

"Not quite come to that yet, I hope," replied the bully, encouraged to insolence by the gentle address, "though, no doubt, you would be heartily glad to see it."

"By no means, I assure you; I hold you no grudge. If, therefore, you require relief, tell me; and though it is not right that you should be here, I can take you into a private chamber where you can receive it unknown."

"Then I will tell you the truth: I came in here merely for a freak, and I should be glad if you could get me quietly out."

"Corvinus," said the youth, with some sternness, "this is a serious offence. What would your father say if I desired these young men, who would instantly obey, to take you as you are, barefoot, clothed as a slave, counterfeiting a cripple, into the Forum before his tribunal, and publicly charge you with what every Roman would resent, forcing your way into the heart of a patrician's house?"

"For the gods' sake, good Pancratius, do not inflict such frightful punishment."

"You know, Corvinus, that your own father would be obliged to act towards you the part of Junius Brutus, or forfeit his office."

"I entreat you by all that you love, by all that you hold sacred, not to dishonor me and mine so cruelly. My father and his house, not I, would be crushed and ruined for ever. I will go on my knees and beg your pardon for my former injuries if you will only be merciful."

"Hold, hold, Corvinus, I have told you that was long forgotten. But hear me now. Every one but the blind around you is a witness to this outrage. There will be a hundred evidences to prove it. If ever, then, you speak of this assembly, still more if you attempt to molest any one for it, we shall have it in our power to bring you to trial at your own father's judgment seat. Do you understand me, Corvinus?"

"I do, indeed," replied the captive, in a whining tone. "Never, as long as I live, will I breathe to mortal soul that I came into this dreadful place. I swear it by the—"

"Hush, hush! we want no such oaths here. Take my arm, and walk with me." Then turning to the others, he continued: "I know this person; his coming here is quite a mistake."

The spectators, who had taken the wretch's supplicating gestures and tone for accompaniments to a tale of woe and strong application for relief, joined in crying out, "Pancratius, you will not send him away fasting and unsuccessful?"

"Leave that to me," was the reply. The self-appointed porters gave way before Pancratius, who led Corvinus, still pretending to limp, into the street, and dismissed him, saying, "Corvinus, we are now quits; only, take care of your promise."

Fulvius, as we have seen, went to try his fortune by the front door. He found it, according to Roman custom, unlocked; and, indeed, no one could have suspected the possibility of a stranger entering at such an hour. Instead of a porter, he found, guarding the door, only a simple-looking girl about twelve or thirteen years of age, clad in a peasant's garment. No one else was near, and he thought it an excellent opportunity to verify the strong suspicion which had crossed his mind. Accordingly, he thus addressed the little portress.

"What is your name, child, and who are you?"

"I am," she replied, "Emerentiana, the Lady Agnes's foster-sister."

"Are you a Christian?" he asked her sharply.

The poor little peasant opened her eyes in the amazement of ignorance and replied, "No, sir." It was impossible to resist the evidence of her simplicity, and Fulvius was satisfied that he was mistaken. The fact was that she was the daughter of a peasant who had been Agnes's nurse. The mother had just died, and her kind sister had sent for the orphan daughter, intending to have her instructed and baptised. She had only arrived a day or two before, and was yet totally ignorant of Christianity.

Fulvius stood embarrassed what to do next. Solitude made him feel as awkwardly situated as a crowd was making Corvinus. He thought of retreating, but this would have destroyed all his hopes; he was going to advance, when he reflected that he might commit himself unpleasantly. At this critical juncture whom should he see coming lightly across the court but the youthful mistress of the house, all joy, all spring, all brightness and sunshine. As soon as she saw him she stood, as if to receive his errand, and he approached, with his blandest smile and most courtly gesture, and thus addressed her—

"I have anticipated the usual hour at which visitors come, and, I fear, must appear an intruder, Lady Agnes; but I was impatient to inscribe myself as an humble client of your noble house."

"Our house," she replied, smiling, "boasts of no clients, nor do we seek them, for we have no pretensions to influence or power."

"Pardon me; with such a ruler it possesses the highest of influences and the mightiest of powers, those which reign without effort over the heart as a most willing subject."

Incapable of imagining that such words could allude to herself, she replied, with artless simplicity—

"Oh, how true are your words! the Lord of this house is indeed the sovereign over the affections of all within it."

"But I," interposed Fulvius, "allude to that softer and benigner dominion, which graceful charms alone can exercise on those who from near behold them."

Agnes looked as one entranced; her eyes beheld a very different image before them from that of her wretched flatterer; and with an impassioned glance towards heaven, she exclaimed—

"Yes, He Whose beauty sun and moon in their lofty firmament gaze on and admire, to Him is pledged my service and my love."

Fulvius was confounded and perplexed. The inspired look, the rapturous attitude, the music of the thrilling tones in which she uttered these words, their mysterious import, the strangeness of the whole scene, fastened him to the spot and sealed his lips; till, feeling that he was losing the most favorable opportunity he could ever expect of opening his mind (affection it could not be called) to her, he boldly said, "It is of you I am speaking; and I entreat you to believe my expression of sincerest admiration of you, and of unbounded attachment to you." As he uttered these words he dropped on his knee, and attempted to take her hand; but the maiden bounded back with a shudder, and turned away her burning countenance.

Fulvius started in an instant to his feet, for he saw Sebastian, who was come to summon Agnes to the poor, impatient of her absence, striding forwards towards him, with an air of indignation.

"Sebastian," said Agnes to him, as he approached, "be not angry; this gentleman has probably entered here by some unintentional mistake, and no doubt will quietly retire." Saying this, she withdrew.

Sebastian, with his calm but energetic manner, now addressed the intruder, who quailed beneath his look: "Fulvius, what do you here? What business has brought you?"

"I suppose," answered he, retaining courage, "that having met the lady of the house at the same place with you, her noble cousin's table, I have a right to wait upon her, in common with other voluntary clients."

"But not at so unreasonable an hour as this, I presume?"

"The hour that is not unreasonable for a young officer," retorted Fulvius insolently, "is not, I trust, so for a civilian."

Sebastian had to use all his power of self-control to check his indignation, as he replied—

"Fulvius, be not rash in what you say; but remember that two persons may be on a very different footing in a house. Yet not even the longest familiarity, still less a one dinner's acquaintance, can authorise or justify the audacity of your bearing towards the young mistress of this house a few moments ago."