

CHAPTER VII.

THE FORESTER'S HUT.

MORNING had not yet dawned ; nevertheless there was light and life in a little hut that nestled in the woods near Strozzi Castle. The forester, in hunting costume, stood in the middle of the hearth ; while his young wife, by the light of a flaming pine torch, prepared his breakfast.

The whole room was illumined by the torch, whose red rays flickered even over the face of the infant that lay sleeping in its cradle, and shone far down the forest glade, a kindly beacon to guide the footsteps of the fugitive of Strozzi Castle.

The forester rose from his breakfast, and slung his gun across his shoulder. "Now I must go, Marcella," said he, "or the stag will have left the brook before I get there. By sunrise it will be off."

"Go, then, Luigi, and may the holy Bernard protect you ! I do hope you will bring down the stag, and please the marquis by your skill as a huntsman."

"Please him ? He looks as if nothing on earth would ever please him again. He is the crossdest-looking man you ever saw ; so unlike his wife. They say the marchioness is crazy ; but I do not believe it."

"Why, Luigi ? Did you ever see her ?"

"Once, when I went to the castle to tell the marquis that his hounds were ready for the hunt. He was out walking in the park, and I had to wait for him to come back. Presently he came with two lackeys before him, and two behind, and at his side the most beautiful woman you ever laid your eyes upon. I could have fallen on my knees before her, she looked so lovely ; while he—bless me, Marcella, with his fierce eyes and his thick brows frowning over his long, sallow face, he looked like Love's headsman—such a face.—But I must go ; I will tell you the rest another time."

"Oh no ; do tell it to me now, I love so to hear you talk, dear Luigi. But I will not keep you from your work. Let me go a bit with you into the forest, as far as the blasted oak.

It is too late for me to sleep, and the baby will not wake for half an hour."

"Very well," said Luigi, kissing her ; "come, for morning will soon dawn."

So, with their arms entwined about each other, the young couple went out into the woods, and the sound of their loving voices was sweet to the ear of the wanderer that stood upon their threshold. Laura pushed open the door, and entered the little room, looking around to see if any one was nigh.

Her dress was torn, and her hands and feet were bleeding ; but her countenance beamed with hope, as, approaching the fireplace, she rested her stiffened limbs.

After enjoying for a few moments the reviving glow of the fire, she rose and looked around to assure herself that no one was near. "She is to be absent for half an hour," said Laura to herself. "By that time I will have destroyed this garment, and God will forgive me the substitution of my bracelet for one of the peasant's gowns."

Opening a chest that stood by the side of the bed, the marchioness took out a petticoat and kirtle of coarse, dark stuff ; stripped off her sweep's dress, and, in a trice, was transformed into a country-maid, very beautiful, but sooty still. Then throwing her disguise into the fire, she rejoiced to think that no human being would ever find out the manner of her escape.

Half an hour after, Marcella returned, and rekindling the fire, prepared to warm her baby's milk. As she rose from her knees, she looked instinctively around at the child's cradle, and there, to her extreme astonishment, she saw the figure of a woman with hands outstretched, and eyes that seemed to plead for mercy. Marcella darted toward the cradle, her fears being entirely for her child. But it lay peacefully slumbering with a smile on its face, and the mother began to be apprehensive for her wares.

"Who are you ?" said she, sharply, to Laura.

"Marcella," replied the marchioness, coming forward and taking her hand, "I am an unhappy woman, that implores you, by all your hopes of heaven, to rescue her from persecution."

But Marcella heard not a word of this petition. She had

recognized her petticoat and kirtle, and screamed with all her might :

"Those are my clothes, you thief ! You have been robbing me ! Thief ! thief !" cried she. "Oh, why is Luigi not here ? Give me my kirtle ! Off with my clothes, this instant, you rogue !"

Laura was somewhat alarmed, and not a little hurt ; for the grasp of the peasant was rough, and her voice, as she called for help, was loud and piercing.

"Marcella," said she, when she had opportunity to speak, and her tones were so pleading, that the woman listened in spite of herself—"Marcella, as I stood beside your threshold to-night, I heard your husband telling you of the misfortunes of the Marchioness Strozzi. He broke off to go into the forest ; you followed him, and now I can tell you what he related after you left the cottage. Your husband came respectfully up to the marquis, who repulsed him rudely, and asked what business he had in the court of the castle. Luigi replied that Battista had admitted him, whereupon the marquis discharged Battista on the spot, and drove him from the castle. Then he dragged the marchioness forward and hurried her up the steps of the portico."

"Just so," murmured Marcella. "But what else ? Do you know what else occurred ? What the signora did ?"

"Of course I do. Slipping from her finger a diamond-ring, she presented it to Battista, saying, 'Forgive me ; it is I who am the cause of your dismissal.'"

"So she did !" cried Marcella. "But how came you to know ?"

"Alas ! I am that unhappy marchioness."

"The Marchioness Strozzi !"

"Yes ; but believe me, Marcella, I am not crazy. For five years I have been a prisoner, and now that God has willed my liberation by means so marvellous as almost to partake of the character of a miracle, He has sent me to you that you might aid in the blessed work of my deliverance. See my hands bleeding and cut—see my feet torn by thorns, and bruised by stones ;—and oh, as you hope for mercy, help me on my way to liberty !"

"I do not believe you," was the reply of the cautious Marcella. "The Marchioness Strozzi would not come out of her grand castle by night to steal a poor peasant-woman's clothes. Where are your fine garments, if you are the marchioness ? Let me see them."

"I came disguised, and burnt up the dress in which I made my escape. I needed another disguise, and have taken your clothes ; but I will reward you richly for the forced loan. Take this bracelet ; your husband can sell it, and, with the money, buy you a pretty farm."

"Ah !" screamed Marcella again, "now I know you to be a thief, perhaps worse than a thief ! You have been stealing the jewels of the signora ; for aught I know, murdering her with those bloody hands, and now you want to bribe me to help you away ! No, no, you shall not escape—that I promise you."

"Oh, Marcella, how shall I convince you that I am no impostor ? I swear, by God who made, by Christ who redeemed me, and by His holy mother, the Blessed Virgin, that I am the Marchioness of Strozzi, the unhappy prisoner of yonder gloomy castle. It is impossible that you can be so cruel as to deliver me into the hands of its wicked lord ! A woman that loves—that loves her husband and child, must surely have a compassionate heart ! See—I am at your feet !—In mercy, help me to escape !"

Marcella slowly shook her head. "I cannot, I cannot, I dare not."

"Yes, yes, you can, you dare do a good action. Think of the joy you experienced when the pangs of your travail were past, and you had given birth to a child whom you loved even before it had seen the light of life. Think, if your child should be in distress like mine, and kneel in vain at the feet of another woman who might deliver it from peril, and would not !—Oh, if you were in your grave, as my dear mother is, would you not curse the heartless being that repulsed your orphan !—Oh, mother ! my dead mother ! soften this woman's heart, that she may help me !"

Just then the voice of the baby, cooing in its cradle, reached Marcella's ear, and strangely moved her heart.

"Ah, the child—the dear child will plead for me," cried Laura. And, stooping to the cradle, she raised the baby in her arms, and brought the little rosy, smiling thing to its mother's feet.

"Let this baby, whom you love, be my advocate. I lay my hand upon its head and swear before Heaven that I am an innocent fugitive from persecution. Do unto me as you would have others do unto your own child."

And Marcella, no longer able to resist the pleadings of that melodious voice, burst into tears, and, encircling both Laura and the baby in her arms, clasped them close to her heart.

"My child, my child!" cried she, tenderly. "As I do to this unhappy lady, so may others do unto you."

"Then you will not betray me!" cried Laura, joyfully. "Oh, good, good Marcella, may God bless you for those pitying words!"

Marcella wiped her eyes, kissed her baby, and, replacing it in its cradle, said, "Now, signora, that I consent to assist you, tell me at once what is to be done, for it must be done quickly."

"Give me these clothes and a little money; guide me out of the forest to a post-station whence I may travel to Turin; and for these services take the bracelet: it is honestly mine, and therefore yours."

"It is now four o'clock," observed Marcella, looking toward the east.

"And precisely at eight the marquis will visit my rooms and discover my flight. Come—come—we have indeed no time to lose."

"We can reach the station in an hour," replied Marcella, "and the postilions will start early this morning for—to what point did you say you wished to travel, signora?"

"To Turin."

"That is a pity," murmured Marcella.

"Why?" asked Laura, anxiously.

"Because, if you were going northward, we might find you an escort. Luigi and I met a courier who was going to the next station to order post-horses for a traveller who is to leave

for Vienna this morning. The man stopped to ask us the way."

"For Vienna!" cried Laura. "Who is going to Vienna?"

"The physician of the Duke of Savoy, whom his highness is sending to see a kinsman of his who is very ill in Vienna."

Laura uttered a cry of joy. "O God! my God, I thank thee!—Come, Marcella: I know the duke's physician, and he, of all other men, is the one I prefer for an escort."

"But your poor, bleeding feet, signora," cried Marcella, piteously.

"Never mind them. May they bleed anew, so I but reach the station in time to meet the physician! God has sent him to my deliverance. Come—let us away!"