

No one was aware of this by-play but themselves, for the signora and her pupil were attending to Herr Harfenspieler, who had improved the occasion by delivering a lecture upon idleness.

In the drawing-room, after dinner, the signora saw Fan flitting up and down in the twilight between the great windows, and noticed the pale, perplexed, half-frightened look in her face which had caught the attention of his lordship.

"My child," she said, "there is something strange about you. You look as if you had got a shock."

"So I have, Mamzelle."

"What, can it have been since the morning?" said the signora, in great agitation. "I hope Captain Wilderspin has not been saying anything foolish. Military men are so peculiar."

"He is very good, but I am greatly surprised. He wants me to marry him, Mamzelle."

The signora gave a little shriek.

"You would not like it?" said Fan, tremulously.

"Like it! My dear, do you know what you are saying? The idea is simple madness. You are only a poor protégée of his lordship, and he is Lord Wilderspin's heir."

"Then it really could not be?" said Fan, with a long sigh of relief.

Mamzelle mistook the sigh for one of pain, and her kind heart smote her.

"How dare he be so cruel?" she murmured. "My love, is it possible your happiness is in his hands?"

"I do not know," said Fan, musingly, and with an air of trouble. "It cannot be—if what you say be true."

"Oh, me, oh, me! What a mess we have made of our affairs!"

"Do not grieve, Mamzelle; indeed, I am quite satisfied."

"Good, obedient child!" murmured the signora, a little disappointed in spite of herself. She could not have expected to find her wild gipsy maiden so tame in a matter where her affections were concerned.

"I must not leave you under a mistake. If I were to marry Captain Wilderspin, it would only be for the sake of something he promised me."

The signora's heart grew cold. "A title, diamonds, or what other gew-gaw?" she asked, severely.

"Nothing of that kind," said Fan, with a sad little smile, "and yet something that you would not approve of. I will not vex you by even mentioning it."

Herr Harfenspieler here appearing, the conversation was at an end; and Fan's voice was soon pealing through the room, and her heart unburdening itself of some of its longings and perplexities by means of the utterances of her song.

Lord Wilderspin and his nephew were meanwhile in earnest conversation in the garden.

"I think you hardly understood me just now," the old lord had begun, trying to be patient and reasonable. "It is my desire that everyone in my house be kindly inclined to that young girl. But there are limits to be observed. There are certain lines to be drawn."

"You mean that no man is to dare to fall in love with her?"

"Exactly. Such conduct would be inexcusable."

"Why?"

"Why—why—why? What a question to ask. The world is full of reasons why. Because, in the first place, she is only a child."

"A girl of 17 cannot long remain a child, no matter how peculiarly she may have been brought up, no matter how simple she may be in herself."

"I intend her to remain a child till it pleases me to introduce her to the world."

"Suppose Nature has undermined your plans: is it fair to rob her of her woman's inheritance of love?"

"Her woman's rubbish! Confound it, Rupert! To think of *you* coming to talk to me like this: you who were always the first to sneer, who professed to have no belief in that kind of thing."

"I believe in it now. A child (as you say) has

taught me. Excuse me, uncle, for trying your patience so severely. I do not wonder you are surprised; I have been astonished at myself."

"You mean to say that you have fallen in love with this girl, who has been practising her music in my house?"

"I am determined to make her my wife."

"You audacious jackanapes!"

"Come, come, uncle; a man is not a jackanapes at 35."

"He may be a jackanapes at 100. How dare you come here to rob me behind my back?"

His lordship put his hands behind him and glared from under his eyebrows at his nephew.

"You needn't try to frighten me," said Rupert, good-humoredly. "You have spoiled me too long and too often for that. I have deserved your anger, and you have always forgiven me. This time there is no fault upon my head."

"When I advised you to marry, you would not do it," burst forth his lordship. "Why have you not married your Lady Mauds and Miss Julias?"

"Because they were not—Fan," said Rupert, smiling.

"Be silent, sir; you are most impertinent," said Lord Wilderspin, striding about.

"Now, uncle, do be quiet, and let us talk. I want to marry and settle down according to your wishes; and the woman I have chosen is the 'child' who is dear to yourself. You love her as an old man, and I as a young man, and that is the only difference between us. You would have her obey you that you may ride out a hobby, and I would devote my life to making her happy. There are women enough to sing for us in the theatres. I advise you to let me have my own way."

"An Irish beggar-girl, a gipsy's foundling, is to be installed here as the future Lady Wilderspin!" stormed his lordship.

"I will take her out of the place, that you may not be troubled with the sight of her again."

"You shall do nothing of the kind, sir. I tell you this is no mere case of a hobby, as you think. I cannot have her taken from me. I love her as a child of my own."

"Treat her accordingly, then," said Captain Wilderspin, laying his hand pleadingly on the old man's arm.

"Ungrateful, good-for-nothing, covetous rascal!" shouted his lordship, shaking off the hand and striding away in towering wrath towards the house.

Captain Rupert looked after him and smiled, and then lit his cigar.

"Too hot to last," he said, complacently. "His bark is always worse than his bite."

The frightened look had gone from Fanchea's face when she went up to her room for the night. Further conversation with the signora had assured her that Lord Wilderspin would never consent to her marrying his nephew, and the conviction brought relief to her mind. Captain Rupert pleased her: his tender homage charmed her girlish pride; she admired his soldierly bearing, and had felt him younger and more companionable than the other persons who surrounded her. Yet she was very well aware that she did not want to marry him.

The scheme dear to her heart was the discovery of the lost, and she would keep herself free for that enterprise. A promise of help in her search had for a moment shaken her purpose, and she had asked herself whether she could not accept this means of attaining her end. But a word had made everything clear. Her benefactor must not be displeased.

Such thoughts having raced to a conclusion through her head, she flung open her windows and extinguished her light and moved softly about her chamber dancing the gipsy's dance. Snapping her little fingers, poising herself on her toes, she whirled from one end of the room to another, singing gaily under her breath that she was free:—