

"If this farce continues longer than an hour and a half, I shall throw down my harp and go away," said Carlo, in a tone of severity. "I swear it to you by the spirit of my mother! Remember it; I shall show you the time every quarter of an hour."

"You are a tyrant," said she, laughing. "But I suppose I must submit. Give, therefore, the signal that we are ready."

CHAPTER XXXI.

THE IMPROVISATRICE.

ALL the guests of the cardinal were assembled in the gigantic hall, and all eyes were anxiously bent upon the mysterious curtain, which still remained closed.

Now resounded a little bell, and Cardinal Bernis smilingly turned to Natalie, who sat by his side.

"I think this mystery is about to be unveiled," said he.

"And I am quite anxious about it," said the young maiden, gracefully laying her hand upon her heart. My heart beats as violently as if a mystery were about to be unveiled in my own breast. Do you believe in presentiments, Sir Cardinal?"

Bernis had not time to answer her. Just at that moment the curtain drew up, a general "Ah!" of admiration was heard, and, suddenly carried away by their feelings, the whole audience broke into extravagant and long-enduring applause, crying and shouting, "*Evviva Corilla! l'improvisatrice Corilla!*"

And in fact it was an admirable picture which was there presented to the audience. Those flower-strewed steps led up to an altar, upon the centre of which, between wreaths of flowers, shot up two dark-red flames. Against that altar leaned, exalted and august as a Grecian priestess, the improvisatrice Corilla. Her eyes raised to the heavens, her features lighted up with a rosy glow by the red flames, her half-raised right arm resting upon an urn, while her left arm was stretched upward toward heaven, she thus resembled an inspired priestess, just receiving a message from on high, listening with ecstasy, with suppressed breath and parted lips, to the voice of the Deity, and forgetting the world in a blissful intoxication, she seemed about to take her flight to the empyrean!

And while Corilla, as if absorbed in spiritual contemplation, continued to stand immovable there, began the low notes of a harp, which, gradually becoming fuller and stronger, at length resounded in powerfully rushing and exultant tones. From Corilla all eyes were now turned upon Carlo, who, in the light dress of a Greek youth, his harp upon his arm, was leaning against a pomegranate tree placed in the background of the stage, and with his pale, serious face, with his noble, manly features, formed a beautiful contrast to the inspired and love-beaming priestess Corilla.

Natalie, feeling something like a slight puncture in her heart, involuntarily carried her hand to her bosom. It was a strange, a wonderful feeling, which stirred within her, partly partaking of joy at seeing and hearing her friend Carlo, as people were murmuring praises of his beauty, and

of his great skill upon the harp, and partly a feeling of painful emotion. She knew not why, but as her glance met his, it quickly turned toward Corilla, and quite sadly she said to herself: "She is much handsomer than I!"

Carlo now opened his lips, and to a beautifully simple melody he sweetly sang an introductory song, as it were to prepare the audience for the coming solemnity. Having finished this, two lovely *amourettes* came forward, with silver vases in their hands, and hastened down the steps to the audience, politely requesting them to furnish themes for the great improvisatrice Corilla.

Then, returning to the altar, they threw into the urn the small scraps of paper on which the guests had proposed themes. The harp again resounded, and with a solemn earnestness, her face and glance still directed upward, Corilla drew one of the little strips of paper from the urn. Accident, or perhaps her own dexterity, had favored her.

"Sappho's lament before throwing herself from the rocks"—that was the theme proposed.

Corilla's face immediately took an expression of sadness; her eyes flashed with an unnatural fire; her previously raised arm fell powerless by her side; her head, like a broken rose, sank upon her breast; her other hand convulsively grasped the urn, and in this position she in fact resembled an abandoned mourner, weeping over the ashes of her lost happiness. She was now the repudiated and forsaken one who, ready to resign her life, was brooding upon thoughts of death. And while her face took this expression, and she, staring upon the earth before her, seemed to be meditating upon irremediable fate, thought Corilla:

"This is a charming theme which the good Cardinal Albani has thrown into the urn for me. I found it directly by the small pin which, according to his promise, he inserted in the paper. This cardinal is an agreeable imp, and I must give him a kiss for his complaisance. Besides, the Tasso rhyme will here be the most appropriate!"

Again she directed her gaze, with a gloomy expression, toward the heavens, and with a violently heaving bosom, with feverishly flitting breath, she began the lament of Sappho. Now like rattling thunder, now like the gentle breathings of the flute, rolled this sweet and picturesque language of Italy from her lips—like music sounded those full, artistic rhymes, of which but few of the hearers had the least suspicion that they came from Tasso. To improvise in the Italian language is an easy and a grateful task! What wonder, then, that Corilla acquitted herself so charmingly? The audience paid no attention to the thoughts expressed; they asked not after the quintessence; they were satisfied with the agreeable sound, without inquiring into the sense of her words; it was their melody which was admired. They listened not for the thought, but only for the rhyme, and with ecstatic smiles and admiring glances they nodded to each other when, thanks to the studies which Corilla had made in Tasso, Marino, and Ariosto, she seemed of herself to find rhymes for the most difficult words.

An immense storm of applause resounded when she ended; and as if awakening from an intoxicating ecstasy, Corilla glanced around with an expression of astonishment on her features; she looked around as if she knew not

whence she came, and in what strange surroundings she now found herself.

After a short pause, which Carlo filled out with his harp, she again put her hand into the urn and drew out a new theme; again the inspiration seemed to pass over her, and the holy Whitsuntide of her muse to be renewed. Constantly more and more stormily resounded the plaudits of her hearers; it was like a continued thunder of enthusiasm, a real salvo of joy. It animated Corilla to new improvisations; she again and again recurred to the urn, drawing forth new themes, and seemed to be absolutely inexhaustible.

"It is now enough," whispered Carlo, just as she had drawn forth a new theme. "You have but a quarter of an hour left!"

"Only this theme yet," she begged in a low tone. "It is a very happy one, it will win for me the hearts of all these cardinals and gentlemen!"

"Yet a quarter of an hour, and then your time is up," said he. "Remember my oath, I shall keep my word!"

An inexplicable anxiety, a tormenting uneasiness, came over him; he had hardly strength and recollection sufficient to enable him to accompany Corilla, who was discussing in verse the question, "Which Rome was the happiest, ancient or modern?"

Carlo's eyes, fixed and motionless, rested upon Natalie; it fearfully alarmed him not to be near her, not to be able to watch every one of her steps, every one of her motions; it seemed to him as if he saw that savage man with his naked dagger lurking near her! And she, was she not pale

as a lily; seemed she not, in that white robe, to be already the bride of death?

"I must hasten to her, I must protect her or die!" thought he, and, with a threatening glance at Corilla, he showed her the hour. Corilla read in the expression of his face that he was in earnest with his threat, and as if her inspiration lent wings to her words, she spoke on as in a storm of inward agitation, and with words of fire she decided that modern Rome was the happiest, as she had the holy father of Christendom, her pope, and his cardinals!

The applause, the general delight, was now unbounded; cardinals were to be seen weeping with enthusiasm and joy; others with heartfelt emotion were showering words of blessing upon the improvisatrice, and all pressed toward the tribune in order to accompany her down the steps and in among the company.

A sudden thought of rescue had like a flash of lightning arisen in Carlo's soul.

"Natalie must first be completely separated from this society, and then I will seek this man and render him incapable of mischief!" thought he.

By main strength he made himself a path through the crowd surrounding Corilla, and now stood near Cardinal Bernis, at whose side still remained Natalie and Count Paulo.

"You have struck the lyre like an Apollo," exclaimed the cardinal to the singer.

Carlo bowed with a smile, and hastily said: "And are you ignorant, your eminence, that a much greater poetess and improvisatrice than our Corilla is in your society?"

The cardinal smilingly threatened him with his finger. "Poor Carlo, has it already come to this?" said he. "You are jealous of our delight in Corilla, and would lessen her fame, that you may make her more your own!"

"I speak the truth," said Carlo; "a poetess is among us whom the muses themselves have consecrated, an improvisatrice, not of human composition, but by the grace of God, to whom the angels whisper the rhymes, and the muses the ideas!"

"And who, then, is this divinely-gifted artist, this consecrated daughter of the muses?" wonderingly asked the cardinal.

Carlo indicated Natalie, and bowed to the ground before her.

"Princess Tartaroff?" asked the cardinal, with astonishment.

"That she is a princess, I know not," said Carlo, "but I am quite certain she is a poetess!"

What was it that at this moment stirred the soul of the young maiden? She now felt a pride, a blessed joy, and yet she had previously felt so sad at Corilla's triumph! It seemed as if enthusiasm raised its wings in her, as if the word, the right word, pressed to her lips, as if she must utter in song her rejoicings and lamentings for her simultaneously felt pleasures and pains! A pure and genuine child of Nature, she felt in herself the natural impulse to pour out in words, tones, and even in tears, what agitated her soul, and to which she was unable to give a name.

Cardinal Bernis had first turned imploringly to Count Paulo, praying for his permission to invite the young

princess to surprise and delight the company with some of her improvisations. Others, overhearing this, mingled in the conversation, and added their requests to those of the cardinal; and, the feeling becoming general, the requests for an improvisation became universal and pressing; people, momentarily forgetting the great and celebrated improvisatrice Corilla, with a feverish curiosity turned to the new and unknown star. Corilla stood almost alone—only Cardinal Albani remaining by her side; but his tender words were not competent to appease the violent storm of jealousy that raged in her soul.

The solicitations of the curious Romans became constantly more urgent, and Count Paulo, unable longer to resist them, finally consented to leave the decision to his ward, the young princess herself.

And Natalie? She was so real and ingenuous a child of Nature that she felt no timidity in the presence of this crowd; she was so full of faith and confidence, so full of trust and human love. She thought: "Why should I not give a little pleasure to these good people who approach me with such warm sympathies? And why should I tremble before them? Did not Paulo tell me that I should feel as if I were in my garden, and it was only my trees and flowers that were looking at me with human faces? Well, then, I will so think and feel, and speak only to my dear trees and flowers!"

Beckoning Carlo with a charming smile, guided by his hand, she hastily ascended the steps. And as they saw her there upon the stage, this delicate, lovely maiden—as they looked upon her spiritual maiden beauty, with the childlike

expression of her noble features, with eyes that beamed with pleasure and inspiration—there arose such a storm of applause that Natalie slightly trembled, and with a sweet smile she said to Carlo: "The people here are much more boisterous than the zephyrs in our garden, but they are not so melodious, and it almost saddens the heart!"

Cardinal Bernis now approached with the silver vase. On this occasion he had taken it upon himself to collect the themes, and with a respectful bow he handed them to the princess. With a gracious smile she took one of the papers and unfolded it. The subject given was, "Longing for home."

That was a theme well calculated to inspire Natalie, and to reawaken in her all her longings, sorrows, loves, and remembrances. She suddenly felt something like a cold shudder in her heart, and glancing around with a feeling of solitude and desertion, she saw nothing but curious faces and strange, staring eyes! She, also, was repudiated and homeless, and an excessive longing for the distant unknown home of her childhood now took possession of her.

Perhaps Carlo had read her thoughts upon her brow; low and plaintive melodies poured from his harp, as it were the rustling murmurs of far-off remembrances, the sighing and sobbing of a yearning heart. And Natalie, carried away by these tones, forgetful of all around her, mindful only of the happiness of her childhood and of the lady she had so dearly loved, began to sing.

Of what she said and what she sang she was unconscious. She stood there as if elevated by inward inspiration; her eyes flashed as she stared into the far distance,

and the images she saw there caused her to smile and weep at the same time; all the glow, all the childlike purity of her soul, came in words from her lips in a stream of inspiration, of painful ecstasy!

She saw nothing, heard nothing! She saw not the ladies weeping with emotion, not the rapturous glances of the men; she had entirely forgotten all those strange, unknown people; and when the constantly increasing storm of applause finally reminded her of them, it was all over with her inspiration—the words died upon her lips, and with a sad smile she hastened the conclusion.

And now arose a shout and an outbreak of rapture which caused Natalie to tremble with anxious timidity. She cast a searching glance around her; it seemed to her that Paulo must come to her relief, that he must rescue and redeem her from the enthusiastic and flattering men who surrounded her. She saw him not! Where was Paulo, where was Carlo? These inquisitive lord cardinals had formed a circle around her, she seemed to herself a prisoner; it alarmed her to thus find herself the central point of all these attractions.

Not far from her stood Corilla, with glowing cheeks and anger-flashing eyes.

"I will avenge this affront or die!" thought she, as, grasping Albani's hand with convulsive violence, she whispered to him: "Free me from this woman, and I will realize all your wishes."

Francesco Albani smiled. "Then you are mine, Corilla, and no power on earth shall take you from me. That child is dead. See, see how she makes herself a path through the

crowd—ah, it is too sultry for her here in the hall, she approaches the garden door, she slips out. Ah, give me your hand, Corilla. Yet a few moments and the fairest woman on earth is mine!”

Light as a gazelle, timid and trembling, Natalie had fled the crowd, and now, stepping out into the garden, she breathed easier, it seeming to her that she had escaped a danger.

“This night air will cool and refresh me, and I shall soon succeed in finding Paulo,” thought she, constantly wandering farther and farther into the garden. But the brightness of the illuminated alleys annoyed her. A more obscure and secluded path opening, Natalie entered it. Ah, she needed solitude and stillness, and what knew she, this simple, harmless child of Nature—what knew she whether it was proper and seemly for a young woman thus alone to venture into these dark walks? She knew not that she incurred any risk, or that one needed protection among people!

Even farther resounded the noise of the festival—the clang of the music sounded fainter and fainter. Natalie wandered farther and farther, happy because alone!

Alone? What, then, was it that noiselessly and cautiously haunted her steps, following every movement she made, constantly nearing her the farther she found herself, as she supposed, from all other living beings? What was it inaudibly creeping through the bushes, even its dark shadow imperceptible, that followed her like a ghost?

It became stiller and stiller, and nearer crept the gloomy form that lurked in her steps. Now with a sudden spring

he rushes upon the maiden. What gleams in his hand? It is a dagger. He swings it high, that he may sink it deep. Then some one rushes from the bushes, seizes the murderer's arm, wrests the dagger from his hand, hurls him to the earth, and a dear, well-known voice cries: “Fly, Natalie, fly quickly to Count Paulo! This serpent will no longer follow you! I have him fast, the assassin!”

And Carlo broke out into a happy and triumphant laugh.

Natalie made no answer, she was paralyzed with terror; there was a roaring in her ears, it darkened before her eyes, and she fell senseless to the earth!

But her disarmed murderer sought to free himself from Carlo's grasp. Struggling with his captor, he finally succeeded in half rising. Carlo thought not of his own danger, but only of Natalie's, and it was only on her account that he now loudly called for help, at the same time exerting a superhuman strength to hold on upon his prisoner.

Voices were heard, lights approached, and Paulo's cry of anguish resounded.

“Here, here!” anxiously cried Carlo, his strength already beginning to fail him. And his call being recognized, people soon came with lights. Count Paulo was already distinguishable, already Cardinal Bernis, with a light in his hand, was hastening on in advance of the rest.

With a last powerful effort the prisoner succeeded in freeing himself.

“She is saved for this time, but my dagger will yet make her acquaintance!” said he, with a scornful laugh, and like a serpent he glided away among the bushes.

"She is saved!" cried Carlo, sinking back toward Count Paulo, and pointing with a happy smile to Natalie, who, awaking from her momentary stupefaction, stretched forth her arms toward the count.

"Paulo," she whispered low, "let us hasten from here! I dread these people! I fear them! Let us go! But take him with us, that they may not kill him, my saviour, my friend Carlo!"

CHAPTER XXXII.

THE DEPARTURE.

THE morning dawned. Count Paulo rose from the arm-chair in which he had passed the night. He had occupied the whole fearfully anxious night in writing; he now laid the pen aside and stood up.

His face had an expression of firmness and decision; he had formed a firm resolution, had come to an irrevocable determination.

With a firm step advancing to the door opening into the adjoining chamber, he called to his friend Cecil.

The latter immediately made his appearance, and, entering the count's chamber, laconically said: "All is ready."

Count Paulo smiled sadly. "You are then sure there are no other means of saving her and ourselves?" he asked.

"None whatever," said Cecil. "Every moment's delay increases her and your danger. The occurrence of last night is a proof of it. They sought the death of Natalie—

without Carlo's help she would have been murdered, and all our plans would have come to an end."

"Her life is threatened, and yet you can urge me to go and leave her here alone and unprotected?"

"Was it you who saved her from the danger of last night?" asked Cecil. "Believe me, it is your presence that threatens her with the most danger. Precisely because you are at her side, they suspect her and watch her every step; the circumstance that she is with you creates distrust, and in Natalie they will think they see her whose mysterious flight has long been known in Russia. And Catharine will have her tracked in all countries and upon all routes. Therefore, save Natalie, by seeming to give her up. Return home and relate to them a fable of a false princess by whom you had been deceived, and whom you abandoned as soon as you discovered the deception. They will everywhere lend you a believing ear, as people gladly believe what they wish, and by this means only can you assure the future of Natalie and yourself."

"That is all just and true. I myself have so seen and recognized it," said the count; "and yet, my friend, I nevertheless still waver, and it seems to me that an internal voice warns me against that which I am about to do!"

Cecil smilingly shook his head. "Trust not such voices," said he; "it is the whispering of demons who envelop themselves in our own wishes, who entice us to what we would, by seeming to warn us against what we fear. Nothing but your departure can give you safety. Leave Natalie here in quiet solitude, and without you she will be well concealed in the solitude of this garden, and