

"Great God!" was the minister's exclamation. "She has given herself up to shame! She lives publicly as the mistress of a man who was not worthy to become her husband! Your royal highness must have been misinformed."

"I have it from herself, nevertheless."

"And your royal highness, that bears the name of the most virtuous woman in Paris, is not shocked at her unchastity?"

"Unchastity! You talk of unchastity, who, while she was plighting her troth to this same Eugene, were not ashamed to prostitute her to Strozzi! Cease your disgusting cant, and learn that I acknowledge and respect the tie that binds your daughter to her real spouse: and woe to you, if you dare trouble the current of her peaceful life! Farewell. Say to his majesty that I shall be forever grateful for the deliverance of Trier."

"Philip," added she, when Louvois had left the room, "forgive me, beloved son, if I sacrificed you to the well-being of my oppressed countrymen! You say that your affianced is stupid; but every weary hour you spend in her society shall be repaid to you by the blessings of those whom you have saved from assassination. Moreover, Mademoiselle de Blois is not yet your bride, and many a thing may intervene to prevent you from being forced to espouse her. If your mother can do any thing to frustrate it, be sure that she will come to your assistance. Her consent was wrung from her, 'tis true—but not her willingness."

"Laura the mistress of Eugene of Savoy!" muttered Louvois, as he descended the marble staircase of the ducal palace. "And to propitiate that royal virago, I dare not revenge myself! But no!" said he suddenly, "no—I need not lift a finger. I will leave it to Barbesieur; *he* will attend to it. He will put an end to her infamous life!"

## CHAPTER VIII.

## BRAVE HEARTS.

THE embassy of Prince Eugene to Turin had been attended with the happiest results. His arguments in favor of the emperor had proved irresistible, for he had worked upon the pride as well as the ambition of his kinsman. He had addressed him as a "royal highness;" had promised him accession of territory; and finally had imparted to him a diplomatic secret which decided him at once to join the imperialists. In the event of any manifestation on the part of Victor Amadeus that was friendly toward the emperor, Louvois had ordered Marshal Catinat to take him prisoner, confine him in the fortress of Pignerolles, and appoint the duchess-dowager Regent of Savoy.

The astounding insolence of the French minister gained a zealous partisan for Leopold. "I am yours and the emperor's forever," cried the indignant duke. "And from my heart I hope that we may both have speedy opportunity to avenge the wrongs we have sustained at the hands of Louis XIV. and that atrocious villain—Louvois."

"As for my wrongs," replied Eugene, with a beaming smile, "they are all forgotten in my excess of happiness."

"So, then, you are happy at last?" asked Victor Amadeus, kindly.

"Supremely blest," was Eugene's emphatic reply.

"Supremely blest?" repeated the duke, shaking his head. "Pardon me if I think otherwise. Do you not think that you could be made happier by obtaining the sanction of the church to your liaison with the Marchioness de Strozzi?"

"I would be the proudest and happiest of created beings if I could call her my wife," sighed Eugene. "And since the subject has been broached between us, I will confide in you. I have written to the pope an account of Laura's fraudulent marriage with Strozzi, and I hope that his holiness will recognize the unlawfulness of that wicked transaction. It seems to me impossible that Religion should look upon it otherwise than as an act of falsehood."



"You have no answer as yet from Rome?"

"I expect an answer to-day; and now, that the crisis of my Laura's destiny is at hand, I begin to be timorous as to the success of my petition. The pope is not my friend; I have upheld the Waldenses against the church, and have sought their alliance for Austria. These, I know, are serious offences; and not less displeasing to his holiness will be the news of your defection from France to Austria through my intervention."

"True—true," said Victor Amadeus, thoughtfully. "Your embassy to Turin will prove prejudicial to your own interests at Rome. I am afraid they will suffer. And if his holiness will not grant a divorce, what is to become of the marchioness? You will not continue to live with her out of wedlock?"

"Pardon me," replied Eugene. "She is mine in the sight of God, and man shall not part us. Our union is holy in our own eyes, and we shall maintain its sanctity against the whole world. It will very soon forget us, and consign us to the oblivion we covet."

"You are not so easily consigned to oblivion, my dear cousin; you occupy a prominent position before the world, and the brighter your fame as a hero, the darker will be the shadow that falls upon your mistress. My wife and I have talked this matter over, and we have determined to make a joint effort either to have you formally united at the altar, or to use our honest endeavors to induce you to separate. The duchess has sent three invitations to the marchioness, every one of which has been refused."

"The marchioness desires no intercourse with the world. She is independent of its sanction or its blame."

"Because, for the present, her world is concentrated in you. But it will not always be so; and the duchess has gone this very morning to pay her a visit, hoping to prove to her that a woman should not only avoid wrong, but the appearance of wrong. At the same time, we both render ample justice to the purity of intention of the marchioness."

"Not only of intention, but of conduct," replied Eugene. "But let us discuss other matters. The elector, Max Emman-

uel, has arrived at Montcaliers, the imperialists have joined him, and the Spanish troops are on their way."

"My army also shall march to Montcaliers to-morrow. It is time that the atrocities of Louis XIV. should cease. His soldiers have been worse than an irruption of the Goths both in Germany and in Italy."

"With the help of God, we will emulate their deeds in France."

While the two Princes of Savoy were in their cabinet together, the duchess was on her way to visit the marchioness. She was determined not to give Laura the opportunity of denying herself. To this end she followed the lackey that announced her, and as he opened the door, and was about to pronounce her name, she passed him by, and, going directly up to Laura, introduced herself.

She was calmly and courteously received, and, after some desultory conversation, entered upon her delicate mission.

"I have but one rule of action," said Laura, in return, "and I cannot wound my own convictions by shaping my conduct according to the standard of others."

"But surely you do not apply this rule to your unlawful liaison with Prince Eugene!" exclaimed the duchess.

"It is no unlawful liaison," replied Laura, simply. "I am Eugene's wife in his eyes and in mine: we have plighted our troth, and will be faithful to our vows until death!"

"And to this fidelity you sacrifice your honor and your peace of mind. Prince Eugene is but a mortal man. He is, for the time, desperately in love, and scorns all possibility of change. But by-and-by he will begin to be annoyed by the world's censure; he will be ashamed to be seen with you—"

"Madame," interrupted Laura, proudly, "by what right do you thus prejudge the conduct of Prince Eugene?"

"By the right of experience, my poor child, and of a knowledge of the human heart, whose inconsistencies are all unknown to you. Let me relate to you a history that concerns me nearly, and has caused me many a burning tear. My husband was once beloved by a beautiful woman, who, for his sake, left her husband, the court, and the grand monde, to be the solitary inhabitant of a castle, which, to be sure, was fit to



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be the abode of a goddess. She became the mistress of the Duke of Savoy, who loved her to distraction. I, his unhappy wife, had no right to remonstrate, for our union was like that of princes generally, an affair of state; and Victor Amadeus never knew that my poor heart was racked by jealousy, and that many a time I prayed for death as the only remedy for my anguish. For a time the duke was contented to see the Countess de la Verrue in her castle, but by-and-by he exacted of this poor devoted creature another sacrifice—that of returning with a brow of shame to the world. He fitted up a residence for her in Turin; passed all his time at her side; drove out with her, and finally held his levees at her palace. Now, there were certain festivals *de rigueur* that were obliged to be given at the ducal palace; and from these festivals the countess would be excluded unless she was invited by myself. I had nothing to lose, and hoping to win an approving smile from Victor, I invited his mistress, and, when she entered the hall of reception, placed her above all possibility of slight by advancing to meet her.”

“That was magnanimous indeed!” exclaimed Laura.

The duchess smiled. “Do not overestimate the act, my dear child. There was quite as much policy in it as magnanimity. I know men well: they are greater slaves to opinion than women; they have not half our moral courage, and not one of them can long confront the disapprobation of the world. From this day, a change came over the spirit of my husband. Seeing that the world held me in high esteem for my sacrifice, and held his mistress very cheaply, he began to feel uncomfortable when he brought her before its scrutiny. From discomfort he proceeded to shame, and finally the day came—the inevitable day that dawns for every woman who lays her honor at the feet of her lover. The poor countess was reproached for the sacrifices she had made, and blamed for her weakness in yielding to the importunities of her seducer! She fled, broken-hearted from his presence, and, like poor La Vallière, took refuge in a convent. Oh, my dear young lady!” continued the duchess, taking Laura’s hand in her own, “be warned, and do not court the fate of these unfortunate victims of man’s inconsistency!”

“Madame,” returned Laura, “their fate in no way can affect *me*, for I am not the mistress of Prince Eugene. He can never reproach me with weakness, for he, like myself, believes in the holiness of our union. We have been sinned against, but are not sinning. No woman can say of Eugene that he has broken his vows to her; no man can say of me that I have been unfaithful to him!”

“You forget the Marquis de Strozzi.”

“Forget him! Great God! Forget the villain who, under cover of night, stole the vows I pledged to Eugene, and kept me his prisoner for five long years! No, madame, I have not forgotten the Marquis de Strozzi; but he is no husband of mine. My spouse before Heaven is Prince Eugene—and, so help me God, I will be true to him in life as in death!”

“You are a noble woman; and your love, I admit, is as pure as that of Eve for Adam. But, for your exalted ideas of duty, you will receive naught from the world save scorn and contumely.”

“So be it. In my Eugene’s love will be my exceeding great reward. The arrows of the world’s contempt will fall harmless at my feet, for his dear arm will shield me from their sharpness. My world is Eugene; he alone is my husband, and my judge.”

The duchess looked compassionately at the beautiful enthusiast, and heaved a sigh. “I cannot save you, my child: your resolution is mightier than my arguments, and I can only pity and love you. Farewell! May your heroism meet with the reward it deserves.”

Laura accompanied the duchess to the door, and returned, calm and serene, to her embroidery-frame. She was working a standard for her beloved Eugene, and appeared quite to have forgotten the visit of the duchess, when, suddenly her cheeks flushed, and she raised her head to listen. She sprang from her seat, crossed the room and opened the door. Eugene came in, clasped her in his arms, and imprinted a kiss on her fair brow.

“My own love, my white swan,” whispered he.

She lifted her magnificent eyes to his, there and he read the



history of her deep, deep love. They sat down together, his arm still around her waist.

"Has the Duchess of Savoy been here?" asked he.

"Yes. She was here to persuade me, for the world's sake, to leave you."

"The duke has been doing the same by me," said Eugene.

And then they smiled. Neither one made protestations to the other; neither one had any thing to relate. The heaven of their mutual trust was without a cloud.

Their silent, solemn happiness was interrupted by a knock. Conrad came in with two dispatches—one from Germany, and one from Rome. Eugene took them from the golden salver on which they lay, and said:

"With the permission of the marchioness, I will read them."

She bowed and smiled; then, passing her arm through his, led him to a divan, and would have had him take a seat by her side.

"No, darling," said he, gently putting her down upon its satin cushions. "Lie there, while I sit at your feet and read the fiat of Rome."

He unfolded the letter, and read, Laura watching him the while; smoothing his hair with her loving hands, and gazing in his face with tenderness unspeakable. As she gazed she saw a cloud pass over his features; he looked up at her, and his eyes wore an expression of strange compassion and sorrow.

Laura bent forward and kissed him. "What ails my love?" said she.

"This letter has destroyed a blessed dream, beloved. I had hoped that we had propitiated Fate, and that misfortune had ceased to follow us."

"Why, what have your political papers to do with our fortunes?"

"This is not a political dispatch," replied Eugene. "It is the answer to a letter I addressed to Pope Innocent. Will you read it, dearest?"

She took the paper from his hands, and then began to laugh.

"I do not read Latin," said she. "Translate it for me."

Eugene then rose, put his arm around her and read:

"The sacrament of marriage is holy and inviolable, and it cannot be set aside. Woe be unto those who deny its sanctity and its irrevocable pledges! The marchioness Strozzi was married by a priest, and her witnesses were a father and a brother. We are under the necessity of refusing the petition of the Prince of Savoy; for, no representation of intentions misdirected, can stand against the deliberate consent of the parties to wedlock, witnessed by honorable relatives. We, therefore, call upon the Prince of Savoy to humble himself as befits a man that has sinned against God and the Church, lest he incur her malediction, at the hands of the vicar of Christ on earth."

The paper fell from his hands and fluttered to her feet.

"You appealed to the pope to annul my marriage with Strozzi?" asked she.

"Yes, my beloved. I would have aspired to the bliss of seeing the beautiful Laura Bonaletta my own wife—my wife before the world."

"How good, how noble of you!" murmured she. "You would have elevated poor Laura Bonaletta to the height of your own greatness, and would have had her bear your glorious name! It would have been too much bliss for me to bear that honored name, Eugene: and yet! oh, how I wish I might have called myself Princess of Savoy! This happiness is denied me, and I must submit; but I will not sin against my conscience, by allowing any judgment of mortal man to drive me from your side. Once more I lay my hand in yours, and what God has joined together, no power of man shall ever put asunder."

Eugene clasped her trembling hand in his, and, raising his eyes to heaven, recorded their vows.

After a pause, Laura resumed: "You have another letter to read, dear Eugene. Perhaps it may console you for our own disappointment. It is from Germany, and will, doubtless, bring pleasant tidings."

Eugene unfolded the dispatch, with a smile; but scarcely had he glanced at its first words, when his face grew pale,



and his hands trembled so that he could scarcely hold the paper.

"Ah!" cried Laura, "another disappointment!"

"Oh, Laura," sighed he, "Charles of Lorraine is no more."

"Your dearest friend?"

"Ay—my dearest friend! Charles of Lorraine dead!—And dead of a broken heart. Not on the battle-field, as became the greatest hero of his age, but on a bed of sickness. No officer by to do him honor—no soldiers there to weep for their adored commander! Oh, I would be a happy man, could I but win the love of my men as he did, and earn but one of the many laurels that were wreathed around his honored head!"\*

"Your laurels will surpass his, my Eugene," exclaimed Laura, with prophetic love. "You are destined to achieve immortality."

Eugene shook his head, and, almost unconsciously, murmured these lines of Homer:

"Like leaves on trees, the race of man is found,  
Now green in youth, now withering on the ground;  
Another race the following spring supplies,  
They fall successive, and successive rise.  
So generations, in their course, decay,  
So flourish these, when those have passed away!"

"Any admission within these enchanted walls?" said a gay voice, behind them; and, starting up in amazement, they beheld the tall figure of the Elector of Bavaria, and behind him, Conrad, with a perplexed and most distressed countenance.

"Before I say another word, let me exonerate Conrad from any complicity in my indiscretion," said the elector; "for, I must say, that he told a series of falsehoods on your account, that will keep him out of heaven for many a month. But I surprised him glancing uneasily toward this door, so I took your Peter by the shoulders, put him aside, and walked into paradise without his permission."

\* Prince Eugene's own words.—See Zimmermann.

"Very well, Conrad," said Eugene; "you are excused." And, taking the hand of the elector, he led him to the marchioness, and presented him as his dearest living friend.

The elector kissed her hand and bent the knee before her as he would have done before an empress.

"Madonna," said he, "I bow before your beauty and your worth. I am a poor, sinful mortal, but I have, at least, an appreciation of heavenly goodness, and I come to do homage to the innocence, the purity, and the courage of my friend's guardian angel."

"You are most welcome, prince; but, I pray you, rise. It becomes not a hero like you to kneel before poor Laura Bonaletta."

"I would have died but for her care," said Eugene, when the elector had accepted a seat at Laura's side. "She came to me through perils that shame our every-day deeds on the field of battle."

"I have heard of her miraculous flight from one who loves her dearly. We rejoiced together over the news of her escape."

"You allude to Lucretia," said Laura—"how is she?"

"Like other mortals," laughed the elector; "loving to-day and hating to-morrow, and, finally, discovering that lovers' hate is love. Neither you nor Eugene can understand these vicissitudes of sublunary attachments; for you have nothing in common with the stormy and changeful sea of ordinary loves. Heaven created you one for the other, and your lives are a development of that divine charity which 'believeth all things, hopeth all things, and endureth all things.'"