

the wall—what is that looking out with flashing eyes and a poisonous glance? Is it the serpent already come to expel these happy beings from their paradise?

They see nothing, they hear nothing, they are both dreaming, so sure do they feel of their happiness.

But there is a continued rustling. It is unnatural! It resembles not the rustling of the evening wind! It is not the rustling of a bird, balancing itself upon the branch of the tree! What, then, is it?

An opening is made in the foliage, and it is the arm of a man that makes it. Upon the wall is to be seen the form of a man, and near him slowly rises a second form. Cautiously he glances around, and then makes a scornful grimace, while his eyes shine like those of a hyena. He has discovered the two sitting together in happy security, and enjoying the tranquil beauty of the evening in silent beatitude. He has seen them, and points toward them with his finger, while, at the same time, he lightly touches the arm of the other man, who has boldly swung himself up on the wall. The glance of the latter follows the direction in which the other points; he also now sees the reposing pair, and over his features also flits an unnatural smile. He suddenly fumbles in his bosom, and when his hand is withdrawn a small dagger glistens in it. With a bold leap, the man is already on the point of springing from the wall into the garden. The other holds him back, and makes a threatening counter-movement. He, it seems, is the commander, and uses his power with an indignant negative shake of the head; his commanding glance seems to say: "Be silent, and observe!"

Staring and immovably their eyes were now fixed upon the silent pair sitting in the bright moonlight which surrounded them as with a glory. One of the men still holds the dagger in his hand, and with a powerful arm the other holds him in check. Then they whisper low together—they seem to be consulting as to what is to be done. The man with the dagger seems to yield to the arguments or persuasions of the other. He nods his consent. The first disappears behind the wall, and the armed one slowly follows him. Yet once again he glances over the wall, raising his arm and shaking his dagger toward Natalie and her friend. Then he disappeared, and all was again peaceful and still in this smiling paradise!

Was it, perhaps, only an illusive dream that bantered us, only a *fata morgana* formed by the moonbeams? Or does the serpent of evil really lurk about this paradise? Will destruction find its way into this charmed garden? Ah, no solitude and no wall can afford protection against misfortune! It creeps through the strongest lock, and over the highest wall; and while we think ourselves safe, it is already there, close to us, and nearly ready to swallow us up.

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE LETTERS.

It was suddenly lively in the garden. Cecil, Paulo's old servant, approached from the house, with a lantern in his hand.

He comes down the alley with hasty steps, and with an anxious countenance approaches his master.

"What is it, Cecil?"

"Two letters, sir, that have just arrived. One comes from the hotel of the Russian legation, and the other from that of the Lord-Cardinal Bernis."

Paulo shuddered slightly, and his hand involuntarily grasped after the first letter, but he suddenly constrained himself, and his glance fell upon Natalie, whose eyes were fixed with curiosity upon the two letters.

"We will first see what the good Cardinal Bernis writes us!" said Count Paulo, placing the Russian letter in his pocket with apparent indifference.

"Bernis?" asked Natalie. "Is not that the French Cardinal, who is at the same time a poet, and whom the pope, the great Ganganelli, so dearly loves?"

"The same," said Paulo, "and besides, the same Cardinal Bernis whom I had months ago promised to allow the pleasure of making your acquaintance! He already knows you, Natalie, although he has never yet seen your fair face; he knows you from what I have told him."

"Oh, let us quickly see what the good cardinal writes!" exclaimed Natalie, clapping her hands with the impatience of a child.

Count Paulo smilingly broke the seal and read the letter.

"You are in truth a witch," said he; "you must have some genius in your service, who listens to every wish you express, in order to fulfil it without delay! This letter contains an invitation from the cardinal. He gives a

great entertainment to-morrow, and begs of me that I will bring you to it. The improvisatrice Corilla will also be there!"

"Oh, then I shall see her!" exclaimed the delighted young maiden. "At length I shall see a poetess! For we shall go to this entertainment, shall we not, Paulo?"

The count thoughtfully cast down his eyes, and his hand involuntarily sought the letter in his pocket. An expression of deep care and anxiety was visible on his features, and Cecil seemed to divine the thoughts of his master, for he also looked anxious, and a deep sigh escaped from his breast.—Natalie perceived nothing of all this! She was wholly occupied by the thought of seeing Corilla, the great improvisatrice, of whom Carlo, Natalie's music-teacher, had told her so much, and whose fame was sounded by children and adults in all the streets of Rome.

"We go to this festival, do we not, Paulo?" repeated she, as the count still continued silent.

Recovering from his abstraction, he said: "Yes, we will go! It is time that my Natalie was introduced into this circle of influential Romans, that she may gain friends among people of importance, who may watch over and protect her when I no longer can!"

"You will, then, leave me?" cried the young maiden, turning pale and anxiously grasping the count's arm. "No, Paulo, you cannot do that! Would you leave me because I, a foolish child, desired to go to this festival, and was no longer contented with our dear and beautiful solitude? That was wrong in me, Paulo, as I now plainly see, and I desire it no longer! Oh, we will prepare other pleas-

ures for ourselves here in our delightful paradise. You have often called me a poetess, and I will now believe I am, and no longer wish to see another. I will suffice for myself! Come, I will immediately sing you a song, a festival song, my friend!"

And taking her guitar, Natalie struck some joyous accords; but Count Paulo lightly laid his hands upon the strings so as to silence them, and drawing the tips of her fingers to his lips, with a slight shaking of his head, he said: "Not now, my charming poetess, I am not worthy of hearing you."

"And it is late," added Cecil, coming as it were to the aid of his master.

The count rose. "Yes, you are right—it is late," said he, "and I must not longer keep Natalie from her slumber. Come, my sweet child, you must retire; you must sleep, that your brow may beam with blooming freshness to-morrow!"

Natalie made no answer; with a light sigh she mechanically took the count's offered arm.

Cecil preceded them with the lantern in his hand. Thus they proceeded up the alley leading to the villa, all three silent and thoughtful. The sky had become obscured, a black cloud intercepted the light of the moon, and Natalie's charmed garden was suddenly wrapped in gloom.

A cold shudder ran through her delicate frame.

"A feeling of anxiety has come over me!" she whispered, clinging closer to the count's side.

"Poor child!" said the count. "Are you already oppressed with fear?"

"What if the wall should give way, and bad people should intrude into our garden! Ah, Marianne says that misfortune lurks everywhere in the world, lying in ambush for those who think themselves safe, destroying their happiness, and making them wholly miserable; and people only laugh and rejoice that another man's hopes have been wrecked! Ah, and I have felt so secure in my happiness! If misfortune should now actually come—if these walls should prove not high enough to keep it off! Ah, Paulo, protect me from lurking misfortune!"

They had now arrived at the door of the villa. Paulo pressed the trembling young maiden with paternal tenderness to his breast, and, lightly touching her forehead with his lips, he said: "Good-night, my love! Sleep gently, and be not anxious! So long as I live, misfortune shall never approach you! Rest assured of that!"

Thus speaking, he led her into the house, where Marianne was waiting to accompany her to her chamber.

Natalie silently followed her, but before entering her room she once more turned, and, pressing her fingers to her lips, wafted kisses in the air toward her friend.

"Good-night, Paulo!"

"Good-night, Natalie!"

The door closed behind her, and the smile instantly vanished from Paulo's lips. With impetuous haste, beckoning Cecil to follow him, he strode through the corridor leading to his own apartments.

When he had arrived there, and Cecil had closed the door behind him, the count with a deep sigh threw himself upon a chair, whilst Cecil silently busied himself in light-

ing the wax-candles and placing them upon the table beside his master.

"Will not your grace now read the other letter?" he timidly asked, as Count Paulo still remained buried in his silent reflections.

"Oh, this unblest letter!" exclaimed the count, with a shudder. "I tell you, Cecil, I feel that it contains misfortune. It has lain with a heavy weight like a nightmare upon my breast and I yet felt not the strength in me to draw it forth and read it in Natalie's presence!"

"That was well!" said Cecil, "and it was for that reason that I told you in advance that the letter was from Russia, that you might be on your guard. But now, Sir Count, we are alone, and now you can read it!"

"Yes, away with this childish fear!" cried the count, with resolution. "I will be a man, Cecil, and whatever this letter may contain, I will bear it like a man!"

Drawing forth the letter, he broke the seal with a trembling hand, and threw the cover across the room. Then unfolding the letter, he read. Behind him stood Cecil, involuntarily trembling with anxious expectation.

The letter fell from the count's hands, and a deadly paleness spread over his face, which bore the expression of utter despair.

"Oh, my prophetic soul!" he sighed.

"Your presentiment is then fulfilled!" anxiously asked Cecil.

"Yes, it is fulfilled! My property is sequestrated; they refuse to send me the money I required; they command my

immediate return to Russia, as my *congé* has expired and my respite is at an end!"

"And you are lost, my lord, if you do not obey this command!" said Cecil.

"And Natalie?" reproachfully asked the count. "Can I, dare I leave her?"

"She is much safer without than with you! They may not yet suspect who she is! It is very possible that it in reality only is because your leave of absence has expired, as the laws of Russia require that every absentee should return to his country once in every four years. Fulfill, therefore, this hard duty. Pretend to suppose that your recall is for no other reason than the renewal of your passport, and the giving you an opportunity to pay your homage to the empress. Appear innocent and unconcerned, and all may yet go well!"

"No," gloomily replied the count, "nothing will go well any more! The whole future stands before me in clear and distinct traits—a future full of shame and horror! Oh, would it not be better to flee from that future and seek in some remote and hidden valley a place where, perhaps, misfortune cannot reach, nor destruction overtake us!"

"How?" reproachfully asked Cecil. "Is it Count Paulo who speaks thus? Is it the pupil whom I taught to defy misfortune and rise superior to disaster with courageous self-confidence? Is it the son of my heart for whom I have left all, sacrificed all, for whom I have offered up my fatherland, my freedom, and my independence; whom I shall love until my last breath? Paulo, pluck up a good

heart, my son! You have proposed to yourself a great end, which was only to be reached by thorny and dangerous paths; will you now stop at the first cross-road and return upon your steps, instead of pressing forward sword in hand? No, no, I know you better, my son; this momentary hesitation will pass away, and you will again be great and strong for the struggle and the victory!"

With a faint smile Count Paulo gave him his hand. "You know not, my friend, how great is the sacrifice you demand of me!" said he, in a subdued tone. "I must leave Natalie. I must never see her more, never more draw consolation from her glance, nor hope from her charming smile! Oh, Cecil, you have no idea of what Natalie is to me; you know not that I—"

"I know," interposed Cecil, solemnly, "I know that you have sworn upon the holy book to protect her with your life from every injury; I know that you have sworn never to give rest to yourself until you have reinstated her in her inherited rights, and that, until then, she shall be sacred to you, sacred as a sister, sacred as a daughter whose honor you will protect and defend against every outrage, against even every sinful thought. That have you sworn, and I know you will hold your word sacred and keep your oath!"

Count Paulo dropped his head upon his breast and sighed deeply.

"I must therefore leave her!" said he.

"Your own welfare demands it."

"But how is she to live during our absence? Our money will not suffice to the end. Alas! we had so surely

calculated on this remittance from my estates, and now it fails us!"

"We will sell that costly ornament of brilliants which you had destined as a present for Natalie on her seventeenth birthday."

"Ah," sighed the count, "you have a means for the removal of every obstacle. I must therefore go!"

"And I go with you," said Cecil. "I would, if it must be so, be able to die for you!"

"They will destroy all three of us!" said the count. "Believe me, the knife is already sharpened for our throats! Believe also, Cecil, that I tremble not from fear of death. But I fear for Natalie! Ah, I already seem to see the approach of her murderers, to see them seize her with their bloody hands, and I shall not be there to protect her!"

While Count Paulo thus spoke, with a sad, foreboding soul, those two mysterious men, who had so threateningly watched and listened to Natalie and her friend, still remained under the wall.

The one still held the dagger in his hand, and was unquietly walking back and forth near his companion, who had calmly thrown himself upon the ground.

"You did wrong to hinder me, Beppo," he angrily said. "It would have been best to have finished them at once. The occasion could not have been more favorable—the solitary garden, the nightly stillness and obscurity. Ah, one blow would have done the business!"

"Well, and what if the gentleman who sat near her had seized you before the blow was struck? How then?" asked the other. "You are yet but a novice and a bungler, friend

Giuseppe. You yet lack discretion, the tranquil glance, the sure hand! You always suffer yourself to become excited, which is unartistic and even dangerous. We went out to-day only to obtain information; we were only to discover and observe the signora, and perhaps to watch for an opportunity. But to fall upon her in this garden would have been the extreme of stupidity, for we had all the servants and the hounds against us, and it is one of the first principles of our profession to put others in danger, but never to incur it ourselves."

"Wherefore, then, have we come here?" cried Giuseppe, with vehemence.

"To see her and know her, that we may surely recognize her again when the right hour comes. And that hour will come—I will answer for it. Did not the signora tell us that this lady would probably attend the festival of Cardinal Bernis?"

"She said so."

"Well, and we have come here that we might see and know her in advance. She is very beautiful, and a truly respectable person, Giuseppe. I am pleased with the idea of this festival of the French cardinal. I think it will afford much business in our line."

CHAPTER XXV.

DIPLOMATIC QUARRELS.

IN the palace of the French ambassador at Rome, Cardinal Bernis, there was an unusually busy movement to-day. From the kitchen-boys to the major-domo, all were in a most lively motion, in the most passionate activity. For this morning, while taking his chocolate, the cardinal had sent for his major-domo, and, quite contrary to the usual joviality of his manner, had very seriously and solemnly said to him: "Signor Brunelli, I to-day intrust you with a very important and responsible duty, that of making as splendid as possible the grand festival we are three days hence to give in honor of the Archduke Ferdinand. No pains must be spared, nothing must be wanting; the most luxurious richness, the most tasteful decoration, the most extravagant splendor must be exhibited. For this entertainment must excite the attention not only of Rome, but of all Europe; it must become the subject of conversation at all the courts, and, above all, it must cause the despair of all present ambassadorial housekeeping. I have very important diplomatic reasons for this. All Europe shall see how devoted France is to the empire of Austria, and what a good understanding subsists between the two courts. Therefore, Signor Brunelli, strain your inventive head, that it may on this occasion hit upon whatever is most distinguished and pre-eminent, for this must be an entertainment never before equalled. That is what I expect, what I demand of you; and if you satisfy my demands, it will give