

“H’m! If he is rich and generous I should think he would give you better clothes to wear.”

“No doubt he will, Senora: but we only reached port an hour ago.”

“What business has your master with me, in such a hurry, too?”

“I do not know, Senora,” replied the young man; but it did not escape his notice that the widow turned pale, and the hand that held the letter trembled.

“Are you to wait for an answer?” she asked.

“Yes, Senora.”

“Then go and wait at the door until I call you.”

The young man turned to obey, when the widow, who had hastily opened the letter, started violently.

“Jose Benito, Jose Benito, come here quick!” she called.

Her daughters rushed to her side, questioning her eagerly, but she ordered them from the room to gether with Maria. Then closing the door she turned to Jose Benito.

“Who is your master? What is his name?” she asked sharply.

“Don Jose de Zayas, Senora.”

“Is he a respectable person?”

“He is said to be worth 5,000,000 dols.”

“But is he a gentleman?”

“Ah, Senora, with so much money he—”

“Very well, that is enough,” she said, impatiently. “Tell him I will receive him at once.”

“Thank you, Senora,” said poor Jose Benito as he went away.

A half hour later as the widow Sanchez, attired in her richest costume, sat waiting in her parlour, the maid announced the arrival of the expected guest.

As the man entered the room the widow bit her lips to restrain a smile at his extraordinary figure. He was tall and stout, with stooping shoulders; he had an enormous red nose, and his wrinkled skin was brown and weather-beaten; a stiff, bristling grey beard covered the lower part of his face, and his hair was reduced to a grey fringe across the back of his neck leaving the rest of his head bare. His costume was of fine black broadcloth, with the exception of the vest, which was of yellow velvet spotted with red. Across his broad and ample breast he wore a gold watch chain as massive as a ship's cable, his fat fingers were covered with costly rings, and in his shirt front sparkled a magnificent diamond.

At the widow's request he seated himself upon the sofa, while his long legs stretched half way across the parlour.

For a few moments not a word was spoken, each sat eyeing the other with evident distrust and suspicion.

“Have I the honour of addressing Don Jose de Zayas?” said the widow at length.

“Your servant, Senora. And I suppose I am addressing the widow Sanchez?” said the stranger with an awkward bow.

He was evidently embarrassed. He coughed several times, ran his fingers nervously through his beard, and then sat gazing at his bejewelled hands.

At length, summoning up courage he said:

“I am a plain man, of few words, Senora, and we will proceed to business at once. What is your answer, yes or no?”

The widow hesitated. She had already formed her own plans to appropriate this man's millions, and they differed materially from those which he had proposed. Her object now was to gain time.

“When I read this letter which your servant—”

“My secretary. I have made the young man my secretary,” he interrupted her roughly.

“I beg your pardon, Senora, your secretary. When I read this letter I thought at first it was a cruelly set some malicious person was playing on an uneducated widow, but—”

“As I told the truth, you saw that it was in dead earnest—eh, Senora?”

“I have been very unfortunate,” she said pressing her handkerchief to her eyes, “and much as I shrink from doing so, I am compelled to accept your offer and, I think I can make the terms satisfactory to you,” she added with a smiling smile.

“I want nothing, Senora, except what the letter stated; that, or our business is at an end. Do you understand? I thought the letter was plain enough. Listen!”

He leaned forward suddenly, and taking the letter from her hand, began to read:

“Respected Senora: I know that not only the house which you live, but your jewels and all your property have been mortgaged and the money squandered. You have also appropriated to your own use the property of your niece and ward, Maria, which has also been lost. Your creditors are pressing you, and within a week your house will be sold over your head to satisfy their demands. I will pay off your mortgages and place you in comfortable circumstances on one condition—that you give me the hand of your niece, Maria, in marriage.”

The old man laid the letter on the table and sat awaiting her reply.

“But, Senor, I do not know who you are. You may be unable to do all this,” she gasped.

“Look! he said, drawing a package of papers from his pocket, which he carefully unfolded and held at a safe distance for her to see.

They were all the mortgages and note which were outstanding against her.

“I have bought all these and now I am your creditor,” he said, chuckling to himself as he saw her cheeks grow pale. “And I have still more,” he went on. “I have full proof of your theft of your ward's money. You thought that you had destroyed them, but, Senora, such actions are sure to come to light. On the day that Maria becomes my wife, I will burn all these in your presence. If you refuse my proposal I shall proceed against you to the full extent of the law. Now, take your choice. Meanwhile I will tell you all you need to know of my history. I went to South America a poor boy. There a kind man took me into his service, I nursed him through a

terrible illness, and he became so fond of me that, as he had not a relative in the world, he adopted me and gave me his name, which I hope to carry with honour as long as I live. When my benefactor died I found he had made me heir to his immense fortune. I then went to California, where, by lucky investments, I doubled my money. If we were in California now I should marry Maria and leave you to starve, but I know that here in Spain her marriage would not be legal without the consent of her guardian. Now, what have you to say?”

The widow was cornered. She moved uneasily in her chair as she replied:

“But, Senor, you arrived only a few hours ago; you have not even seen my niece. Why do you wish to marry her?”

“I have been in Corunna before, Senora, and I know more about your niece than you think and then the whole town speaks of Senora Maria de Rivera as a model of beauty and virtue. I am an old man, and my only wish is to settle down with a young and pretty wife for my companion. If you have any further doubts of my wealth you are at liberty to go to my bankers here in Corunna. But time is pressing, Senora, you must give me an answer at once.”

The old man arose and stood watching her, with his small twinkling eyes.

The widow had no alternative. Furious as she was over what she considered Maria's good fortune, she was compelled to acquiesce in it. That the girl herself would resist it never entered her mind, but Maria, hitherto the meekest and most submissive of maidens, declared that she would throw herself headlong from the Tower of Hercules sooner than become the wife of such a hideous old man. The widow's commands and entreaties were of no avail, and in despair she finally locked the young girl in her room, declaring that she should remain a prisoner until she came to her senses.

In the morning Jose Benito appeared with a note from his master. He was dressed in a new suit of clothes as became the secretary of a millionaire and looked handsomer than ever.

In the note Senor Zayas requested permission to visit his bride, which the widow did not dare to refuse. Then she set to work to prepare the obstinate girl for the interview. It was not an easy task. Only after a storm of threats and abuse did Maria allow herself to be arrayed in a silk gown belonging to one of her cousins and conducted to the parlour to await the arrival of the dreaded bridegroom.

The widow met him at the door. She thought it wise to inform him of Maria's rebellious state of mind before he saw her.

“H'm! So she objects to the marriage, does she? That is serious,” said the old man thoughtfully. “Please allow me to see her alone for a few moments. I think I can tame the little rebel,” he added, with a self-satisfied smile.

A solitary interview was contrary to all laws of Spanish etiquette, but this was an extreme case and the widow was forced to give way. Although she was dying to be present, she took the old man to the parlour and left him alone with the unfortunate girl.

When she returned to the room half an hour later she found Maria weeping bitterly, but the old man was sitting at her side, holding her dainty hand in his rough, red paws. He had evidently conquered.

In the days that followed Maria crept about the house, pale and silent. Jose Benito came constantly, bringing flowers and rich presents from his master to the bride. Every evening the old man was at Maria's side, and strange as it may seem, she was evidently growing to love him. Her lovely eyes sparkled when he appeared and his whispered words often brought a rosy blush to her fair cheeks.

As for the widow and her daughters, the old man's ugly face was gilded by his gold. They declared that he was the most elegant of gentlemen and their hatred and jealousy of Maria increased every moment. But they were helpless and dared not say a word.

Not far from Corunna an elegant villa stood in the midst of an extensive park. Its owner lived in Madrid, and the place had been for sale for many years, but no one in Corunna was rich enough to purchase such a magnificent property. It stood in solitary state, while the surrounding grounds had become a wild tangle of shrubbery and forest undergrowth, among which squirrels and wild deer roamed at will.

One morning the gossips of Corunna became wildly excited over the rumour that the rich stranger from America had purchased the entire estate, and would fit up the mansion with the utmost splendour to receive his bride. That this rumour was true was soon proved by the arrival of carpenters, masons, painters, and gardeners which swarmed about the villa, and by the great vans which were being loaded with furniture of the richest description, which a ship had brought from London to Corunna.

Senor Zayas and his secretary, Jose Benito, directed all the improvements in person, and the old man took a special interest in the renovation and decoration of the chapel, for it was here that he intended the marriage ceremony to take place.

From time to time he went in an elegant carriage drawn by a span of magnificent English horses, to take his bride to show the progress of the work. On these occasions Maria was always accompanied, as was proper, by the Widow Sanchez and her daughters, to whom the old man was most courteous, although certain people declared that they had seen him make furious grimaces behind their backs which revealed quite a different state of feeling. Maria apparently took little rest in these preparations for her future luxury. Still, the roses were beginning to bloom on her cheeks, and the gossips said that when talking with the handsome secretary of her future lord her lips were much more smiling than the occasion called for.

The widow and her daughters, on the contrary, treated Jose Benito with great rudeness; in fact, they ignored him completely; but they were loud in their praises of the villa, and bowed down to Don Jose de Zayas as did the last whites of old to the golden calf.

“Ah, Senor, I love love has made you blind,” said the widow, with her sweetest smile. “I am positive that Maria cares nothing for you. She is marrying you only to escape from us. Although we have protected her all her life, the ungrateful girl has always hated us. Then, too, she is a girl with no manners; she is unfit to be the mis-