

spite of his intrigues, he will manage to deprive us of all its advantages. He will sell us to France, of that you may be sure."

CHAPTER V.

THE MARQUIS STROZZI.

"THEN you think that Strozzi will not recognize me?" asked Barbesieur de Louvois.

"I know it," replied Carlotta. "His memory is a blank from which every image, except that of his wife, has been effaced."

"Does he love her still?"

"Unhappily he does," sighed Carlotta.

"My good girl," said Barbesieur, trying to look amiable, "pray don't be so concise. Tell me the condition of the marquis, at once: I did not come to this old owl's roost for pastime. I came to see what could be done to restore its unhappy lord to reason. That you are observing, I remember; you proved it by the good care you took of my sister Laura."

"My lord, you jest; but the flight of the marchioness has disgraced me. She outwitted me, and I shall hate her to the end of my days."

"Verily I believe you," laughed Barbesieur, as he saw the glitter of her pale-green eyes. "I see in your face that you know how to hate. But you must excuse me if I am amused when I think I see you watching the doors like a she-Cerberus, while that sly creature was flying out of the chimney. But never mind her: I want to talk with you of her husband. I know that he was confined in a mad-house; but, having occasion to see if he was sane enough to do me a service, I found out that he had been discharged as cured, and had retired within himself. Now, good Carlotta, tell me his veritable condition."

"He never has been sane since the flight of the marchioness. The morning after, when, in spite of our knocking and calling, we received no answer, I set Julia to watch the doors

(for I thought she was merely trying to frighten us, and would make her escape while we were away), and went to consult the marquis as to what we must do. When we returned, Julia assured us that she had not heard a breath since I had been away."

"And I suppose that the marquis forced the doors?"

"Oh, no, my lord," replied Carlotta, bitterly. "He was so fearful of displeasing her that he resisted all my importunities to break them open. He knocked and begged so humbly for admission, that I fairly cried with rage. This lasted for hours. Finally he fell on his knees and cried like a child, promising, if she would open the door, to give her her freedom, and never imprison her again. Then he swore by the memory of his father that he would go to Rome and get a divorce for her. It was shameful; and at last I cried out for passion, and told him to get up and behave like a man. But all in vain. Suddenly Julia came running to say that, while the marquis had been lying before the parlor door, she had forced the one that led to the sitting-room, and that the marchioness had escaped."

"What did Strozzi do when he heard this? Whine louder?"

"Oh, no! He sprang up, rushed into the rooms, and began to search for her."

"I suppose you helped, like good dogs after their game?"

"Of course, for it seemed impossible that she should have gotten out by any but supernatural means. But at last we were obliged to accept the fact of her flight, wonderful as it was, and we sat down. Not so the marquis. He appeared to think that she had been transformed into a mouse, for he ran about, opening boxes, looking under tables, occasionally stopping to roar like a wild beast, or falling on his knees and weeping. Then he would begin his hunt again, and this lasted the whole day. We asked him to take some rest, and let his servants be sent out to search the woods, but he gave us no answer, still going round and round until dusk, when he called for lights. He kept up his search the whole night; and when the sun rose, and we awoke, we found him running to and fro, from one room to the other. In vain we pressed him to eat or to rest, he spoke not a word to any of us. Finally, one of

the men laid hands on him to force him to sit down, when he drew back and struck him with such force that the blood spirted from his face, as he fell full length on the floor. The marquis went on in this manner for a week, each day growing paler and feebler, until at last he staggered like a drunken man."

"Unhappy lover!" exclaimed Barbesieur, with a shrug.

"Finally, the physician we had sent for came from Turin. By this time the marquis had fallen from exhaustion, and lay asleep. He was lifted to bed, and four men were set to watch him; for the doctor expected him to be violent when he waked. And so he was. He tried to leap out of bed, and was finally bound hand and foot. After a while, came his cousin from Venice, who took charge of him and of his property."

"Yes, to my cost," growled Barbesieur, "for he swindled me out of my pension."

"The Marquis Balbi-Strozzi inherits the estate, if the Marquis Ottario dies without heirs," said Carlotta.

"The Marquis Ottario will not be such an ass as to die without heirs," cried Barbesieur, impatiently. "He shall be reconciled to his wife, or he shall marry some other woman, and beget children. The devil! He is a young man, and nobody dies of love, nowadays."

"He looks like a man of eighty," said Carlotta.

"He is much changed, then?"

"You would not know him, my lord."

"Perhaps not, but he will recover his youth with his health. What does he do all day, Carlotta? What does he say?"

"My lord, he says nothing, except an occasional word to his valet. As for what he does, he is forever shut up in his laboratory."

"Laboratory? What sort of a laboratory?"

"A room which, immediately after his return, he had fitted up like a great kitchen. When the alterations had been made, he went to Turin, and came home with the entire contents of an apothecary shop, with which the shelves of his laboratory are filled. I helped him to place his jars and phials, but much against my will, for he calls me ugly names."

Barbesieur laughed. "Do tell me what he calls you?"

"My lord, you may laugh, but you would not like to answer to the name of 'Basilisk.'"

"To be sure, 'Floweret' would be much more appropriate to your style of beauty, Carlotta; but let that pass, and go on with your narrative. What is Strozzi about, in this laboratory?"

"How do I know, my lord? He cooks and evaporates his messes; then runs to his table and reads in some mouldy old parchments; then hurries back to the chimney and stirs his pipkins—then back to the table—and so on, all day long."

"But, my angelic Carlotta, if nobody is allowed to enter the laboratory, how came you to be so admirably posted as to Strozzi's movements?"

Carlotta looked perplexed. "My lord, there is a little hole in the door that leads out to the corridor, and sometimes I have thought it but right to watch our dear lord, that he might do himself no harm."

"Which means that you bored a hole in the door by way of observatory. Nay—do not deny it; I respect your thirst for knowledge. Does he never leave his laboratory?"

"Oh, yes, my lord. He writes a great deal in his cabinet. All his orders are transmitted in that way. Last week the steward made a mistake in his accounts—"

"To his own prejudice?"

"My lord," said Carlotta, with a hoarse laugh, "no, to that of the marquis. When he discovered it, he wrote underneath, 'Two thousand florins unaccounted for. If this occurs a second time, you are discharged.'"

"Good, good!" cried Barbesieur. "Then he is returning to his senses. He receives no company?" added he.

"How should he? He knows nobody, and has forgotten every thing connected with his past life."

"But you told me that he still remembered the marchioness?"

"As for her, my lord, he loves her as madly as ever. He stands before her portrait, weeping by the hour, and the table is always set for two persons. Every morning he goes into

the garden and makes a bouquet, which he lays upon her plate before he takes his seat."

"Poor Strozzi! Sane or mad, he will always be a dreamer!" said Barbesieur. "Where is he now?"

"In the garden, my lord; for it is almost the hour for dinner, and he is in the conservatory gathering flowers for the empty plate."

"Show me the way. I am curious to know whether he has forgotten his brother-in-law and benefactor."

CHAPTER VI.

INSANITY AND REVENGE.

BARBESIEUR followed Carlotta to the garden. They were walking silently down the great avenue that led to the conservatory, when, at some distance, they beheld advancing toward them the figure of a man. His step was feeble and slow; his black garments hung loosely about his shrunken limbs; his face was bloodless, like that of a corpse, his cheeks hollow, his large eyes so sunken that their light seemed to come from the depths of a cavern. His sparse hair, lightly blown about by the wind, was white as snow; his long, thin beard was of the same hue.

"Who is that strange-looking old man?" asked Barbesieur.

"That, my lord, is the Marquis Strozzi!"

"Impossible!" cried Barbesieur, with a start.

"I told you, my lord, that he looked like a decrepit old man," said Carlotta.

"And truly he is not a very seductive-looking personage," answered Barbesieur. "But we must try if, in this extinguished crater, there be not a spark by which its fire may be rekindled. Leave me, Carlotta. I must have no third person here to divert Strozzi's attention from myself."

"Shall I not announce you, my lord?" asked Carlotta, who was dying of curiosity to see the meeting.

"Not at all, my angel. Go back to the castle—not by that winding path, if you please, but by this wide avenue. And—be alert in your movements, for I shall watch you until yonder door closes upon your youthful charms, and hides them from my sight."

Carlotta looked venomous, but dared not tarry, and Barbesieur followed her with his eyes until he heard the clang of the ponderous castle-door behind her. He then confronted the living spectre that, by this time, was within a few feet of him.

"God's greeting to you, brother-in-law," cried he, in a loud, emphatic voice, while he grasped Strozzi's poor, wan hands, and held them within his own.

The marquis raised his dark, blank eyes, then let them fall again upon the bouquet which Barbesieur had so unceremoniously crushed.

"Sir," said he, gently, "do release my hand, for see—you are bruising my flowers."

"Sure enough, he does not recognize me," said Barbesieur, relaxing his hold; while Strozzi, unmindful of his presence, caressed his flowers, and smoothed their crumpled leaves.

"She loves flowers," murmured the poor maniac.

Barbesieur took up the words. "Yes," said he, "yes; my sister Laura loves flowers. Pity she is not here to see them."

The marquis shivered. "Who speaks of my Laura?" said he.

"I,—I, her brother," bawled Barbesieur, looking straight into Strozzi's eyes. "I spoke of her, and, by G—d, I have a right to call her, for I am her brother Barbesieur!"

Strozzi extended his hand, and an imbecile smile flitted over his ghastly face. "Ah! then, you love her?" asked he, mournfully.

"Of course I love her," was the lying response. "You remember—do you not—that you were indebted to me for your marriage with Laura Bonaletta?"

"Bonaletta!" screamed Strozzi. "There is no Laura Bonaletta; her name is Laura Strozzi, the Marchioness Strozzi, my wife! Remember that, sir—remember it."

"To be sure, to be sure," murmured Barbesieur; "he has

forgotten everybody but that tiresome Laura. Let us see if we cannot stir up his memory to another tune."

Strozzi meanwhile had passed on, and, with his eyes fixed on his flowers, was slowly making his way to the castle. Barbesieur followed, though the poor lunatic seemed to have no consciousness of his presence. They walked on together in silence, until they had reached the castle, and entered the dining-room, where dinner was served.

Strozzi went up to the table, laid his offering on the plate, and bowed :

"Will you allow me to take my seat?" said he, humbly, while he took a chair opposite, which old Martino had drawn back for his accommodation.

"Do you see, my lord?" said Martino to Barbesieur; "he imagines the marchioness present at all his meals."

"He must be undeceived," said Barbesieur, roughly.

"I beseech you, signor," said the old man, "leave him in error; for, if you undeceive him, you will rob him of the only glimpse of happiness that remains to him."

"I shall make the attempt, nevertheless," replied Barbesieur, in a tone that admitted of no further remonstrance, while he advanced to the table, and seated himself in the empty chair.

The marquis started, and his brow darkened. "Sir," said he, "that is the head of the table—the place of the Marchioness Strozzi."

"I know it," was the reply, "and, as soon as she makes her appearance, I will give it up.—Martino, serve the soup; I am hungry." So saying, he tossed the bouquet to the valet, and poured out some wine.

At this, Strozzi sprang up, and, staring at Barbesieur, with eyes that glowed like the orbs of a wild animal—"Sir," exclaimed he, "you are an insolent intruder!"

"I know it," cried Barbesieur—"and what next?"

The marquis gazed in bewilderment at the threatening face of his self-invited guest, and then, slowly turning around, prepared to leave the room. Barbesieur rose and followed him.

At the door of his cabinet he stopped and cried out :

"Let the marshal of the household see to it that no one intrudes upon my privacy!"

And, with a gesture of offended dignity, he entered the room. Barbesieur, however, was immediately behind him, and they had no sooner crossed the threshold than he locked the door, and put the key in his pocket.

"Now, I have him," thought he, "and I shall begin my experiments."

"Sir," said Strozzi, alarmed, "why do you persecute me?"

"I want you to say if you know me," answered Barbesieur, dominating the madman with the calm, powerful glance of reason.

Strozzi shook his head, murmuring, "No, sir, no. I do not know you."

"But I know *you*, Strozzi, my good fellow. You are my beloved brother-in-law, the husband of my sister Laura, who forsook you so shamefully, because she did not love you."

The shaft had pierced. A gleam of returning reason shot athwart Strozzi's face, and a faint color rose to his cheek.

"Not love me!" echoed he, tearfully; "whom, then, does she love?"

Barbesieur laid the weight of his great hands upon Strozzi's shoulders, and looked steadfastly in his eyes. Raising his voice to the utmost, he shouted: "I will tell you whom she loves, and mark me well, Strozzi. She loves Prince Eugene of Savoy!"

"Eugene of Savoy!" shrieked the wretched creature. "Eugene of Savoy! Ah, yes, I remember. I hate him, and he must die!"

"Ay, that's it!" cried Barbesieur, cheerily, "that's it. He must die; and when he is dead, Laura will love the Marquis de Strozzi."

"You think so?" asked Strozzi, laying his tremulous hand upon Barbesieur's, great firm arm.

"I know it. The very moment Prince Eugene dies, Laura's heart is yours."

"He must die! He must die!" murmured Strozzi, clasping his attenuated fingers, and looking imploringly into Barbesieur's face.

"Ay, that must he, and you are the man that shall take his life. Your honor demands it of you."

"Yes, my honor," repeated Strozzi, "my honor. I thank you, sir, for your goodness to me. You are the first person that ever advised me to avenge myself on Eugene of Savoy. You are the only person that ever advised me to take his life, and I believe you, and trust you. Yes, sir, take my word for it, Eugene of Savoy shall die!"

"How will you go about it?" asked Barbesieur.

An expression of cunning was seen to steal over the face of the madman, as he replied, "That is my secret, sir."

"I will tell you how to make an end of him," cried Barbesieur, patting him on the shoulder. "Poison him!"

Strozzi gazed with astonishment at his brother-in-law, and forthwith conceived a profound respect for his cleverness. "Did you know that?" said he, with a silly smile. "Did you know that I meant to poison him?"

"To be sure I did, and I came here to work with you in your laboratory, until we concoct the right dose for him."

"Did you know that I had a laboratory?" asked Strozzi, in a whisper. "And did you know that I was trying to find a brave, beautiful poison that would kill him like a pistol-shot, or a good stab under the ribs?"

"I knew it all, and I came to help you."

"I thank you, sir, I thank you! Give me your hand. I take you for my friend, and trust you. Come with me to my laboratory."

So saying, he passed his arm within that of his brother-in-law, and led him to the opposite end of the room. Barbesieur laid his hand on the bolt, but the door was locked.

"You see," said Strozzi, waxing confidential, "I keep this door always locked, for let me tell you, my dear friend, that Eugene of Savoy has surrounded my castle with a regiment of dragoons, who are his spies. That is the reason why I never talk to anybody—I am so afraid that my people will betray me to Prince Eugene's dragoons. Luckily, they have never found out the secret of my laboratory, for I always carry the key in my pocket. Here it is." He took out his key and un-

locked the door, but before opening it he addressed Barbesieur in a solemn whisper:

"My dear friend, before you enter my sanctuary, swear to me, by the memory of my dear departed wife, that you will not betray its secrets to Prince Eugene's dragoons."

"I swear, my dear Strozzi, by sun, moon, and stars—"

Strozzi shook his head, and folded his hands reverently.

"No, no; swear by the memory of my sainted Laura."

Barbesieur swore, and the door was opened.

"Come in," said Strozzi.

"And may all the gods of vengeance bless my entrance hither!" muttered Barbesieur, between his teeth.

The room was as Carlotta had described it. Its long shelves were filled with jars and phials, and over the chimney was a wide mantel, with porcelain pipkins, retorts, glass tubes, and flasks.

"Ah," cried Barbesieur, taking a phial from its shelf, "this is a precious beverage, that lulls one to sleep or to death, as one's friends may prescribe."

"Yes—it is laudanum," replied Strozzi. "A painless dagger, an invisible sword of justice in the hands of the elect. It was the basis of all the wonderful preparations of Katherina de Medicis. There was a woman! Why did I not know her, and learn of her the precious secrets of her laboratorium? From my youth, I have studied chemistry, and I had a beautiful room in Venice, where I used to work with the famous Chiari. But we never discovered Katherina's secret."

"What secret, dear Strozzi?" inquired Barbesieur.

"The secret of killing people by fumes, which left no trace whatever of their action on the body," answered Strozzi, with an awakening gleam of wickedness in his eyes.

"And you believe that there are such delicate, ethereal little ministers of vengeance?"

"Do I believe it?—Why, to their agency, Katherina owed her elevation to the throne of France. Nobody knows this better than I, for my ancestor Filippo Strozzi was her friend and relative, and their correspondence now is in the archives of the family, at Venice. I am indebted to the letters of Katherina for much of my knowledge of chemistry."

"And so you found out from her correspondence how she managed to become Queen of France?" asked Barbesieur, anxious to indulge Strozzi's sudden fit of garrulity.

"I did," was his complacent reply, while he nodded his head repeatedly, and stroked his long, white beard. "When Katherina came to France, she came as the bride of the Duke of Orleans, the second son of Francis I. There seemed no chance for *her* to be a queen, for the dauphin was a lusty young fellow who was already betrothed to the beautiful Infanta of Spain. But Katherina had no mind to let the infanta reign in France, so she invited the dauphin to her castle of Gien, and took him to her conservatory. There was a beautiful rare flower there, which had a strong perfume. Katherina directed his attention to it, but advised him not to hang over it too long, as it never failed to give *her* the headache, if she approached it too closely. The dauphin laughed, and was not to be frightened away from a flower, because of the headache. Moreover, the odor was delightful, and he would not be warned. That day he had a headache; the next, he was pale and feeble, and in less than a week, he died, and nobody the wiser, except Katherina."

"And he died, really from the odor of a flower?"

"Yes, from a flower which Katherina had perfumed for his use, my dear friend. And do you know how she made away with Joanna of Navarre, who had guessed the secret of the dauphin's death, and had already hinted her suspicions to her brother Francis?"

"No, I never heard of it. Upon my word, Strozzi, you interest me exceedingly."

"Do I? Well, I will tell you more, then. Katherina made a present to Joanna of a pair of embroidered gloves. The day after she wore them she was dead. What do you think of that?—And did you ever hear how the Prince of Porcia died—he who advised the dauphin to divorce his wife because she had been married for eight years and had borne him no children?" continued Strozzi, with increasing volubility.

"I confess my ignorance, Strozzi; do enlighten me."

"I will, sir. The prince received a present from Katherina (she was a great hand to make presents). This time it was a

flask of fine Italian oil for his night-lamp, which oil, in burning, emitted a delicate perfume. By the time the flask was emptied, the prince had gone the way of all flesh."

"And all this because of Queen Katherina's science?"

"And all this because of Queen Katherina's science!" echoed Strozzi.

"But you have not yet hit upon her secret yourself?"

"Not yet; but I think I am on the track, and hope to discover it in time to try it on Prince Eugene."

Barbesieur rose from his seat, and, coming toward Strozzi, struck him on the shoulder. "Now, Strozzi, look at me attentively, and try to understand what I am about to say to you. I will help you to seek this poison. Do you hear?"

"Yes," said Strozzi, with a cunning leer. "Yes, I hear. You will help me to seek the poison for Prince Eugene."

"Good," replied Barbesieur. "Now, look at me full in the eyes. Look, I tell you!" repeated he, as Strozzi's face began to relapse into imbecility. "I have found the poison."

Strozzi uttered a triumphant yell, but Barbesieur silenced him. "Pay attention while I tell you how I became possessed of it. I was by, when La Voisin was put to the torture in *La Chambre ardente*, and I heard her confession. I was deputed to search for her papers; and before I delivered them up you may be sure that I examined them, to see what I could make out of them for my own profit. I found various receipts for love-potions, as well as for the renowned *poudre de succession* of the Countess Soissons; but of that anon. Do you mark me, Strozzi?"

"Oh, sir," cried Strozzi, trembling in every limb, "speak—speak quickly, or I shall die of suspense!"

Barbesieur then, emphasizing each word, replied: "I found a parchment on which were inscribed these words: 'Receipt for procuring death by inhalation. Queen Katherina de Medicis.'"

"That is it, that is it," howled Strozzi, and in his ecstasy he flung his arms around Barbesieur's great body. But suddenly his countenance became expressive of distrust, and his eye had a deadly glitter, like that of a snake.

"But will you give it to me? Where is it? I warn you,

do not trifle with me, for you never shall leave this laboratory until I have it!" Meanwhile he made a furtive movement toward his breast.

But Barbesieur had seen the gesture, and with his powerful grasp he clutched Strozzi's hand, and withdrew it armed with a poniard of fine, glistening steel. Flinging it with such force against the wall that it buried itself in the masonry, Barbesieur gazed for a moment at the poor fool whose teeth were chattering with fear; then leading him to a seat—

"Come," said he, "let us talk like men. We are neither enemies nor rivals; we are brothers, having one and the same interest at stake."

"Yes, sir," murmured Strozzi, obsequiously.

"Well, then, look at me. Did you ever see me before?"

Strozzi raised his obedient eyes and looked—for a while, in blank amazement. But gradually his black orbs dilated, and a sudden flash of intelligence crossed his face. He breathed hard.

"I think, sir, I think you are—are—ah, yes! I know. You are Count Barbesieur de Louvois."

"Right, right," cried Barbesieur. "Laura Strozzi's brother."

"Are you the brother of my darling Laura?" cried Strozzi. "If you are, you are welcome, sir. Oh, if she were but alive to see you!"

"Alive? What do you mean? Where do you suppose her to be?"

"She is dead," replied Strozzi, his eyes overflowing with tears. "Dead—my own, my precious angel!"

"Of what did she die?" asked Barbesieur, highly amused at poor Strozzi's grief.

Strozzi shook his head. "No one on earth knows, sir. She must have dissolved in a sunbeam, and gone back to heaven, for her corpse was never found here below."

"Strozzi, you are mistaken," exclaimed Barbesieur, with an authoritative gesture. "Mark my words, and believe them, or I shall be very angry. The Marchioness Laura is *not* dead. She lives here on earth, not far away from you."

"She lives!" repeated Strozzi, starting from his seat and

falling at Barbesieur's feet. "Tell me where she is. Let me go, let me go, and bring her home. Come—come with me!"

"Wait a minute. She is living with Eugene of Savoy, disgracing you and me both. Before you bring her home, you must take the life of her paramour, and just as soon as you have done that, she will be freed from the spell that binds her, and will love nobody but you."

"Ah, he shall die," muttered Strozzi.

"Yes, he must die, and *you* must kill him. But *I* shall furnish the means. And now to work, to prepare the ambrosia that shall give him immortality!"

CHAPTER VII.

THE AMBROSIA.

THANKS to the illness of the Duke of Savoy, the summer campaign of 1692 was of short duration. The allies had dispersed and retired to winter-quarters; the imperial army had retreated to Piedmont; and the officers in command of the several divisions had betaken themselves to Turin to enjoy the festivities that followed the recovery of Victor Amadeus.

Eugene had been invited with the rest; but he gave his health as an excuse for avoiding the changeable winds of Turin, and seeking the balmy atmosphere of Nice, where, having found comfortable quarters for his troops, he proposed to pass the coming winter.

Victor Amadeus made great pretence of regret at Eugene's absence; but, truth to tell, he was not sorry to escape the scrutiny of his clear-sighted cousin, who, for his part, was happy beyond expression in the devotion of his men, and the companionship of his Laura.

Here in the peaceful seclusion of the obscure little village of Nice, Eugene and Laura enjoyed unalloyed happiness. The fishermen and sailors, that formed the principal part of its population, knew nothing of the history of the grand Austrian officer that had come to live among them. In their eyes, the