THE OCTOROON

A STORY OF SLAVERY DAYS.

BY MISS M. E. BRADDON.

CHAPTER XXVI.

AT twelve o'clock upon the day after that on which Gerald Leslie and his daughter had been parted by the pitiless attorney, the slave auction commenced.

The sale was to take place in a public auction room in New Orleans; an apartment capable of containing upward of a hundred people.

At one end of this room stood the rostrum of the auctioneer, while immediately before his desk was stretched a long table of rough deal, upon which, one by one the slaves took their places, while the auctioneer expatiated upon their merits.

Round this table was placed benches, on which the buyers and lookers on lounged during the auction

The plantation hands were the first to be sold, and the sale had lasted for some hours when Toby, the mulatto, slowly mounted the table, and took his stand before the eager eyes of the buyers.

The countenance of the slave was sad and careworn; and, as he ascended the table, he looked anxiously round the room as if seeking among all those eager faces for some one he expected to see there.

But it was evident that he looked in vain, for, after a long and earnest scrutiny of that varied crowd, he sighed heavily, and his head sank upon his breast with a gesture of despair

The bidding lasted for some time, and the most persevering bidder was Silas Craig himself, who sat on a bench close to the table, and amused himself by whittling a stick with his bowie knife.

One by one the other purchasers gave way, and the mulatto fell to the attorney.

As the hammer of the auctioneer descended upon his desk, thus proclaiming that the bargain was complete, a singular expression illuminated the face of the slave, Toby.

That expression seemed one of mingled hate and triumph; and, as he descended from the platform, the hand of the mulatto mechanically sought for some object hidden in his breast.

That object was the knife with which Francilia had stabbed herself—the knife which Toby had offered the day before to Gerald Leslie.

The mulatto slowly withdrew into a corner where some other slaves purchased by Silas Craig were huddled together, awaiting the termination of the sale.

For some moments there was a pause. Several among the crowd asked what the next lot was to be. The voice of the auctioneer responded from his rostrum, "The Octoroon girl, Cora!"

Again there was a pause. There were few there who did not know the story of Gerald Leslie and his daughter, and every one present seemed to draw a long breath.

The Octoroon emerged from a group of slaves, behind whom she had been hidden, and slowly ascended the platform.

Never in her happiest day—never, when surrounded by luxury, when surfeited by adulation and respect, had Cora Leslie looked more lovely than to-day.

Her face was whiter than marble, her large dark eyes were shrouded beneath their drooping lids, fringed with long and silken lashes; her rich wealth of raven hair had been loosened by the rude hands of an overseer, and fell in heavy masses far below her waist; her slender yet rounded figure was set off by the soft folds of her simple cambric dress, which displayed her shoulders and arms in all their statuesque beauty.

One murmur of admiration spread through the assembly as the Octoroon took her place at the table.

All there had heard of the loveliness of Gerald Leslie's daughter, yet few had expected to see her so lovely.

Eyeglasses were raised, spectacles put on, and looks of insolent admiration were fixed upon the unhappy girl.

But she saw them not—the center of every eye, she was scarcely conscious of how much she had to endure. Her whole being was absorbed in one thought. Her father; would he come, would he rescue her?

When for one brief instant she lifted her eyes, the crowd of faces swam before her, as if hidden from her by a veil of mist.

The sounds of the many voices fell as confused murmurs upon her ears.

She was listening for the voice which should announce to her that help was near.

But that longed-for voice did not come, and she heard instead the harsh accents of the auctioneer dwelling upon the charms which were to be sold to the highest bidder.

At that moment two men entered the building from opposite doors.

One of these was Augustus Horton, the other Gilbert Margrave.

Gerald Leslie and the engineer had passed a night of utter wretchedness.

All the ready money that the ruined planter could command consisted of a few thousand dollars, and Gilbert Margrave had only the sum which he had brought with him for his traveling expenses.

To communicate with England was impossible, though the young man had ample resources there; he had also letters of credit on a banking-house in New York, but he well knew that nothing but ready money could save Cora from her infamous persecutors.

The entire sum at his command was a little over twenty thousand dollars.

Gilbert Margrave was the first to bid.

"Five thousand dollars!"

"Six thousand!" cried Augustus Horton.

A laugh circulated among the assembly. "I guess you begun a bit too low, stranger," said one of the planters.

"Seven thousand."

"Ten!" cried Augustus.

"Guess we'll teach you what a slave sale is, Britisher," said another man near Gilbert, cutting a lump of tobacco and thrusting it into his mouth.

Gilbert Margrave's cheek grew pale; he felt that the man he had to deal with was not to be beaten.

"Twelve thousand," "fifteen," "twenty."

For a moment there was a pause; Gilbert drew his breath. For one brief instant he thought that the planter's cause might be less powerful than his advice. He knew not that Augustus Horton's love for Cora was full of passionate determination.

"Twenty-two thousand dollars," cried the planter.

Gilbert was silent. Throughout this scene the Octoroon had never once lifted her eyes from the ground; but, at this ominous silence, she slowly raised them, and looked imploringly at her lover.

It was a glance of despair which answered this mute appeal. All hope was over.

"Strikes me your pretty well cleaned out, sirree," said one of the men who had spoken before.

The bidding continued, the excitement of the scene had become intense. Thirty, five-and-thirty, forty thousand dollars were bid; forty-five, fifty thousand.

The last bid came from Augustus Horton, and the auctioneer's hammer descended with an ominous sound.

Cora was his.

Gilbert Margrave sprang forward, as if he would have struck the planter, but a friendly hand was laid upon his shoulder, and he was dragged back by a group of Americans.

"Better keep your dander down, stranger," one of the men whispered in his ear, "our folks are not over fond of your countrymen just now, and they wouldn't make much work of taking out their bowie knives. Let him have the gal. Was there ever such a noise about a handsome slave?"

Augustus Horton walked up to the place where Gilbert was standing, surrounded by these men.

"I've beaten you before to-day, Mr. Margrave," he said, with a sneer, "and I think I've had the pleasure of giving you a second licking this afternoon."

Again Gilbert would have sprung upon him, but again he was restrained by those about him.

"We've another duel to fight yet, Mr. Horton," said the Englishman, "and in that you may not come off so easily."

"We citizens of New Orleans don't fight about colored gals," answered the planter, turning upon his heel, contemptuously, and walking toward the spot where Cora stood, side by side with Toby and the other slaves.

Gilbert Margrave released himself from the arms of those who held him.

"I must follow him," he said, "I must speak to him. I pledge you my honor that I will attempt no violence, but I tell you I must speak to him. Life and death hang on this matter. How can I go back to Gerald Leslie and tell the broken-hearted father that I was powerless to save his only child?"

Gilbert found Augustus standing at a little distance from the group of slaves contemplating Cora with the insolently admiring glance with which the master surveys his property.

She was no longer the woman who had scorned and defied him. She was his slave, his purchased slave, over whom the law gave him full and indisputable authority.

"Mr. Horton," said Gilbert, in a voice rendered hoarse by emotion, "let me speak to you for a few moments?"

The planter bowed superciliously. "Well, sir?" he said, as they withdrew to a solitary corner of the auction room.

"You are aware that had my means enabled me, I would have outbid you just now in the purchase of Miss Leslie."

Augustus Horton laughed aloud.

"Miss Leslie!" he repeated scornfully, "we don't call the slaves Miss and Mr. down south. I guessed you would like to outbid me for this Octoroon girl, Cora, but I'm happy to say you weren't able to do it. Had you bid a hundred thousand dollars, I'd have outbid you, and if you'd doubled that I'd have outbid you still. No man comes cheaply between Augustus Horton and his will."

"Tell me," said Gilbert, "tell me, what do you want with Mr. Leslie's daughter? Why do you want to become her master?"

Again Augustus laughed, and the hot blood mounted to Gilbert's cheek as he heard the mocking laughter.

"If it comes to that," said the planter, "why do you want her?"

"Because I love her."

"Then one answer will do for both of us," said Augustus. "I want her because I love her."

"No," cried Gilbert, "no, Mr. Horton. Do not sully the pure and holy name of Love by so base a blasphemy. Yours is the low passion of the profligate who seeks to destroy that which he pretends to love. Mine is the honorable sentiment of the man who seeks to bestow upon her he adores the sacred name of wife."

"You Britishers have another way of thin king to what we have in Louisiana," answered Augustus; "we don't marry our slaves. However, I've no wish to quarrel with other folks' opinions; the girl's mine and I don't mean to part with her, so good day to you, Mr. Margrave."

Gilbert laid his hand upon the planter's shoulder.

"One moment," he said. "The sum which I offered just now for Miss Leslie was the extent of the ready money I possess; but it was not one twentieth part of what I can command; communication with London, or even with New York, will bring me the funds I require. I ask you—as a gentleman appealing to a gentleman, upon a subject that is dearer to him than life—I ask you to do a great and generous action. Accept my note of hand for a hundred thousand dollars—double the sum you have just given—and let me restore Cora Leslie to her father?"

Augustus Horton shrugged his shoulders.

"I would be very glad to oblige you, Mr. Margrave," he said; "but as I don't happen to want money just now, and as I've a fancy for keeping the Octoroon, I beg to decline your liberal offer."

Gilbert Margrave glanced at him with a scornful smile.

"I appealed to you as a gentleman," he said. "I was mistaken. You shall hear from me to-night."

CHAPTER XXVII.

ON the night of the slave sale, Don Juan Moraquitos sat alone in the apartment which he called his study.

The following day was that appointed for the Spaniard's marriage with Pauline Corsi, and preparations had been made for the celebration of the ceremony with the splendor worthy of such a wealthy bridegroom.

Pauline and Camillia were together in the young girl's apartments.

On one of the sofas lay the dresses of white satin and lace, which the bride and bridemaid were to wear upon the following morning.

On a table near stood a box, which contained the wreaths selected by the Frenchwoman for herself and Camillia.

This box had not as yet been opened.

"Come, dearest Camillia," exclaimed Pauline; "have you no wish to see the Parisian flowers which are to adorn that beautiful head tomorrow? You certainly are most devoid of that feminine weakness—curiosity."

"I can trust to your taste, Pauline," answered Camillia.

"That's just as much as to say you don't care a straw about the matter; and that you are thinking of nothing but that stupid lover of yours, who is, no doubt, thousands and thousands of miles away."

Camillia sighed. Her face was averted, and she did not see the arch smile which lighted up the Frenchwoman's face. "However," continued Pauline; "I shall insist on your approving of my choice."

She unfastened the cord which was tied about the box; and, lifting the lid, took out the two wreaths.

They were both of the same pattern—coronet-shaped garlands of orange flowers and buds, purely white amidst their glistening green leaves; as true to nature as if they had been gathered from a hot-house, and breathing the delicious perfume of the flower.

They were the perfection of Parisian taste and art.

"Why, Pauline," exclaimed Camillia, "they are both bridal wreaths."

"Can you guess why it is?"

"No, indeed."

"Because there will be two brides tomorrow. I never break a promise. Tomorrow, Don Juan Moraquitos will divide his fortune; one half he will reserve for himself and his wife, the other he will give to his daughter and the husband of her choice."

"But, Pauline, how in Heaven's name will you accomplish this?"

"That is my secret. There is very little time left me for my work. It is now nine o'clock, I must go out immediately."

"Go out, and at this hour?"

"It is absolutely necessary."

"But, dear Pauline, you will have my carriage, you will let me accompany you?"

"Neither; I go on foot and alone."

She hurried from the room before Camillia could remonstrate further, and the Spanish girl, bewildered and amazed, seated herself near the table, looking musingly at the two bridal wreaths.

That night Silas Craig sat alone in the office in which was the map of America.

The lawyer had triumphed over the man who had scorned him.

He had seen Gerald Leslie's proud nature abased to the very dust, and the darling child of a doating father sold to her most deadly enemy; for the slave has no greater enemy than the hardened profligate, whose guilty passions her charms have awakened.

Silas Craig was a winner in the game of life—what cared he for the dark secrets upon the cards he had played?

He was rich, and he could defy mankind.

He had dined sumptuously after the fatigue of the slave sale, and the table before him was spread with glittering decanters of the choicest wines.

This man reveled in the luxuries of a palace; but he had risen from the gutter; and his low and groveling soul still wore the degradation of the foul haunts in which he had been reared.

He lounged in his easy-chair, sipping wine, which sparkled like melted jewels in the light of the shaded lamp.

He was disturbed from his reverie by the entrance of the slave who waited upon him.

"A lady, massa," said the man.

"A lady? a lady at this time of night? phsaw; why you must be dreaming."

"No, massa, me wide awake. A lady, a very beautiful lady, with white hands and rings, oh, golly! dey shine like stars."

"Did she tell you her name?"

"No, massa, but she gib me dis."

The negro handed Silas a card.

This card bore the name of Mlle. Pauline Corsi.

Beneath the card was written this warning:

"There are secrets which Silas Craig may wish to preserve; if so, he will do well to see Mlle. Corsi."

Like all base creatures, Silas was a coward. The card dropped from his trembling hand, and his bloated face grew ashy pale.

"Admit the lady," he said.

The slave left the room, and in a few minutes returned with Pauline Corsi.

During those few brief moments, Silas Craig had recovered from his first impulse of terror.

What could this woman know of his secrets?

Who was she but the paid dependent of Don Juan Moraquitos? He had nothing to fear, therefore.

All the native insolence of his nature returned, and when the governess entered the room, he neither rose from his seat nor offered her a chair.

The impertinence did not escape Pauline Corsi. With a smile of provoking assurance, she seated herself opposite to the lawyer, and threw back the dark veil that had shaded her face.

"We shall understand one another better, by-and-by, Mr. Craig," she said, quietly.

"May I ask the motive of this rather untimely visit?"

"We will come to that in good time, my dear sir," replied Pauline, laughing; "Perhaps there are several motives. Suppose then, that we begin with motive number one."

The lawyer writhed beneath her calm assurance.

"I must tell you, mademoiselle," he said, "that these ain't my business hours, and that if you've anything particular to say to me, you'd better call another time. Though I should think," he added insolently, "that the governess of Don Juan Moraquitos can't have much business with lawyers."

"But the wife of Don Juan Moraquitos may, Mr. Craig."

"The wife."

"Yes, I see your client does not give you his entire confidence. I am to become Pauline Moraquitos before twelve o'clock tomorrow."

The lawyer's cheek once more grew ashy pale. Again a sudden terror seized him. He felt that there was some mystery shrouded beneath this business, of which he now heard for the first time.

"I know the question which very naturally rises to your lips," said Pauline, with quiet deliberation. "You would ask what motive can have induced Don Juan Moraquitos to take such a step. A reply to that question before it is asked: The motive is a most powerful one."

Silas quailed beneath the look which accompanied these emphatic words.

Pauline Corsi had not boasted idly of the power of her will.

The guilty lawyer, versed in every art of lying and chicanery, trembled, he scarce knew why, in the presence of this frail girl.

"Do you ask the nature of this motive?" said Pauline.

"I do," he faltered, pouring out a glass of wine. His hand shook so violently that the neck of the decanter rattled against the rim of the glass, and he spilled half the costly liquid as he raised it to his quivering lips.

He had no reason to fear this Frenchwoman—but the strength of her indomitable will had a magnetic power over him, and his brutal nature bowed beneath its force.

"I will tell you, Silas Craig," answered Pauline, "those are three secrets which, once known, give to the person who discovers them a fearful and a beneficent power over the guilty wretches

whom they touch—a power that are discovered when least the criminals fear detection; words that are overheard and cherished for years by the person who overhears them; words which have power to drag the guilty to the scaffold; words that can kill. Do you understand me?"

"No."

He spoke doggedly, but sat with his hands clasped upon the arm of his easy-chair, his rat-like eyes almost starting from his head as he gazed at Pauline.

"Think again, Silas Craig," said the Frenchwoman; "surely I have spoken plainly? Can you not understand me?"

"No," he repeated with a terrible oath.

"I must speak more plainly still then, it appears. Silas Craig, thirteen years ago it was my good fortune to become acquainted with such a secret as this!"

The lawyer raised one of his trembling hands and wiped the perspiration from his icy forehead.

"Thirteen years," he muttered.

"Yes; I see you remember the date. I was a penniless girl of seventeen when I discovered this secret. I am now thirty; I have kept it long and patiently, have I not?"

He did not answer her.

"I have waited my time. I knew that this secret would bring me wealth and power whenever it was told. It concerns two men. Those two men are my slaves! At a word from me, they stand before the tribunals of this city branded with crime—loathed by their fellow citizens. A word from me, and they go from homes of luxury to the gloom of a prison, from which but a few steps will lead them to the gallows. Shall I tell you who those two men are, Silas Craig?"

"If you please."

He tried to speak with his accustomed insolent and mocking smile, but the white lips refused to do his will, and his words came in a hollow whisper.

"The first is Don Juan Moraquitos, the second is—you!"

The words seemed to whistle from her lips like the bullet of a pistol. The lawyer fell back in his chair as if he had received a blow.

"The secret concerns the night upon which Tomaso Crivelli died, and the will which on that night was forged by you, after the real will had been made away with. The secret also concerns the young man called Paul Lisimon. The man whom you dared to accuse of theft."

"How—how did you discover this?"

"No matter how. Enough that I did make the discovery. Shall I tell you now the price I ask for my secret?"

"Yes."

All attempts at insolence or defiance upon the part of the lawyer was now abandoned.

Silas Craig cowered before the Frenchwoman as humbly as the criminal who awaits the sentence of his judge.

"Don Juan Moraquitos will make me his wife and will share with me his own fortune. From him I ask no more than this. We shall leave America for Paris, and in the delight of my native city I shall endeavor to forget the sorrows of my youth. But although I am ambitious, I am not utterly selfish, and in my triumph I wish to secure the happiness of others. Those others are Camillia Moraquitos and the young man it has pleased Don Juan to call Paul Lisimon."

"How do they concern me?" asked Silas.

"You shall hear. By a foul and infamous plot, the details of which I do not know, but which is doubtless worthy of the person who has concocted it, you have contrived to brand the name of Paul Lisimon with infamy. You will reveal that plot. You will withdraw that shameful accusation; and you will insert an advertisement in every paper printed in New Orleans declaring the young man's innocence. You may call your plot a practical joke if you please. You are so universally beloved and respected that you will of course be believed. That is my first condition. Do you comply with it?"

Silas Craig bent his head. He had scarcely power to speak.

"My second demand is that you produce the real will, signed by Don Tomaso Crivelli, in which he leaves the whole of his estate to his only and legitimate son, Paul Crivelli, known in this city as Paul Lisimon."

Again the lawyer bent his head.

"In conjunction with Don Juan Moraquitos, you will restore to this young man the wealth of his father, which you divided into equal portions soon after Don Tomaso's death. You will find no difficulty with Juan Moraquitos. Pirate and adventurer as he has been, he is not so fortunate as you. He has still a conscience."

"Is that all?" gasped the lawyer.

"It is. I think we understand each other a little better now than we did half an hour ago. Good night."

She left the room before he could reply, and before he could summon the negro to usher her from the house.

It was nearly eleven o'clock when Pauline Corsi left the lawyer's office, but the streets were lighted brilliantly by the full moon which sailed high in the heavens. The Frenchwoman drew her veil closely over her face. She was dressed in dark garments, which shielded her from observation, and she hurried rapidly through the lonely streets.

About half-way toward her destination she met two men walking side by side, smoking cigars.

Suddenly she stopped, and, clasping her hand upon her heart, looked eagerly at the younger of these two men.

"It cannot be," she murmured; "it cannot be. It is the moonlight which deceives me."

At this moment they drew near a tavern, the door of which was brilliantly lighted.

The lamp-light fell upon the face of the younger man.

The two men entered the tavern, and Pauline Corsi remained a few paces from the threshold, looking after them.

"Can I be mistaken?" she said, "and yet it seems like some bewildering dream. I might—after thirteen weary years—and tonight!"

CHAPTER XXVIII.

THE same moonlight which illuminated the meeting of Pauline Corsi and the strangers in the streets of New Orleans, shone on the smooth bosom of the Mississippi, and on the white walls of the villa residence of Augustus Horton. The house and plantation of Hortonville were some miles from the wood in which the duel between Augustus and Gilbert had taken place.

The scenery which surrounded the villa was exquisitely beautiful, and the building itself, seen beneath the light of the moon, with its lamp-lit windows gleaming like pale gems in the glory of the summer's night, had the appearance of some fairy palace rather than any earthly habitation.

You might almost have expected to see these white walls melt into thin air and fade away from your gaze.

It was nearly midnight, and the planter's slaves slumbered and were at rest.

There were only two watchers in that luxurious habitation.

The first of these was Augustus Horton; the second was Cora, the Octoroon.

The unhappy girl had been brought from the auction room to Hortonville in Augustus's phaeton, the thoroughbred horses of which made brief work of the journey from New Orleans.

Adelaide Horton and her aunt, Mrs. Montresor, were still at their city residence.

Cora scarce dared to think why Augustus had chosen to take her to Hortonville, rather than to his town house.

The answer to that question was too terrible.

Could there be any doubt as to his motive in choosing this lonely villa for the retreat of the Octoroon?

Was it not that the wretched girl might be more fully in his power?

The chamber to which Cora had been conducted was even more luxuriously furnished than her own tastefully decorated apartment in the pavilion on the borders of Lake Pontchartrain, but the Octoroon looked at the splendor around her with a shudder.

She knew it was not thus that slaves were ordinarily treated, and she knew the sinister meaning of this seeming kindness.

The young mulattress who led Cora to her apartment informed her that she had been appointed to wait upon Miss Leslie.

Cora smiled bitterly.

"Who told you to call me Miss Leslie?" she asked.

"My master, Mr. Horton."

"Alas, my poor girl," answered Cora, "I am no longer Miss Leslie. I am a slave like yourself, with no name save that which my master chooses to give me. He has bought me; bought me at the auction yonder. Name, fame, happiness, honor, ay, and even soul—as he thinks—are his."

In the bitterness of her despair she buried her face in her hands and sobbed aloud.

The mulattress was touched to the heart by this burst of grief.

"My dear mistress, pray do not weep thus," she said. "You will be no slave here, I know; for our master had these beautiful rooms prepared on purpose for you, and you are to be treated as a queen."

"A queen!" said Cora, hysterically. "Yes, the empress of a profligate's hour of pleasure, to be trampled beneath his feet when the whim has passed. Go, my good girl; why should I distress you with my griefs. You can never understand my misery."

It was impossible, indeed, for this poor ignorant slave to comprehend the feelings of the highly educated and refined woman, torn from a father she adored, and from him who was to have rescued her from slavery and made her a happy English wife.

Cora dried her tears; and, affecting a calmness which she did not feel, dismissed the mulattress.

The girl had lighted a shaded lamp upon an elegant little inlaid table, and had brought a tray loaded with delicacies for Cora's refreshment, but the Octoroon turned with a sickened heart from the rich food set before her. She had eaten nothing that day, and her lips and throat were parched and burning with fever. She poured out a glass of [illegible] and drained the cool liquid drop. Then, throwing on [illegible] tian shutters, she looked out into the warm night.

"What if there were yet hope! What if she could escape?"

A thrill vibrated through her inmost soul as she asked herself those questions.

She fell on her knees, and lifting her clasped hands, exclaimed in an outburst of enthusiasm:

"Oh, Merciful and Beneficent Creator! I cannot believe that Thou wouldst utterly abandon the meanest of thy creatures. Even here, on the brink of terrors more hideous than the most cruel death. I still hope, I still believe that Thou wilt show me a way of deliverance!"

The Octoroon arose from her knees, a new creature after the utterance of this heart-felt prayer. Her very countenance seemed as if transfigured by the sublime emotions of the moment. A holy light shone from her tearless eyes; a faint flush of crimson relieved the pallor of her cheek.

"My father abandons me to my fate. Even he who was to be my husband can do no more to save me. It is to Heaven, then, that I turn, and to One above who is stronger than all earthly friends."

The apartment to which Cora had been conducted was on the upper floor of the villa; but the ceilings of the lower chambers were far from lofty, and the window from which the Octoroon looked was scarcely eleven feet from the ground. Under this window ran a rustic colonnade with slender pilasters, round which hung the leaves and blossoms of the luxuriant creeping-plants familiar to the South. The roof of this colonnade formed a balcony before Cora's window.

For some moments the Octoroon stood at the open casement, gazing on the scene beneath her, lost in thought.

"If I remain in this house," she murmured, "I am utterly in the power of that base man. Another moment, and he may enter this chamber; again I may hear those words which are poison to my soul; and this time he may force me to listen to his infamous proposals. All those beneath this roof are the slaves of his will—it were hopeless, then, to look for help from them; but beneath that purple vault I might surely be safer; and at the worst the river is near at hand."

She shuddered as she spoke. To this girl, religiously educated, there was something horrible in the idea of suicide. It seemed a doubt of Providence even to think of this worst and last resource.

But on one thing she had determined, and that was to escape from the house to the gardens below; once there, she might find her way to some adjoining plantation, where she might meet with some benevolent creature who would interfere to shield her from her hated master.

It was not slavery she feared, it was dishonor.

The rope with which she had been bound still hung to one of her wrists. This rope might be the means of saving her.

She examined the door of her chamber and found that it was locked on the outside.

"So much the better," she thought; "he believes his prisoner to be safe. He thinks that I would not dare a leap of a few feet even to escape from him. How little he knows of a woman's power in the moment of desperation!"

She hurried to the balcony, and attached the cord, which was about five feet long, to the iron railing, then with the help of this cord she dropped lightly to the ground.

She lighted unhurt upon the soft earth of a flower-bed, but the slender ropes broke with her weight, and the best part of it remained in her hand.

She was free!

Free did she think, when still within a few paces of her master?

Swift as the wind she flew from the villa in the direction of the river-side,

scarce knowing which path she took in her eagerness to escape.

Her footsteps made no sound upon the dewy turf, and she did not hear another footstep hurrying close behind her.

A broad lawn stretched before her, and beyond that a thick plantation.

Her anxiety was to reach this friendly shelter, for the moonlight night was bright and clear as day, and she trembled lest she should be perceived from the windows of the villa.

She was nearing the plantation when an iron hand was laid upon her shoulder, and turning round with a scream of mingled anguish and terror, she confronted Augustus Horton bare-headed in the moonlight.

He had watched her escape from the window of his own apartment, and had lingered long enough to allow her to imagine herself free before he had left the house in pursuit of her.

"So, Cora," he said, "this is the way you repay me for my foolish indulgence. This is how you show your gratitude for being received at Hortonville like a princess! Do you know how we treat runaway slaves in the south?"

"No," answered Cora, with a look of defiance.

"Oh! you don't; I'm afraid they neglected your education in England. But why, why, Cora, do you compel me to use this language? It is not the right of a master that I would exercise, but that of a lover."

"You forget," replied Cora, with icy coldness, "that I love, and am beloved by an honorable man, who would make me his wife."

"It is you who must forget that, Cora," answered Augustus, fiercely. "Henceforth, Gilbert Margrave and you are strangers. You are mine. I have kept my promise; I have given the fifty thousand dollars owed me by your father as the price of this moment. But it is not as a master that I address you. The rigors of slavery are not for you. Reward my devotion with one smile, one word of encouragement, and a life of luxury shall be yours; but, if you value your own happiness, do not force me to remember—"

"That I am your slave. Pardon me, Mr. Horton, it is that which I would not forget; but, as my education has left me very ignorant, I must beg you to teach me the duties of a slave."

"Those duties are told in one word, Cora," replied the planter, "and that word is submission! absolute and unquestioning submission to every wish of the master. Blind obedience to every word, to each command, however revolting to the will of the slave. Body and soul, Cora, you are mine. Shriek, and your voice will echo through the plantation, but will awake no answer; for those who alone could hear it are slaves like yourself, and powerless to help you. Cease this mad folly, then, and thus let me—"

He advanced as if to encircle her in his arms, but the Octoroon stepped back a few paces, and raising the cord which she held in her right hand, addressed him thus:

"One step further, and it is I who will inflict upon you the chastisement of a slave, by striking you across the face."

As Cora uttered these words, a whistle resounded through the plantation, near the spot upon which she and the planter stood, and in another moment two dark figures emerged from the shade of the trees.

Before Augustus could interpose, Cora had [illegible] men, and carried into the plantation, while the other grasped the shoulder of the planter with a hand of iron.

The moonlight on this man's face revealed his identity to Augustus.

"Gilbert Margrave!" he exclaimed.

"Ay, Gilbert Margrave, the affianced husband of the woman you would have destroyed. You refused today to accede to the appeal made by one gentleman to another. You gave me the answer of a ruffian; tonight it is I who use the ruffian's argument, force!"

"The law shall make you pay dearly for this," cried Augustus, hoarse with rage.

"Be it so. I am willing to suffer the worst penalty the laws of Louisiana can inflict upon me, rather than sacrifice the honor of my affianced wife."

The man who had seized Cora, disappeared beneath the shade of the trees. Gilbert tried to follow him, but Augustus Horton sprang toward him, with an open bowie knife in hand.

"I am armed," cried Gilbert, "and wrong has made me desperate, follow me at your peril."

He bounded through the brushwood, and reached the bank of the river, by the side of which was moored a boat, with three men, who held their oars, ready to strike the water at the first signal.

The man carrying Cora had already taken his place at the stern of the boat; Gilbert sprang in after them, the oars dipped into the water, and before Augustus Horton reached the brink of the river, the boat had shot out toward the center of the stream.

Upon his own estate, and within a few hundred yards of a regiment of slaves, the planter had been defied and defeated in his hour of triumph.

The Octoroon had fainted from the excitement of the moment, but the cool breeze from the river quickly restored her to consciousness.

When she re-opened her eyes, she found herself reclining on the shoulder of the man who had seized her.

That man was her father, Gerald Leslie.

CHAPTER XXIX.

THE two men whom Pauline Corsi met on her way from the house of Silas Craig to the Villa Moraquitos, are not entirely strangers to us.

We saw them last in the solitude of California, living a life of labor, far from all civilized society.

They only reached New Orleans upon the evening after the slave auction, and when Pauline Corsi met them, they were in search of a hotel where they could spend the night.

In outward appearance, they were very much altered from the day when we last beheld them.

Their rough garments were exchanged for the fashionable attire of gentlemen, and their bearing harmonized well with the change in their costume.

Let us return to the moment when Pauline Corsi met these two gold-diggers.

They entered the hotel, and were immediately conducted to a handsomely furnished, and brilliantly lighted apartment upon the first floor.

The elder of the two men, the one who had called himself Smith, flung himself into an easy chair, after dismissing the waiter with an order for a couple of bottles of claret and seltzer water, and looked complacently round the room.

The younger man walked to the open window, from which he watched the receding form of Pauline Corsi, who, after observing the two men enter the hotel, hurried onward toward the end of the