

SLOW POISON.

PREPARATIONS having the power of weakening the vital powers, and finally cutting short the life of human beings, were at one time used to an incredible extent for the purpose of private murder; and no where with greater skill than in Italy—a country where assassination has always, in modern times, been deemed a light crime. The atrocities committed in Italy and France during the seventeenth century, by these diabolical preparations, have been noticed by Professor Beckmann, in his *History of Inventions and Discoveries*, in a narrative fitted to interest the reader of the *Moutreal Saturday Evening Magazine*.

It was remarked at Rome (says he), about the year 1659, that many young married ladies suddenly became widows, and many husbands who were known to have become disagreeable to their wives unexpectedly died. Suspicion fell on a society of females under the direction of an old woman, who pretended to foretell future events, and who had in fact correctly predicted the death of many persons, to those who were interested in the event. A spy was employed, who introduced herself to this sorceress as a person of distinction, suffering under the tyranny of an imperious husband, of whom she wished to be rid; and by means of this stratagem her secret was detected. The whole society were then arrested, and put to the torture; and the hag herself, whose name was Hieronyma Spara, along with several others, publicly executed. It appeared that many of the Roman nobility were implicated in this affair; and, notwithstanding the severity with which it was visited, traces of the same suspicious practices were remarked for a long time afterwards. Spara was a Sicilian, and was said to have acquired her knowledge from the celebrated Tofania; but the difference of their age renders it more probable that she was instructress of the latter.

Tofania, if not the inventress of the far-famed drops which from her obtained the name of *aqua tofana*, at least carried the diabolical art of preparing them to the greatest perfection. She first resided at Palermo, but afterwards at Naples, where she was more particularly known, and whence the drops have also been commonly called *aquetti di Napoli*. There was, at Bari, in the kingdom of Naples, a miraculous oil, said to distil from the tomb of Saint Nicolas; and the credulity of the people inducing them to employ it as a remedy for certain disorders, it was sold in small glass phials bearing the image of the saint, and an inscription purporting that they contained '*manna of St. Nicholas of Bari*.' The apparent sanctity of these securing them from suspicion, Tofania employed them for the distribution of her drops; but it seems that, like her friend Spara, she reserved them for the service of those of her own sex to whom the yoke of matrimony had become irksome; and if the history of those times be not incorrect, the toilet of few married ladies of distinction at Naples, and other parts of Italy, was without a phial of the precious manna. This poison was limpid and tasteless as pure water, so that it

was impossible to guard against its attacks; a few drops, administered at different periods, were sufficient to destroy a man by slow and imperceptible degrees; and it was supposed, that through its effects not fewer than six hundred persons perished.

Tofania lived to a great age; but suspicion having at length fallen on her, she took refuge in a monastery, from which she was dragged by the officers of justice, notwithstanding an outcry raised by the clergy at the violation of ecclesiastical privilege. Being put to the rack, she confessed her crimes, and acknowledged that the day before she absconded, she had forwarded two boxes of *manna* to Rome, where it was actually found in the customhouse; but it never appeared who had ordered it. She was afterwards, it is said, privately strangled; but in the accounts of her fate there is considerable discrepancy; for Labat says that she was arrested in 1709; Keysler, another traveller, affirms, on the contrary, that she was still living at Naples in 1730, and resided in a convent, in which she was protected as in a sacred sanctuary, and where many strangers used to visit her from motives of curiosity; and Garelli, who was physician to Charles the Sixth, King of the Two Sicilies, and whose authority on this point is most to be relied on, wrote to a friend, about 1719, that she was still in prison at Naples.

This infamous art, however, no where ever excited greater interest than at Paris. About the year 1670, Margaret d'Aubray, wife of the Marquis de Brinvilliers, a nobleman of large fortune, attached herself to a young officer of a distinguished but needy family, named Godin de Ste. Croix. After a short period, she lost her husband, whose property she had partly dissipated; and still openly continuing her intimacy with De Ste. Croix, her father procured a *lettre de cachet*, had him arrested, and thrown into the Bastille. He there got acquainted with an Italian, who instructed him in the manner of preparing poisons. After a year's imprisonment, he was released, and immediately flew to the Marchioness, to whom he communicated the baneful art, which she undertook to practise for the improvement of their circumstances. She then assumed the garb of a nun of the order of *Les Sœurs de la Charité*, distributed food to the poor, administered to the sick in the *Hôtel-Dieu*, and thus tried the effect of her poisons, undetected, on these helpless wretches. She bribed a servant to poison her own father and her brother, and endeavoured to poison her sister. The two former perished; but a suspicion having arisen of the cause of their death, the sister was on her guard, and thus escaped. She then, however, avoided detection, and the guilty pair continued their villainous practices in security, until they were at length providentially brought to light in the following manner:—

De Ste. Croix, while preparing poison, always wore a glass mask; but this once happening to drop off by accident, he was, as it is said suffocated by the vapour, and was found dead on the floor of his laboratory. As he was without apparent heirs, government caused an inventory to be taken of his