

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

THE VAPO.

SINCE Paulo had left her, and she found herself alone, Natalie felt sad, solitary, in the paradise that surrounded her. No longer did she sing in emulation of the birds, no longer did she hop with youthful delight and the impetuosity of a young roe through the charming alleys. Sadly, and with downcast eyes, sat she under the myrtle bush by the murmuring fountains, and frequent heavy sighs heaved her laboring breast.

"All is changed, all!" she often thoughtfully said to herself. "A great and terrible secret has been unveiled within me—the secret of my utter abandonment! I have no one on earth to whom I belong! Once I never thought of that. Paulo was all to me, my friend, my father, my brother; but Paulo has abandoned me, I belong not to him, and hence I could not go with him. And who is left to me? Carlo!" she answered herself in a low tone, and with a melancholy smile. "But Carlo has not filled the void that Paulo's absence has left in my heart. At first I thought he could, but that was only a short deception. Carlo is good and kind, always devoted, always ready to serve me. He always conforms himself to my will, is all subjection, all obedience. But that is terrible, unbearable!" exclaimed the almost weeping young maiden. "Who, then, shall I obey, before whom shall I tremble, when all obey me and tremble before me? And yet Carlo is a man. No," said she, quite low; "were he so I should

then obey him, and not he me; then would he give me commands, and not I him! No, Carlo is no man—Paulo was so! Where art thou, my friend, my father?"

And the young maiden yearningly spread her arms in the air, calling upon her distant friend with tender, low-whispered words and heartfelt longings.

But the days slowly passed, and still no news came from him. Natalie dreamily and sadly sank deeper into herself; her cheeks paled, her step became less light and elastic. In vain did her true friends, Marianne and Carlo, exhaust themselves in projects and propositions for her distraction and amusement.

"You should go into the world and amuse yourself in society, princess," said Carlo.

"I hate the world and society," said Natalie. "People are all bad, and I abominate them. What had I done to these people, how had I offended them even in thought, and yet they would have murdered me the very first time I appeared among them? No, no, leave me here in my solitude, where I at least have not to tremble for my life, where I have Carlo to guard and protect me."

The singer pressed the proffered hand to his lips.

"Then let us at least make some excursions in the environs of Rome," said he.

"No," said she, "I should everywhere long to be back in my garden. Nowhere is it so beautiful as here. Leave me my paradise—why would you drive me from it?"

"Alas!" despairingly exclaimed Carlo, "you call yourself happy and satisfied; why, then, are you so sad?"

"Am I sad?" she asked, with surprise. "No, Carlo, I

am not sad! I sometimes dream, nothing more! Let me yet dream!"

"You will die," thought Carlo, and with an effort he forced back the cry of despair that pressed to his lips; but his cheeks paled, and his whole form trembled.

Seeing it, Natalie shook off her apathy, and with a lively sympathy and tender friendship she inquired the cause of his disquiet. She was so near him that her breath fanned his cheek, and her locks touched his brow.

"Ah, you would kill me, you would craze me!" murmured he, sorrowfully, sinking down, powerless, at her feet.

She looked wonderingly at him. "Why are you angry with me?" she innocently said, "and what have I done, that you so wrongfully accuse me?"

"What have you done?" cried he, beside himself,—the moment had overcome him, this moment had burst the bands with which he had bound his heart, and in unfettered freedom, in glowing passion, his long-concealed secret forced its way to his lips. He must at length for once speak of his sorrows, even if death should follow; he must give expression to his torment and his love, even should Natalie banish him forever from her presence!

"What have you done?" repeated he. "Ah, she does not even know that she is slowly murdering me, she does not even know that I love her!"

"Am I not to know?" she reproachfully asked. "Would you, indeed, have saved my life had you not loved me? Carlo, I am indebted to you for my life, and you say I murder you!"

"Yes," he frowardly exclaimed, "you murder me!

Slowly, day by day, hour by hour, am I consumed by this frightful internal fire that is destroying me. Ah, you know not that you are killing me. And have you not destroyed my youthful strength, and from a man converted me into an old, trembling, and complaining woman? Is it not for your sake that I have fled the world, leaving behind me all it offered of fame and wealth and honor? Is it not your fault that I have ceased to be a free man, to have a will of my own, and have become a slave crawling at your feet? Ah, woe is me, that I ever came to know you! You are an enchantress, you have made me your hound, and, whining, I lie in the dust before you, satisfied when you touch me with your foot."

At first, Natalie had listened to him with terror and astonishment; then an expression of noble pride was to be read upon her features, a glowing flush flitted over her delicate cheeks, and with flashing eyes and a heaving bosom she sprang up from her seat. Proud as a queen she rose erect, the blood of her ancestors awoke in her; she at this moment felt herself free as an empress, as proud, as secure—and, stretching her arm toward the outlet of the garden, she said in a determined tone: "Go, Signor Carlo! Leave me, I tell you! We have no longer any thing in common with each other!"

Carlo seemed as if awakened from a delirium. Breathless, with widely-opened eyes, trembling and anxious, he stared at the angry maiden. He knew nothing of what he had said; he comprehended not her anger, only his infinite suffering; he was conscious only of his long-suppressed, long-concealed secret love. And, grasping Natalie's hands

with an imploring expression, he constrained the young maiden, almost against her will, to remain and reseal herself upon the grassy bank before which he knelt.

As he looked up to her with those glowing, passionate glances, a maiden fear and trembling for the first time came over her, an anxiety and timidity inexplicable to herself! Her delicate, transparent cheeks paled, tears filled her eyes, and, folding her hands with a childish supplicating expression, she said in a low, tremulous tone: "My God, my God! Have mercy upon me! I am a wholly abandoned, solitary orphan! Rescue me yet from this trouble and distress, from this terrible loneliness!"

"Fear nothing, my charming angel," whispered Carlo, "I will be gentle as a lamb, and patient, very patient in my sorrow; I have sworn it and will keep my oath! But you must hear me! You must, only this one time, allow me to express in words my love and my sorrow, my misery and my ecstasy. Will you allow me this, my lily, my beautiful swan?"

He would have again grasped her hand, but she withdrew it with a proud, angry glance.

"Speak on," said she, wearily leaning her hand against the myrtle-bush. "Speak on, I will listen to you!"

And he spoke to her of his love; he informed her of his former life, his poverty, his want, his connection with Corilla, whom he had quitted in order to devote himself wholly to her, to obey, serve, and worship her all his life, and, if necessary, to die for her! "But you," he despairingly said, "you know not love! Your heart is cold for earthly love; like the angels in heaven, you love only the

good and the sublime, you love mankind collectively, but not the individual. Ah, Natalie, you have the heart of an angel, but not the heart of a woman!"

The young maiden had half dreamingly listened to him, her head leaned back and her glance directed toward the heavens. She now smiled, and, with an inimitable grace, laying her hand upon her bosom, said in a very low tone: "And yet I feel that a woman's heart is beating there. But it sleeps! Who will one day come to awaken it?"

Carlo did not understand these low whispered words; he understood only his own passion, his own consuming glow. And anew he commenced his love-plainings, described to her the torments and fierce joys of an unreturned love, which is yet too strong and overpowering to be suppressed. And Natalie listened to him with a dreamy thoughtfulness. His words sounded in her ears like a wonderful song from a strange, distant world which she knew not, but the description of which filled her heart with a sweet longing, and she could have wept, without knowing whether it was for sorrow or joy.

"Thus, Natalie," at length said Carlo, entirely exhausted and pale with emotion—"thus love I you. You must sometime have learned it, and have known that even angels cannot mingle with mortals unloved and unpunished. I should finally have been compelled to tell you that you might torture no longer, in cruel ignorance; that you, learning to understand your own heart, might tell me whether I have to hope, or only to fear!"

"Poor Carlo!" murmured Natalie. "You love me, but I do not love you! This has even now become clear to me;

and while you have so glowingly described the passion, I have for the first time comprehended that I yet know nothing of that love, and that I can never learn it of you! This is a misfortune, Carlo, but as we cannot change, we must submit to it."

Carlo drooped his head and sighed. He had no answer to make, and only murmuringly repeated her words: "Yes, we must submit to it!"

"And why can we not?" she almost cheerfully asked, with that childlike innocence which never once comprehended the sorrow she was preparing for Carlo—"why can we not joyfully submit? We both love, only in a different manner. Let each preserve and persevere in his own manner, and then all may yet be well!"

"And it shall be well!" exclaimed Carlo, with animation. "You cannot love me as I love you, but I can devote my whole life to you, and that will I do! At home, in my charming Naples, a beautiful custom is prevalent. When one loves, he is adopted as a *vapo*, a protector, who follows the steps of the one he loves, who watches before her door when she sleeps, who secretly lurks at a distance behind her when she leaves her house, who observes every passer-by in order to preserve her from every murderous or other inimical attack, or in case of need to hasten to her assistance. Such a *vapo* protects her against the jealousy of her husband or the vengeance of a dismissed lover.* Natalie, as I cannot be your lover, I will be your *vapo*. Will you accept my services?"

* Archenholz, "England and Italy," vol. v., p. 187.

Giving him her hand, she smilingly said, "I will."

Carlo pressed that hand to his lips, and bedewed it with a warm tear.

"Well, then, I swear myself your *vapo*," said he, with deep emotion. "Wherever you may be, I shall be near you, I shall always follow to warn and to protect you; should you be in danger, call me and you will find me at your side, whether by night or by day; I shall always watch over you and sleep at the threshold of your door, and should a dream alarm you, I shall be there to tranquillize you. So long as I live, Natalie, so long as your *vapo* has a dagger and a sure hand, so long shall misfortune fail to penetrate into your dwelling. You cannot be mine, or return my love, but I can care for you and watch over you. In accepting me for your *vapo*, you have given me the right to die for you if necessary, and that of itself is a happiness!"

Thus speaking Carlo rose, and, no longer able to conceal his deep emotion and suppress his tears, he left Natalie, and hastened into the obscurest alleys of the garden.

The young maiden watched his retreat with a sad smile.

"Poor Carlo!" murmured she, "and ah! yet much poorer Natalie! He loves at least. But I, am I not much more to be pitied? I have no one whom I love. I am entirely isolated, and of what use is a solitary paradise?"