

sacrifice? Are you aware that your mind may now be upheld by an uncertain enthusiasm? Have you thought upon the drear dull calm of poverty, and decaying health? Do you feel assured that when the first tumultuous feelings of self-applause have worn themselves out, when there are none around to wonder at your extraordinary devotion to Alberti, when your name will be almost forgotten in the circles where you have hitherto lived, quite forgotten indeed, by all but a few friends whom you will never behold again,—do you think you will then rejoice at the decision you have made? When perhaps your husband may be dying, in the morning of his age, with no attendant but a weak helpless wife, who may then be too ill even to stand beside him, then what will your feelings be?”

The empress repeated her question; for the words which preceded it had absorbed Bianca's thoughts. She pictured to herself the young and vigorous Ernest wasting away, dying in her presence; she forgot herself, and all but his sufferings. Slowly she raised her head, as the empress again addressed her.

“What will my feelings be? Ah! I can scarcely imagine what they will be. Sorrow, certainly sorrow, but only for him; that must be the pervading feeling at such a moment. Happiness,” her whole face brightened with smiles as she spoke, “real joy on my own account, to know that I am with him *then*, to hope, to believe, that I shall soon be with him *for ever!*”

Bianca continued to speak, and it was evident that her mind had anticipated and dwelt on the miseries that awaited the wife of Alberti.

Maria Theresa listened to her with profound attention; she asked once again:

“Do you determine to follow Ernest Alberti to the mines of Idria as his wife, and to resign your rank and possessions?”

Bianca sunk on her knee, she raised her clasped hands, and exclaimed:

“I am but too favoured by God and my sovereign, if I may follow him. I resign my rank and my property with joy, with gratitude.”

Again, once again, the empress fixed on Bianca an earnest and searching look, and appeared to think deeply.

“I am satisfied—I am *quite* satisfied,” she said at length, and the sternness of her look disappeared; “I cannot countenance, but I shall not oppose your marriage.”

Bianca had been comparatively calm before, but now she covered her face with her hands, and sobbed almost hysterically. Maria Theresa would have raised her, but Bianca sprung up

from the ground, her face beaming with delight, though the tears hung upon her cheeks.

“Oh! forgive me,” she said eagerly; “your highness will forgive me. Do not mistake my tears for sorrow; I am so happy that I must weep.”

The empress opened the door by which she had entered the room, and led the trembling countess into a small oratory.

“I must converse with you here, before we part,” she said; and at once, her look, her voice, her manner, became expressive of the tenderest affection. “I have spoken as your sovereign, now listen to your friend. Here we should forget all distinctions of worldly rank. Here, my sweet Bianca, an empress may feel herself inferior to the wife of a poor miner. Tell me really, my dear child,” she said, tenderly clasping her companion's hands, as she drew her nearer, and gazed with a look of affectionate inquiry in her face; “confide in your friend. Must you, will you, pursue this rash plan? What is the chief motive that determines you?”

“I love,” she replied; and these two words, spoken as they then were, needed little comment to the heart of Maria Theresa; “I love Ernest for himself. I did not love his rank or his riches; he is still Ernest Alberti, he is still himself, and therefore I still love him. I can live with him in disgrace and misery; I can die with him! My words may seem like those of a romantic girl, but they are not idle sounds. I do feel that I am speaking to a friend. I open all my heart to you, when I tell you, that I see but one simple path before me, and that, in deciding to tread it, my principles confirm the decision of my heart.”

“And I,” said the empress, “yes, I confess that I understand and approve you. My child, you must leave me, or——”

Bianca sunk at the feet of the empress. She hoped, she implored for a moment. The words died upon her lips, when she beheld the calm, but changeless refusal expressed in the look of Maria Theresa, who said instantly:

“I have now only to bid you farewell. In this oratory I shall pray for you constantly. Think of me, not as your sovereign, but as your friend, and love me.”

A missal lay upon the altar; its leaves were kept open by a rosary of pearls; the empress had left it there, it was the rosary she always wore: she pressed the crucifix suspended from it to her lips, and gave it silently to the young countess. Silently she kissed her cheek and forehead, and they parted.