reject."

Somewhat relieved by these words, Bianca was departing on her errand, when the duke recalled her.

"Wait," he said, "thou need'st not summon thy young lady. I will seek her in her chamber,—doubtless she is weary, poor thing, and I will not call her from her rest tonight."

So saying, he arose, and, ascending the stairs, took his way towards the apartment of his daughter. She was kneeling on a priez-Dieu, her face buried in her hands, and her rich hair unbound and falling like a veil about her figure; but, absorbed as she seemed, she started when she heard his step, and turned towards him a face so full of emotion and anxiety, that, forgetting the object of his visit, the duke threw his arms around her, and asked with the tenderest solicitude the cause of her disturbance. She pointed to the open letter which he held, and, placing it in her hand:

"Read," he said; "these lawless ruffians have had the insolence to return my bill of exchange—they demand the gold; but I will give them in its place, something which they merit better."

Viola trembled, as, approaching a lamp, she silently read the letter of the bandit. It was written in a rude, but evidently a disguised hand, and contained only these few laconic words:

"The sum demanded for the ransom of Annibal Murano is again called for—the bill of exchange is valueless to the brotherhood of the Apennines, and they return it to the Duke du Conti. Four hundred crowns, in solid gold, must be forthwith paid to them, or their vengeance shall fail, not only on the captive in their power, but on him, who has the ability, but lacks the nobleness, to redeem the innocent and suffering."

"MANFREDI."

As Viola finished reading this peremptory scrawl, the paper fell from her powerless hand, and had not her father's arm been hastily thrown around her, she would have sunk to the floor. A flood of tears came to her relief, and the duke, supporting her upon his bosom, tenderly caressed and soothed her.

"Calm thyself, my dear one," he fondly said, mistaking the cause of her agitation; "we have naught to fear from the threats of these bold outlaws—they have terrified thee, but I defy them to work us harm."

"We are safe, I know,—but Annibal, dearest father," gasped the weeping girl—"for his sake thou wilt pay the gold; it is but as dross in comparison with his more precious life."

"Thou dost rate him highly, fair one," said the duke, in no loving tone, and with a smile that should have been a frown.

"Wilt thou not pay the gold, dear father?" she again asked, unheeding his remark.

"We will rescue him on our own terms, sweet," returned the duke. "These bold robbers shall learn to their cost, with whom they have to deal; they have ventured to defy my vengeance, and, by the mass, I will not rest till I have dragged the whole fraternity forth from their deepest dens, to meet the death they merit."

"The soldiers of the Pope have essayed to do this, and been baffled," said Viola, faintly. "It is vain, my father, the hope to daunt or conquer them. They have hiding places—so I have heard—in the very bowels of the earth, where they hold their dark councils, and hoard their ill-gotten wealth, mocking as they hear the steps of their pursuers hurrying on in their vain pursuit above them."

"They shall not long mock in their security," said the Duke. "I have heard some startling rumours of their leader, Viola, and if further knowledge confirm their truth, I give not up the chase till the deepest dungeon of the inquisition opens to receive him for life."