

and cushioned in white satin, Montgelas?" said he to his chamberlain.

"Yes, your highness."

"Say to the gondoliers that we follow in its track. Whether we see the regatta or not is of no consequence, so we keep in view of that Venus in the conch-shell."

The Marquis de Villars had pretended to be in earnest conversation with his neighbor, but he heard every word of this order.

"Yes, indeed," thought he. "The countess must be bought, if her price be a million."

Lucretia vouchsafed not a glance that could be detected at her pursuers; but she saw every thing, and exulted at her conquest. "Oh, emperor's daughter, emperor's daughter!" said she, "your husband is falling into my toils. They say you are handsome, but your elector's eyes tell me that I am handsomer than you!"

And so she beguiled her solitude, while in the bucentoro Laura still lay in her swoon, and Strozzi gazed enamoured upon her beauty.

"Beautiful as Aurora!" murmured he, "beautiful as a dew-gemmed rose; beautiful as the evening star! I love you—I love you to madness, and you must, you shall be mine!"

He bent over her, and, now that she had no power to resist him, he covered her face with passionate kisses. But his kisses restored her to life, and with a shudder she raised her hands, and threw him off.

"Touch me again, and I will plunge this dagger in your false heart!" cried she, drawing a poniard from her bosom.

"I would not care, so I could say that you were mine before I died!"

"Would that you *were* dead, that I might fly to him whose wife I am, in the sight of Heaven!"

"Put up your dagger," said Strozzi, coldly, while a look of venom chased away the love that had beamed in his eye. "I will not trouble you again."

"You have betrayed me a second time, liar and impostor that you are!" exclaimed Laura, replacing her dagger. "You have deceived my lover into the belief that I am false to him,

but, believe me, he shall know the truth. God will protect him from you and your bravi, and He will avenge my wrongs! Now, order these curtains to be raised. It is better to be gazed at by the multitude, some of whom have hearts and souls, than to sit in this pavilion within sight of you! And bid your gondoliers take me home to my prison, where, God be thanked! I can sometimes be alone with my own thoughts!"

Strozzi obeyed like a cowed hound. He lifted the curtains, and ordered the men to row to the palace.

Laura's eyes sought the gondola of her lover, but she could not see it. It had left the regatta, and had already landed at the stairs of the Palazza Capello.

## CHAPTER VI.

### THE NEGOTIATOR.

COUNTRESS LUCRETIA CANOSSA had just risen, and lay reclining on a faded ottoman, attired in a *négligé*, which was any thing but elegant, or appropriate to a beauty. She had rung several times for her breakfast, but her waiting-maid had not seemed to hear the summons, for nobody came at the call.

The countess, however, was so absorbed in her day-dreams, that she forgot her breakfast. For a time her thoughts dwelt upon the singular scene that had taken place in the bucentoro. She knew nothing of the complications relating thereunto; she had but witnessed the approach of the gondola which she supposed to be that of her sister-in-law's lover; had seen her brother's extraordinary excitement, and had guessed that some disappointment connected with the presence of the insignificant little personage in that gondola had caused Laura to fall into a swoon. She felt sincerely sorry for her unhappy sister-in-law, but the countess was not inclined to sentiment; so she dismissed the mystery of Laura's troubles with a sigh, and fell to thinking of the Elector of Bavaria.

He had followed her all day, and well had she perceived that he had had eyes for no one but herself. And when she



had affected to weary of his pursuit, he had left his own gondola for that of Count Cornaro, who had approached and asked permission to present his distinguished guest. The permission having been accorded as a matter of course, the elector had entered into an animated conversation with her, which lasted until the close of the regatta.

She had met him again that evening, at a ball given by Admiral Mocenigo to the foreign princes. Many a handsome, gay gallant was there; but the handsomest and most admired of them all was Max Emmanuel of Bavaria. His dress, too, was magnificent in the extreme. It was so covered with diamonds that it was like a dazzling sea of light. But more splendid than his jewels were the flashing eyes which, during that whole festival, had been fixed in admiration upon the beautiful Lucretia; and what was still more delightful was the fact that everybody had observed it, and that many a dame, who had eclipsed the Countess of Canossa, and slighted her because of her poverty, had envied her the conquest of the Bavarian prince's heart. It had all ended as it should have done. Max Emmanuel had asked permission to call upon her, and he was to make his visit at one o'clock that day.

Lucretia had advanced so far in her triumphal course, when she cast a glance of dismay at her mean, faded furniture.

"Oh, how forlorn it looks!" said she. "And to think that this is the only room wherein I can receive a visit! for not another apartment in the palace contains a chair whereon a man might take a seat. I ought not to have yielded to my vanity, and consented to receive him at home, for, when he sees my poverty, he will no longer think my heart worthy of being won. He will believe that it can be bought, and I shall sink in his estimation to the level of an ordinary courtesan. I must be proud and reserved to-day with him; and, as I have naught else to display, I must show off my wardrobe. But where can Marietta be? Perhaps Count Canossa has gambled her away, and she has gone off like the rest of the appointments of this dreary palace."

Lucretia rang again; still there was no answer.

"The poor girl must have gone out to get me some breakfast. I had forgotten that the cook left us because he had not

been paid for a year; and, as there is nobody else here, I must e'en have patience until Marietta returns."

Lucretia sighed, and fell back upon her ottoman. For some time past she had been aware that there was considerable bustle in the palace, attended by hammering, and the sound of furniture either placed or displaced. She had paid very little attention to it, for the rooms were entirely empty, and she could only conjecture that her needy spouse might have rented them out for the carnival. But the noise came nearer and nearer, until she perceived that it had reached the adjoining chamber, whence she could hear the sound of voices, and distinguish much that was said.

She rang again, and this time the door was opened by some invisible hand, when Marietta, bearing in her hand a large silver waiter, advanced to a rickety table which stood near the ottoman, and placed upon it a most delicate breakfast, served in dishes of costly, chased silver. Not only the service was superb, but Marietta herself was attired in a costume which shamed the shabbiness of her high-born mistress.

Begging the countess's pardon for her unpunctuality, the maid proceeded to pour out the chocolate, which she handed in a cup of Sèvres porcelain.

Lucretia rubbed her eyes. "Where, in the name of Aladdin, did you get that dress?—And where this service?"

"The dress was brought to me this morning, my lady, and the mantua-maker told me that it had been ordered by yourself; the jeweller who brought the services of silver told me the same thing."

"I!" cried the countess. "I order such costly things?"

"Why, yes, my lady, for the upholsterers have almost arranged the beautiful furniture you bought yesterday."

The countess smiled. "This is a prank of some carnival-mad jester, child," said she. "There is not a word of truth in it. I wish there were!"

"It is as true as that there are at least fifty workmen in the palace at this very moment," was Marietta's reply.

Lucretia made no answer. She sprang from her ottoman, and, crossing the room, threw open the door leading into the next saloon.



Marietta had spoken the sober truth. There they were all—fifty—some hanging satin curtains before the bare windows, others placing lofty mirrors in the recesses; one detachment uncovering the gilded furniture, another arranging it, while the last folds of a rich Turkey carpet were being smoothed in the corners of the room, where dainty tables held vases of costly workmanship, filled with rare flowers.

At first the countess had been struck dumb and motionless. Recovering herself, however, after a moment or two, she went hastily up to the person who seemed to direct the proceedings, and accosted him:

"Will you oblige me by saying who ordered all this furniture?"

"Her ladyship, the Countess de Canossa," was the man's reply.

"Are you acquainted with the countess?" asked Lucretia.

"No, madame; I have not that honor."

"Then, how do you know that you are acting by her orders?"

"I received them yesterday through her steward."

"Her steward? And have you seen him since?"

"Yes, madame. He came again this morning very early, to see whether we were punctual. It was all to be completed by one o'clock, and, as it is not quite ten, you perceive that we will certainly have done in time. But I must ask you to see the countess and request permission for the workmen to be admitted to her boudoir. Will you be so good as to convey the message?"

Lucretia cast a glance of shame at her faded gown. "He does not know me," thought she, "and how should he in such a guise?" Then she added, aloud, "I will apprise the countess."

Marietta was now in the dressing-room, whither she requested the presence of her mistress immediately.

"What is it?" asked the bewildered Lucretia.

"The dressmaker is there, signora, to see if your dresses are to your taste," replied Marietta.

"Let me see them," cried she, impatiently.

Marietta drew from a box a dress of pink satin, which,

from its make, was evidently intended for an under-skirt. "There is another, just like it, of blue satin," exclaimed the enraptured lady's maid, "and here is a box containing two peignoirs of guipure, with morning caps to match. How beautiful your ladyship will look in these *négligés*!"

"We will see at once whether I do," answered Lucretia, clapping her hands with joy. "Here Marietta—quick! Help me off with this hateful gown, and hand me the pink-satin petticoat."

In a few moments the mistress and maid were equally happy, while the former was being decked in her magnificent *négligé*. The satin petticoat was loose; and over it was thrown the guipure peignoir which reached to the throat, and was confined at the waist by a pink sash. The full sleeves were open, leaving half-covered, half-exposed, Lucretia's arms, firm and white as Carrara marble.

"Now this love of a lace cap," cried Marietta, placing it with great coquetry around the black braids of Lucretia's glossy hair; while the latter, quite reconciled to the wonders that were being enacted around her, was profoundly engaged in admiring herself in a looking-glass.

"And now," said Marietta, "you are ready, and certainly you are as lovely as a fairy."

"Fairy, say you? Yes; that seems to be the appropriate name for one who is the recipient of such extraordinary riches as these. But now, Marietta, whence do they come? Are they from my brother?"

"Signora, I know no more than I have told you. Yesterday a gentleman (I think he must have been a Frenchman) came hither, announced himself as an architect, and told me that your ladyship had sent him to examine the palace, with a view to refurnishing it with great magnificence."

"Did you take him over the rooms?"

"Of course I did, my lady. He took various notes as he went along, and remained longer in your boudoir than in any room in the palace. He sat down and made a drawing of it, asking me, now and then, a question as to your ladyship's tastes and habits."

"Gracious Heaven!" exclaimed the countess, while a pain-



ful blush overspread her face, "has *he* been here to see my need and hear of my privations? Can *he* have been the secret giver of all this magnificence?"

As the possibility that the Elector of Bavaria was her unknown benefactor, presented itself to Lucretia's mind, her humiliation grew extreme; for if these gifts were from him, they proved that he held the daughter of the noble house of Strozzi to be a creature that was to be bought with gold, without the poor pretence of one word of love.

"When came he, and what sort of looking man was he?" asked she, frowning.

"He came just after the regatta had begun, signora."

"Then, God be praised, it was not *he*!" said Lucretia to herself, "for at that hour, he was with me, in Count Cornaro's gondola."

A faint knock was heard at the door, and the *décorateur* begged permission to enter. His coming awakened the countess from her reverie, and she hastily bade him come in, "for," said she, "it must be almost one o'clock."

"The clock on the mantel of the drawing-room has just struck eleven, your ladyship," replied the man, who, now that she was richly dressed, recognized the lady of the house.

"So," thought Lucretia, "I have a clock!" and she bounded off to the drawing-room to see it. Marietta followed with the chocolate, which, in the excitement of the moment, had been forgotten.

"True," said the countess. "bring me my breakfast, and let me take it here in this beautiful apartment. Who is that at the door?" added she, as Marietta went forward to open it.

"Your ladyship's butler," replied she. "He comes to know whether the *déjeuner à la fourchette* is to be served in the boudoir or in the banqueting-hall."

"Let it be in the banqueting-hall, for I may have several guests."

"The steward ordered it for one o'clock, my lady. He said that you expected some guests of distinction."

"My steward?" repeated Lucretia, smiling. "So it seems that I have an entire household. Let us go over our altered domains, Marietta." And the two went from room to room,

the *femme de chambre* as delighted as her mistress, until they descended as far as the kitchen. Here every thing gave evidence that the *déjeuner* was to be a rare one. Two cooks, in white, presided over the arrangements, and two scullions were busy carrying out the orders of the chief. They were so absorbed in their business, that they did not perceive the countess who stood in the door.

Presently from the storeroom opposite there emerged a man with baskets of bottles, which he deposited on the table, saying:

"Here is Burgundy for the Bayonne ham. The champagne, sherry, and constantia, are for the table."

The countess had now seen and heard enough. Not only was her palace fitted up, but her kitchen was in order, and her wine-cellar filled. So she returned to the drawing-room, where she was met with the tidings that her boudoir was ready for occupation, and nothing now remained to be done, unless her ladyship had any alterations to suggest, or deficiencies to point out.

Her ladyship professed herself satisfied, and then came a moment of embarrassment. "As regards the payment—"

"Oh, signora, the steward is to meet me at twelve o'clock, to arrange that matter." And with these words he took his leave.

"I ought to have followed him," thought Lucretia, "to solve this agreeable riddle, by making acquaintance with my steward. But pshaw! I shall soon know all about it. Nobody has made me these presents without intending to get a word of thanks for the benefaction."

She had scarcely seated herself in a new and beautiful ottoman, which had replaced her faded, rickety old couch, before a servant appeared and announced,

"Her ladyship's steward!"

"My ladyship's steward!" echoed Lucretia. "Do let us make his acquaintance."

He came in—a small, slender man, apparently young, with a pair of twinkling black eyes, and a countenance expressive of great energy. With the air of a finished gentleman he bowed, advanced, and bowed again.



"Signor," said the countess, "you have been announced by a title which I have no right to bestow upon any person living—that of my steward. Pray tell me who you are."

"Gracious countess," answered he, smiling, "I have the honor to present myself. I am the Marquis de Villars, ambassador of his majesty the King of France to the court of Bavaria."

"And may I ask why, in addition to your other representative titles, you have assumed that of steward to the Countess of Canossa?"

"Because, signora, seeing that your habitation was not worthy of you, I have ventured to perform the duties of a faithful steward, by fitting it up in a manner which I hope is agreeable to the divinity at whose shrine the elector is now a worshipper?"

"Did the elector suggest—" began Lucretia, reddening.

"Oh no, signora; he knows nothing of the little surprise I have prepared for you. It does not concern him at all."

"Then I am to suppose that Count Canossa, having gambled away my very home, this palace has become your property, and I am here on sufferance. How long may I remain?"

"How long may you remain in your own home! Signora, all that you see has been done for you, in your own name, and I hope you will do me the honor to accept it."

"From whom?"

"You shall learn as soon as we understand each other, signora."

"Then let us come to an understanding at once, for the Countess Canossa does not receive princely gifts from strangers."

"Of course not, nor would a stranger take so unpardonable a liberty with a lady of her rank and birth. But before going further, let me assure you, signora, that you are under obligations to nobody for the little surprise I have prepared for you. Not in the least to me, for I am but the representative of him who begs your acceptance of it."

"You speak in riddles," said Lucretia, with a shrug. "But, at all events, I understand that this furniture, silver, and these rich dresses, are mine?"

"Assuredly yours, signora."

"Then let me inform you that in a week, at farthest, they will go, as they came, in the space of a few hours. Count Canossa will have lost them at the gaming-table, and the palazzo will be in the same condition as it was yesterday."

"Count Canossa is powerless to touch the least portion of your property, signora."

"Powerless? How! Are you a sorcerer, and have you changed him into stone? Or have you spirited him away?"

"I have spirited him away, signora. I have persuaded him by the eloquence of gold to forsake Venice, forever. As long as he remains in Paris, he is to receive a yearly pension from the King of France."

"Gone to Paris! Pensioned by the King of France!" exclaimed Lucretia.

"Gone, signora; and, in leaving, he desired me to say to you that he hoped you would forgive all the unhappiness he had caused you since your marriage."

"Gone! Gone! Am I then free?" cried Lucretia, starting from her ottoman, and grasping the hand of the marquis.

"Yes, signora. You are free to bestow your heart on whomsoever you will. Count Canossa will never molest you more."

"Oh how I thank you! How I thank you!" replied she, her beautiful eyes filling with tears of joy. "But tell me," added she, after a short pause—"tell me, if you please, the meaning of all this providential interference with my domestic affairs?"

"I am ready, signora," said the marquis, waiting for the countess to resume her seat, and then placing himself at her side. "Perhaps in your leisure hours you may have interested yourself in European politics."

"Not I," said Lucretia, emphatically.

"Then allow me to enlighten you on the subject," replied the marquis.

"To what end?" inquired she, impatiently.

"I will not detain you long, signora. Give me but a few moments of your attention. Doubtless you have heard that



the Emperor of Austria, for several years past, has been at war with the Porte?"

Lucretia nodded, and the marquis went on. "Perhaps it will interest you to know that the Elector of Bavaria is an ally of the emperor, and has distinguished himself greatly, particularly at the siege of Buda."

"Oh, I can believe it," cried she, with animation. "He looks like a hero. Tell me, pray, something about his exploits."

"Later, signora, with pleasure; but for the present we must discuss politics. Now the Emperor of Austria is fast getting the better of the Sultan; and if the latter should succumb in this war, the former would not only be left with too much power for the good of Europe generally, but would become a dangerous rival to the King of France. Now it is important for my sovereign that the victories of Austria cease, and that Austria's power wax no greater. Have I expressed myself clearly? Do you understand?"

"I begin to understand," was the reply.

"Now, there are various ways of crippling the resources of Austria; for example, her allies might be estranged. Have patience, signora; in a few moments my politics will grow personal and interesting. One of the emperor's most powerful allies is the Elector of Bavaria."

"Of course," cried Lucretia, delighted with the turn that politics were taking. "Of course he is, being the emperor's son-in-law. Tell me about the elector's wife. Is she handsome? Does he love her?"

"Signora, as regards your latter question, the elector himself will have great pleasure in answering it. As regards the former, the Archduchess Antonia is handsome, but sickly, and her ill-health has lost her the affection of her husband."

"Ah!" cried Lucretia, relieved, "he does not love her."

"He loves her no longer," said the marquis. "But he was greatly taken by the charms of the Countess Kaunitz; and as the elector's alliance with Austria was a matter of more importance than his conjugal relations with the archduchess, the husband of the fair countess was appointed ambassador to Bavaria, and his wife ambassadress. It was through the influ-

ence of this charming ambassadress that Max Emmanuel joined the forces of Austria."

"So he has a mistress, then? One whom he loves?"

"Whom he loved until he saw the Countess Canossa."

"Do you think I could supplant her?" exclaimed Lucretia, her large eyes darting fire at the thought.

"I do not doubt it," was the flattering reply. "If you choose, you can trample under foot this arrogant Austrian, who flatters herself that Max Emmanuel is all her own."

"I would like to try," cried Lucretia, with the air of an amazon about to go into battle.

"Then let me offer my services," said the marquis, bowing. "The elector is peculiar, and has pretensions to be loved for his own sake; therefore he would never quite trust the disinterested affections of a woman whom he had power to raise from poverty to affluence."

"Ah!" cried Lucretia, with a significant bend of the head. "Now I begin to apprehend your meaning as well as your munificence."

"Signora," said De Villars, with equal significance, "the King of France seeks a friend who will alienate the elector from Austria, and win him for France. Will you accept the trust?"

"But you said that he loved another woman."

"So much the greater will be your glory in the conquest, for the countess is beautiful and fascinating."

"Is she in Venice?"

"Wherever the elector goes, thither she is sure to follow."

"She must leave Venice; she must be forced to leave!" cried the vindictive Italian, ready to hate the woman whom Max Emmanuel loved.

"You must do better. Induce the elector to forsake her, and leave her in Venice like another *Didone abbandonata*, while you carry him in triumph back to Munich."

"I will, indeed I will!" exclaimed Lucretia, exultingly.

"Ah, signora," said the marquis, coaxingly, "what a magnanimous and disinterested nature you display! You accede to my request without naming conditions. Allow me to ad-



mire your nobleness, and believe me when I say that my royal master shall hear of it."

"Well, tell him that, if it lies in my power, Max Emmanuel shall learn to dislike Austria and love France."

"Signora, you are the instrument of a great purpose. I give you a whole year wherein to work; and if, at the end of that time, you have prevailed upon the elector to sign a treaty of alliance with France, *you*, as one of France's noblest allies, shall receive from my royal master one million of francs. Meanwhile you shall have ten thousand francs a month for pin-money."

"Alas!" said Lucretia, "I am forced to accept; for my husband has so effectually impoverished me that I live on the bounty of my brother. And he is so arrogant that I am almost as glad to be independent of him as to be delivered from my detestable husband. I shall endeavor to let my acts speak my gratitude for the deliverance."

"Allow me, signora, to present you with your pocket-money for this present month, and give me a receipt in the shape of your fair hand to kiss."

So saying, he laid a purse of gold at Lucretia's feet, and covered her hand with kisses.

"I shall want to consult you frequently, dear marquis," observed Lucretia.

"I shall always be at your service."

"And now, I take it as a matter of course, that what has passed between us this morning is to remain a profound secret."

"As a matter of course, signora, it goes no further," returned De Villars, \* "and to insure perfect secrecy, you must pretend not to know me when we meet abroad. Not even the elector—or, perhaps I should say, above all men, the elector is not to know of my visit. I must, therefore, take my leave, for—hark! your clock strikes one, and lovers are sure to be punctual."

"I shall expect you every morning at eleven; and so we can take counsel together, and I can report daily progress to you."

\* "Memoirs of the Marquis de Villars," vol. i., p. 104.

"Aurevoir, then, signora. Allow me one word more. If, before the close of the carnival, you leave Venice in company with the elector, I shall take the liberty of refunding to you the entire cost of the refurnishing of your palace to-day, as compensation for its temporary loss. And now, fairest of the allies of France, adieu!"

The French ambassador had hardly time to make his escape, before the doors of the drawing-room were flung open, and the lackey announced, "His highness the Elector of Bavaria!"

## CHAPTER VII.

### THE LOVERS REUNITED.

Two weeks had elapsed since that unhappy meeting between Eugene and Laura—two weeks of expectation and hope frustrated. In vain had Eugene attempted to reach her with a message; in vain had he remained for hours before her windows; in vain had Antonio tried to penetrate into her presence. Day after day came the same sorrowful news: the marchioness was very ill, and no one was allowed to pass the threshold of the palace. Her husband watched day and night at her bedside, and, excepting Mademoiselle Victorine, no living creature was allowed to enter her room.

When, for the fourteenth time, Antonio returned unsuccessful from his mission, Eugene became so agitated and grew so pale that the bravo was touched to the heart, and, taking the prince's hand, covered it with kisses.

"Do not be so cast down, excellenza," said he, imploringly; "have courage, and hope for the best."

"Oh, Antonio!" murmured the prince, "she is dead!"

"No, excellenza, no! I swear to you that she lives, nor do I believe one word of this rumored illness."

"Why should you not believe it, my friend?"

"Because I know the marquis well; and this is merely a pretext for keeping his wife imprisoned."

"Thank you, Antonio, thank you," replied Eugene, "for