

## CHAPTER IV.

But the long pomp, the midnight masquerade,  
With all the freaks of wanton wealth arrayed,  
In these, ere triflers half their wish obtain,  
The toiling pleasure sickens into pain,  
And, even while Fashion's brightest arts decoy,  
The heart, distrusting, asks if this be joy ?

GOLDSMITH.

The prophecies of wizards old,  
Increased her terror, and her fall foretold.

WALLER.

MISS DELASSAUX was sitting with the Count in the Temple of Venus, which, at the moment we are now speaking of, was illuminated by a glory of lights, that might have done sufficient honour to the festival of the goddess herself, in her own Paphian bowers. The trees immediately inclosing the grassy recess where the temple stood, were hung with tastefully disposed garlands of coloured lamps,

the reflection of which faintly glimmered from the surface of the artificial lake in front. On the water floated a vast and dark body, indistinctly seen against the deep shadows of the groves lining the opposite shores, where the impenetrable gloom was unbroken by a single ray of illumination.

A grand flight of rockets suddenly shot up from the mass on the water, penetrating the dark vault of Heaven to an immense height, and a general shout was immediately heard from all parts of the gardens. This was instantly followed by a rush of many feet towards the lake, and particularly towards the temple, where Miss Delassaux and the Count were seated.

“ Let us quickly embark, Count,” said she, “ we shall otherwise become embarrassed by the crowd. Let them enjoy the view of the fireworks from the shore, whilst their groups will tend to heighten their effect to us, as we shall, in our turn, contribute, by the addition of our figures, to embellish the spectacle about to be presented to them ;” so saying, she hastened with him to a gilded boat in waiting for her, manned by six rowers in white dresses.

Miss Delassaux was so glad to escape from the throng, that she hurried on board the boat, without perceiving she was followed by her aunt. Her plan had been to rid herself, by this manœuvre, of Lady Deborah, who had appeared to watch her very closely during the early part of the evening, and she was so provoked to find herself defeated, that her anger knew no bounds. She went so far, indeed, as to order the rowers to return to the shore, with the intention of relanding her aunt, when happening to reflect that she could not do so, without subjecting herself to the chance of being overwhelmed by a swarm of applications for permission to get on board, and remembering that it was absolutely necessary to keep the boat with her, to prevent being followed, she reluctantly and angrily permitted the boatmen to pursue their course.

They had no sooner ascended the steps of the immense floating body, than a discharge of guns took place, and it was almost instantaneously illuminated by a glare of light, that exhibited every part of it minutely. It was, in fact, a huge raft, covered by a light superstructure of wood, very naturally shaped and painted to represent a

rocky islet. It was covered over with evergreens and flowers, happily disposed, and several small trees were placed on it, in so picturesque and natural a manner, as to appear growing from its crevices and inequalities. These had an incalculable number of lamps hanging amongst their leaves, which being lighted all at once by some unknown and ingenious contrivance, had produced the magical effect of its sudden illumination.

On a prominent part of an artificial rock at one end, sat Miss Delassaux and the Count; and as neither of them seemed disposed to make room enough to accommodate her, Lady Deborah was compelled to take her place lower down, near their feet, and close to the mouth of a cavity communicating with the hollow interior of the machine. This was made to represent the entrance to a cavern, the dark mouth of which produced a powerful effect, when contrasted with the full glare of the lamps.

The unwieldy pile was towed slowly along by people in boats, and then made to perform various evolutions, within a short distance of the shore, amidst loud shouts of applause from the gay multitude. From time to time, very bril-

liant and beautiful fireworks were displayed from the summit of a pigmy mountain, that rose from the end of the islet opposite to where Miss De-lassaux sat ; and, after these had been continued at intervals for a considerable time, a grand artificial explosion, followed by a magnificent jet of flame, burst from the summit of the peak, whence the fire-works had been discharged. This very superb *feu d'artifice* was intended to represent a volcano. It illuminated the whole surface of the sheet of water, and even the trees on its banks, and lighted up the dense phalanx of faces on the shore. Reiterated acclamations were excited by it. By means of fresh supplies of various combustibles, administered by people concealed below, it produced an imitation of all those various changes in the eruption, exhibited by nature in the real volcano.

Whilst the men, who managed the fire-works, were all employed, and out of sight, the trio were suddenly alarmed by the appearance of a figure from the dark mouth of the cavern. It was a tall and majestic man, habited in a green and yellow Moorish dress, its sweeping drapery giving an imposing effect to his height. In his hand he held

a long white wand, and his face was partly covered by a ghastly bearded mask, leaving his dark and piercing eyes fully disclosed, and giving to the rest of his visage the cold and pallid hue of death. The figure stood motionless for a few minutes, the blue light falling strong upon his face; the eyes of the party were fastened on it with astonishment, not unmingled with horror, and even apprehension. Fixed as a statue, his head erect, his arm extended, and the end of his rod resting upon the ground, it seemed as if a corpse had left the grave to place itself before them.

There was something so appalling in this apparition, that, although the plan of the amusements of the night fully authorized every species of disguise, it was some time before any of them could command sufficient recollection to question it. At last, Miss Delassaux assuming a language and tone suitable to the humour of the evening and the occasion:—

“ Whence come ye, reader of the stars ?” said she, “ for so thy looks and habit would proclaim thee ; deign to answer us—whence come ye ?”

“ From the tomb !” uttered the figure in a deep sepulchral voice, to which the mask gave

additional solemnity by the immobility of its lips.

“Unfold thy name and purpose,” said Miss Delassaux, in a more tremulous voice.

“Abulcassim the Magician, who, after having descended to the world below, to dive into the secrets of the grave, now comes to warn thee of thy folly!” said the spectre in the same solemn tone and immoveable manner.

“Go on then, good master,” said Miss Delassaux, endeavouring to hide her alarm, but at the same time edging herself nearer to the Count; “but let not your admonitions exceed the gentle licence of this night of revelry.”

“I come not to flatter, Lady; there be enough here to minister to your diseased appetite by hailing your approach with honeyed words, but only that their envenomed stings may the more certainly pierce thee. If dread warning from the grave can awaken virtue and wisdom in thy bosom, my errand is to rouse thee!”

“Surely,” said the Count, with a foreign accent, “surely you do not mean to be so rude as to accuse this beautiful and all-accomplished lady of a want of either of these qualities? The licence of the evening goes not to such a point; and”——

The Magician seemed to hear him not ; with his eyes still bent on Miss Delassaux, he proceeded, as if he had not been interrupted,—

“ Leave the flowery but deceitful road of pleasure, Lady, if folly like thine can be called by such a name. Leave the road that leads thee to destruction. Seek, if thou can'st, though late, the rugged path of virtue and of wisdom ; its thorns and rocks alone can now afford thee shelter. Sunshine will depart, and storms will come anon. Think !—deeply think ! and nerve thee for the adverse blast :—One sole protector yet remains, whom future reformation alone can secure. Then, once again, resolve !”

Miss Delassaux was so much confounded by these portentous words, as well as with the solemnity of the appeal, that she was unable to reply. Her knight, too, felt either too much astonished, or too much alarmed to answer for her. Lady Deborah, however, who had been listening with very great attention, and who naturally enough imagined that this prophetic speech proceeded from some one who guessed at the perplexed state of her niece's affairs, and who wished to mortify her in the midst of her glory, now made an

attempt to turn the direction of the stranger's attack.

“ Most renowned Magician, thy sage advices shall not be forgotten. Yea, unbeliever though thou art, thy stern but moral warning shall not be lost. Myself, the Lady Abbess, shall take our erring daughter within the holy precincts of our sanctuary, and there, by mild instruction, shall we wean her from the world. Thy Saracenic tongue gives chastisement too rough for such a gentle maid. Be mine the task to lay some softer penance on the tender girl,—yea, and to give her mild instruction;—a duty most delightful to Religion's voice.”

“ Religion's voice!!!” exclaimed the Magician, now, for the first time, starting from his fixed position as she spoke, and regarding her with a full and fiery eye, as he repeated her last words in a tone of thunder, that made even the proud and dauntless Lady Deborah quail before him, “ Darkest thou then talk of religion with hell itself in thy bosom? Speak not again, I tell thee, or I unfold the past horrors of thy guilty life—thy yet unexecuted crimes—thy future fate!—Thou bearest not now that petrifying Ægis on thy breast, which once as ill disguised thy lack of virtue as those

holy weeds do now befit thy foully feigned religion!—Beware!—thy inmost thoughts are known—the blow threatened by thine uplifted arm has fallen innocuous; else had thy full cup of wickedness overflowed, and dreadful and ignominious would have been thy punishment. Shrink, then, at the thought; for, know, thy future fate hangs on thy future conduct,—therefore Beware.”

Whilst the Magician was pouring forth this terrible threat, Lady Deborah sank down on her knees, and, with a look of bitter agony, that drew together her large eyebrows, and half hid her dark eyeballs, clenching her hands as he proceeded, she shrieked aloud, and, just as he had concluded, she fell backwards in a fit of strong convulsion. Meanwhile, Miss Delassaux and the Count had listened with astonishment to the vehemence of the stranger, whose words had become much too serious to be mistaken for those of mere sport. They were so much petrified by the result, that some moments elapsed before they ran to Lady Deborah. At length they raised her up, and chafed her hands and temples, and, by means of their exertions, her vital spirits were gradually recalled.”

“Where, where is he?” exclaimed she, her eyes rolling about with an air of frenzied anxiety and apprehension, as if desirous again to see, yet afraid to meet those of the Magician.—Where is he?” But he was gone!

The people on the float were all engaged within the artificial volcano; and the men in the boats, tired with towing the unwieldy mass after them, having rested on their oars for some moments, the floating island had been gradually drawn towards a grassy point, jutting into the lake from one side of the slope where the temple of Venus was situated. The Moor seizing this opportunity of escape, had sprung with one bound to the land. Now they could observe him clearing, with firm but solemn step, and folded arms, the gaping crowd, that gave way before him, as if the cold damp air of death had enveloped him, and carried pestilence along with it; and soon afterwards he was lost among the trees.

Lady Deborah, though somewhat recovered, remained in so faint and agitated a state, that she required the assistance of servants to enable her to reach the house, where she immediately sought her chamber, and was no more seen dur-

ing the night. The company who witnessed the scene at a distance, had, naturally enough, considered his appearance as no other than some auxiliary part of the performance of the evening. Lady Deborah's illness disquieted them not, nor perhaps would her death, or even that of Miss Delassaux have made much impression on such holiday hearts.

The amusements in the gardens being over, the ball-room was soon filled, and the pompous minuet, and the lively cotillion, alternated with each other. A superb supper was then announced, where there appeared every thing that luxury could desire. To preside over this, Miss Delassaux led the way, handed by the Count, who whispered a thousand common-place compliments in her ear. But notwithstanding his attentions, she retired jaded and dissatisfied to bed, and the last dregs of the company dispersed, lighted home by the broad morning sun, and flouted by the song of the early lark.