A SIREN.

BOOK IV.—Continued.

THE LAST DAYS OF THE CARNIVAL.

CHAPTER III.

"La Sonnambula."

It may be easily imagined that the Marchese returned from the Corso very little disposed to take any pleasure in the treat to which all Ravenna was looking forward, and which he would have enjoyed more than any one else under other circumstances—the performance at the theatre on that Sunday evening. theless, the duty of attending it had to be done. Ravenna would have been astonished, and have wanted to "know the reason why," if the Marchese had been absent from his box on such an evening. "Society" expected it of him that he should be there, and he had been all his life doing everything that "society" expected of him; besides, his presence there really was needed, and poor little Ercole Stadione would have despaired inconsolably if he had been deprived, on such an occasion, of the support of his great friend and patron.

But if none of these reasons had existed—if the Marchese, when he reached the shelter of his own roof after that horrible Corso, had been entirely free to go to bed and escape the necessity of facing the eyes of all the world of Ravenna, which seemed to him to be from hour to hour growing into a more terrible ordeal, would he have *gone* to bed and abstained from attending the theatre?

It might have been very confidently predicted that he would not have done so. He began, in an unreasoning animal-like sort of way, to recognize the fact that every hour that he spent away from this woman was bare, barren, and of no value to him at all. He was conscious that he could be said to live only in her presence. He was beginning to give himself up as a lost man, and to acquiesce, half-stunned and stupid, in a fatality which he could not struggle against.

And now he was longing—burning not only to have his eyes on her again, but to speak to her. He would have plenty of opportunities of doing so at the theatre in the green-room, or in her dressing-room, and every minute seemed to him an age till he could find such an opportunity.

If he had been asked at that minute—if he had himself asked of his own mind—what he meant to do—to what future he was looking, whether he meant to marry La Lalli or to give her up, he would probably have repudiated either alternative with equal violence. His mind was in a state of chaos; and what was to come in any future, except the most immediate one, he had become incapable of considering. Now he was going to see, to hear, to breathe the same atmosphere with her again, and to go through the wretched task

of striving to behave as usual, and look as usual in the eyes of all Ravenna.

The performance was to commence at half-past eight o'clock, and the Marchese, reaching the theatre nearly half-an-hour before that time, found Bianca sufficiently nearly dressed for him to be admitted to her dressing-room. She was putting the finishing touches to the platting of her magnificent hair, after the fashion of a Swiss village-girl, for the completion of her toilette as Amina. He thought that, in this new costume, she looked more irresistibly attractive than he had yet seen her.

"Bianca," he said, as soon as her dresser had left her, and shut the door, "you have made me so miserable to-day. I must tell you openly at once what is in my heart. I saw, to-day, at the Corso—by no means intending to look at all at your carriage after it had passed mine—I saw my poor flowers thrown away by you, while you were throwing a bouquet to my nephew and receiving from him something thrown in return. Bianca, is that the conduct of a woman who has the very same morning accepted the hand of another man? Bianca, I warn you to beware; you do not know what such a love as mine, if it should discover itself to be betrayed, might be capable of."

"Marchese, do not look at me in that way; you frighten me, and what have I done? It is all a mistake, entirely a mistake!" said the poor Diva, really frightened at the manner of the Marchese.

"Did I not see you throw the flowers I had given you from your carriage; evidently for the purpose of gratifying another person?"

"Oh, Marchese! how is it possible that such a