

on the grass, and Carmen flung herself wearily upon them, and lay there, soft, beautiful, voluptuous.

When Nil had been to the house and made known their wishes to her mother, she stole back, and stood looking at the lady, still with that troubled look in her eyes.

"What a complexion!" said Carmen, looking carelessly at her. "Child, how do you keep that soft color in your face?"

"It's nothin' to your'n," said Nil, drawing a deep breath.

"Mine!" she laughed, lazily, and the pink deepened in her cheeks. "Oh, but mine is not my own, you know."

"Not your'n!" cried Nil, earnestly. "D'you mean that it b'longs to him?" with a look at the fair man.

They all laughed now, so mirthfully that the child colored painfully.

"No, to the other gentleman," said Carmen, but she looked softly at the fair one. "Child, how would you like to go with me, out and down into the world, leaving these mountains behind you forever? I would make you beautiful as—as you seem to think I am; and," bitterly, "your complexion should belong to whomever you chose."

Into the child's face came a rosy radiance, like that which flushes the eastern sky at sunrise. Her nostrils dilated, her lips quivered, her eyes were filled with a swift rush of tears. Her whole being seemed to be trembling, throbbing, leaping up to be free.

"Oh," she cried, "you do not mean it! Dear lady, you do not mean it!"

A soft moisture came into the woman's cold eyes, as she turned them swiftly away. But when she looked back, they were dry again.

"Why not?" she said, with a look of defiance at the men, though in reality she was answering the remonstrances of her own despised conscience. "She could be so useful to me now, and after—ye gods! what a fortune I could get for her if that face keeps its promise."

"For shame!" said the dark man, with sullen scorn. "Have you not blackness in your soul now, without betraying a little child?"

A yellow gleam of anger came into the woman's eyes.

"He pretends to love me," she cried, smiling into the fair one's face, "but I always doubted him—always. One never can believe a man."

"Take her," said he, catching the cue to please her. "She will be happier with you than in these lonely mountains. Who, indeed, would not?"

"Leave her, Carmen," said the other, with less sternness and more entreaty in his tone. "She is only a little child, pure and white as the edelweiss.

Why should you wish to put sin into anything so sweet and so free from it now?"

"Why!" cried the woman, bitterly. "Ah, why, indeed, Oscar? It is honorable of you to ask me that question! Why? If only because I know that you, after having found me so weak as to allow myself to be dragged down to dishonor by you, yet reverence purity and virtue above all things on earth. If only for that, I would see defiled every pure thing on earth."

"Yes," said the man, bitterly, "yet no pure woman ever bound men to her with her fascinations as do you, and all others like you. Do you think, Carmen, that I could leave you now, while you are sweet and gracious, for a better woman? Your own power tells you no. Let this be your comfort always when you are troubled."

"I am seldom troubled," said she, laughing, and flecking her face with the crimson roses, "only—I shall have my way; the child shall go with me."

Nil had heard, without understanding, this conversation. To go with the beautiful lady, to be always near her, to watch the shadows in her eyes and the sunlight on her hair, sometimes to go quite near her, and touch her soft hand, her dress, her white arm, to learn to speak in that sweet, low voice, like clear water running over pebbles, this was all Nil cared to understand. Of course, she loved her mountains and her beautiful valley, and would be sad at parting with them; but, perhaps, she would find some as lovely down in the world, and there would always be some one who understood her. The beautiful Carmen found it an easy task to persuade Nil's parents to let her take the child. She must be good, they thought, to care for such a daft thing as Nil.

"Yuh'll bring 'er back afore long," her mother said, with a disparaging look at the child. "Yuh'll git tired o' her pokin' around alone, lookin' at a mite o' red in th' sky, an' a-talkin' to th' rocks an' things."

"Yuh be daft yurself," cried the old grandmother. "The fine lady yander 's not so good 's she looks. The child never be meant to be sech 's she be, with all 'er finery an' soft hands."

Carmen laughed a little, but she glanced more than once at the old woman, whose dim eyes had pierced her mask, but she felt no anger.

"She is so old," she said to herself, toying with her roses. "I do not mind when the young folks look at me, for they, perhaps, are only good because they have had no temptation. But the old—kind heaven! how old eyes look at one, and how plainly they see us. And she is so old—so old—one could not feel anger at her."

She put gold in their hands, and bade them have everything ready in an hour, that they might be down in the valley by moonrise.