

CHAPTER XXXVIII

THE ACCOUNT WHICH THE DISCONSOLATE MATRON GIVES OF HER MISFORTUNE

THE doleful drums and fife were followed by twelve elderly waiting-women, that entered the garden ranked in pairs, all clad in large mourning habits, that seemed to be of milled serge, over which they wore veils of white calico, so long, that nothing could be seen of their black dress but the very bottom. After them came the Countess Trifaldi, handed by her squire Trifaldin with the white beard. The lady was dressed in a suit of the finest baize, which, had it been napped, would have had tufts as big as rounceval pease. Her train, or tail, which you will, was mathematically divided into three equal skirts, or angles, and borne up by three pages in mourning; and from this pleasant triangular figure of her train, as every one conjectured, was she called Trifaldi, as who should say, the Countess of Three-Folds, or Three-Skirts. Benengeli is of

the same opinion, though he affirms that her true title was the Countess of Lobuna,* or of Wolf-Land, from the abundance of wolves bred in her country; and, had they been foxes, she had, by the same rule, been called the Countess of Zorruna,† or of Fox-land; it being a custom, in those nations, for great persons to take their denominations from the commodity with which their country most abounds. However, this Countess chose to borrow her title from this new fashion of her own invention, and leaving her name of Lobuna, took that of Trifaldi.

Her twelve female attendants approached with her in a procession-pace, with black veils over their faces; not transparent, like that of Trifaldin, but thick enough to hinder altogether the sight of their countenances. As soon as the whole train of waiting-women was come in, the duke, the duchess, and Don Quixote stood up, and so did all those who were with them. Then the twelve women, ranging themselves in two rows, made a lane for the countess to march up between them, which she did, still led by Trifaldin, her squire. The duke, the duchess, and Don Quixote advancing about a dozen paces to meet her, she

* Lobo, is Spanish for a wolf.

† Zorro, is Spanish for a he-fox, whence these two words are derived.

fell on her knees, and, with a voice rather hoarse and rough than clear and delicate, "May it please your highnesses," said she, "to spare yourselves the trouble of receiving, with so much ceremony and compliment, a man (a woman I would say) who is your devoted servant. Alas! the sense of my misfortunes has so troubled my intellectuals, that my responses cannot be supposed able to answer the critical opinion of your presence. My understanding has forsaken me, and is gone a wool-gathering; and sure it is far remote, for the more I seek it, the more unlikely I am to find it again."—"The greatest claim, madam," answered the duke, "that we can lay to sense, is a due respect and decent deference to the worthiness of your person, which, without any farther view, sufficiently bespeaks your merit and excellent qualifications." Then, begging the honour of her hand, he led her up and placed her in a chair by his duchess, who received her with all the ceremony suitable to the occasion.

Don Quixote said nothing all this while, and Sancho was sneaking about, and peeping under the veils of the lady's women, but to no purpose, for they kept themselves very close and silent, until she at last thus began:—"Confident* I

* A fustian speech, contrived on purpose, and imitated by Sancho.

am, thrice potent lord, thrice beautiful lady, and thrice intelligent auditors, that my most unfortunate miserableness shall find, in your most generous and compassionate bowels, a most merciful sanctuary; my miserableness, which is such as would liquify marble, maleate steel, and mollify adamantine rocks. But, before the rehearsal of my ineffable misfortunes enter, I will not say your ears, but the public mart of your hearing faculties, I earnestly request that I may have cognizance, whether the cabal, choir, or conclave of this most illustrious appearance be not adorned with the presence of the adjutoriferous Don Quixote de la Manchissima, and his squirrissimus Panza?"—"Panza is at your elbowissimus," quoth Sancho, before anybody else could answer, "and Don Quixotissimo likewise; therefore, most dolerous medem, you may tell out your teale, for we are all ready to be your ladyship's servitorissimus, to be the best of our cepecities, and so forth."—Don Quixote then advanced, and addressing the countess,—“If your misfortunes, embarrassed lady,” said he, “may hope any redress from the power and assistance of knight-errantry, I offer you my force and courage; and, such as they are, I dedicate them to your service. I am Don

Quixote de la Mancha, whose profession is a sufficient obligation to succour the distressed, without the formality of preambles, or the elegance of oratory, to circumvent my favour. Therefore, pray, madam, let us know by a succinct and plain account of your calamities, what remedies should be applied; and, if your griefs are such as do not admit of a cure, assure yourself at least that we will comfort you in your afflictions, by sympathising in your sorrow.”

The lady, hearing this, threw herself at Don Quixote's feet, in spite of his kind endeavours to the contrary; and, striving to embrace them, “Most invincible knight,” said she, “I prostrate myself at these feet, the foundations and pillars of chivalry-errant, the supporters of my drooping spirits, whose indefatigable steps alone can hasten my relief, and the cure of my afflictions. O valorous knight-errant, whose real achievements eclipse and obscure the fabulous legend of the Amadis, Esplandians, and Belianises!” Then, turning from Don Quixote, she laid hold on Sancho, and squeezing his hands very hard, “And thou, the most loyal squire that ever attended on the magnanimity of knight-errantry, whose goodness is more extensive than the beard of my

usher Trifaldin! how happily have thy stars placed thee under the discipline of the whole martial college of chivalry-professors, centred and epitomized in the single Don Quixote! I conjure thee, by thy love of goodness, and thy unspotted loyalty to so great a master, to employ thy moving and interceding eloquence in my behalf, that eftsoons his favour may shine upon this humble, and most disconsolate countess."

"Look you, Madam Countess," quoth Sancho, "as for measuring my goodness by your squire's beard, that is neither here nor there; so that my soul go to heaven when I depart this life, I do not matter the rest; for, as for the beards of this world, it is not what I stand upon, so that, without all this pawing and wheedling, I will put in a word or two for you to my master. I know he loves me; and, besides, at this time, he stands in need of me about a certain business, and he shall do what he can for you. But, pray, discharge your burthened mind; unload, and let us see what griefs you bring, and then leave us to take care of the rest."

The duke and duchess were ready to burst with laughing, to find the adventure run in this pleasant strain; and they admired, at the same time, the rare cunning and management

of Trifaldi, who, resuming her seat, thus began her story: "The famous kingdom of Candaya, situate between the Great Taprobana and the South Sea, about two leagues beyond Cape Comorin, had for its queen the Lady Donna Maguntia, whose husband, King Archipielo, dying, left the Princess Antonomasia, their only child, heiress to the crown. This princess was educated and brought up under my care and direction, I being the eldest and first lady of the bed-chamber to the queen, her mother. In process of time, the young princess arrived at the age of fourteen years, and appeared so perfectly beautiful, that it was not in the power of nature to give any addition to her charms; what is yet more, her mind was no less adorned than her body. Wisdom itself was but a fool to her. She was no less discreet than fair, and the fairest creature in the world; and so she is still, unless the fatal knife, or unrelenting shears, of the envious and inflexible Sisters, have cut her thread of life. But sure the heavens would not permit such an injury to be done to the earth, as the lopping off the loveliest branch that ever adorned the garden of the world.

"Her beauty, which my unpolished tongue can never sufficiently praise, attracting all eyes,

soon got her a world of adorers, many of them princes, who were her neighbours, and more distant foreigners; among the rest, a private knight, who resided at court, and was so audacious as to raise his thoughts to that heaven of beauty. This young gentleman was indeed master of all gallantries that the air of his courtly education could inspire; and so, confiding in his youth, his handsome mien, his agreeable air and dress, his graceful carriage, and the charms of his easy wit, and other qualifications, he followed the impulse of his inordinate and most presumptuous passion. I must needs say that he was an extraordinary person; he played to a miracle on the guitar, and made it speak, not only to the ears, but to the very soul. He danced to admiration, and had such a rare knack at making bird-cages, that he might have got an estate by that very art; and, to sum up all his accomplishments, he was a poet. So many parts and endowments were sufficient to have moved a mountain, and much more the heart of a young tender virgin. But all his fine arts and soothing behaviour had proved ineffectual against the virtue and reservedness of my beautiful charge, if the damned cunning rogue had not first conquered me. The deceitful villain endeavoured to

seduce the keeper, so to secure the keys of the fortress: In short, he so plied me with pleasing trifles, and so insinuated himself into my soul, that, at last, he perfectly bewitched me, and made me give way, before I was aware, to what I should never have permitted. But that which first wrought me to his purpose, and undermined my virtue, was a cursed copy of verses he sung one night under my window, which, if I remember right, began thus:—

A SONG.

'A secret fire consumes my heart;
 And, to augment my raging pain,
 The charming foe that rais'd the smart,
 Denies me freedom to complain.
 But sure 'tis just we should conceal,
 The bliss and woe in love we feel:
 For oh! what human tongue can tell
 The joys of heaven, or pains of hell?'

“The words were to me so many pearls of eloquence, and his voice sweeter to my ears than sugar to the taste. The reflection on the misfortune which these verses brought on me, has often made me applaud Plato's design of banishing all poets from a good and well governed commonwealth, especially those who write wantonly or lasciviously. For, instead of composing lamentable verses, like those of the

Marquis of Mantua, that make the women and children cry by the fireside, they try their utmost skill on such soft strokes as enter the soul, and wound it, like that thunder which hurts and consumes all within, yet leaves the garment sound. Another time, he entertained me with the following song:—

A SONG.

'Death, put on some kind disguise,
And at once my heart surprise;
For 'tis such a curse to live,
And so great a bliss to die,
Should'st thou any warning give,
I'd relapse to life for joy!

“Many other verses of this kind he plied me with, which charmed when read, but transported when sung. For, you must know, that, when our eminent poets debase themselves to the writing a sort of composure called love-madrigals and roundelays, now much in vogue in Candaya, those verses are no sooner heard, than they presently produce a dancing of souls, tickling of fancies, emotion of spirits, and, in short, a pleasing distemper in the whole body, as if quicksilver shook it in every part.

“So that, once more, I pronounce those poets very dangerous, and fit to be banished to

the Isles of Lizards:¹ though, truly, I must confess, the fault is rather chargeable on those foolish people that commend, and the silly wenches that believe them. For, had I been as cautious as my place required, his amorous serenades could never have moved me; nor would I have believed his poetical cant, such as, I dying live, I burn in ice, I shiver in flames, I hope in despair, I go yet stay; with a thousand such contradictions, which make up the greatest part of those kind of compositions. As ridiculous are their promises of the Phoenix of Arabia, Ariadne's crown, the coursers of the sun, the pearls of the southern ocean, the gold of Tagus, the balsam of Panchaya, and heaven knows what! By the way, it is observable, that these poets are very liberal of their gifts, which they know they never can make good.

“But whither, wo's me! whither do I wander, miserable woman? What madness prompts me to accuse the faults of others, having so long a score of my own to answer for! Alas! not his verses, but my own inclination; not his music, but my own levity; not his wit, but my own folly, opened a passage, and levelled the way for Don Clavijo,

¹ See Appendix, Note 1, Chap. XXXVIII.

(for that was the name of the knight). In short, I procured him admittance; and, by my connivance, he very often had natural familiarity with Antonomasia,¹ who, poor lady, was rather deluded by me, than by him. But, wicked as I was, it was upon the honourable score of marriage; for, had he not been engaged to be her husband, he should not have touched the very shadow of her shoe-string. No, no; matrimony, matrimony, I say; for, without that, I will never meddle in any such concern. The greatest fault in this business, was the disparity of their conditions, he being but a private knight, and she heiress to the crown. Now, this intrigue was kept very close for some time, by my cautious management; but, at last, a certain kind of swelling in Antonomasia's belly began to tell tales; so that, consulting upon the matter, we found there was but one way; Don Clavijo should demand the young lady in marriage before the curate,* by virtue of a promise under her hand, which I dictated for the purpose, and so binding, that all the strength of Samson himself could not have broken the

¹ See Appendix, Note 2, Chap. XXXVIII.

* In Spain, when a young couple have promised each other marriage, and the parents obstruct it, either party may have recourse to the vicar, who, examining the case, has full power to bring them together; and this it is the countess ridiculously alludes to in her story,

tie. The business was put in execution, the note was produced before the priest, who, examining the lady, and finding her confession to agree with the tenor of the contract, put her in custody of a very honest serjeant."—"Bless us," quoth Sancho, "serjeants too, and poets, and songs, and verses, in your country! o' my conscience, I think the world is the same all the world over. But go on, Madam Trifaldi, I beseech you, for it is late, and I am upon thorns till I know the end of this long-winded story."—"I will," answered the countess.