

above all, was Gabrielle the object of her tender solicitude; her resemblance to her lost Charles, made her love for her almost a worship.

She had grieved that Gabrielle could not return the affection of the Duke de Bellegarde, for in him she saw nobility of mind united to every grace of person and manner; and now she grieved that she had surrendered her heart's wealth of feeling to one, who might be indifferent to, or trifle with, the gift.

CHAPTER VI.

NEARLY six months had passed, since Henry's romantic visit to the Castle of Cœuvres, most of which had been consumed in fruitless attempts on Rouen, which, sustained by the hope of the Duke of Parma's speedy return, still defied their efforts, and sternly refused all terms of capitulation.

It would seem, that incessant action of body and mind was not required, to erase from Henry's soul the affection with which the beautiful and innocent Gabrielle d'Estrées had inspired him. Marie de Beauvilliers was now the sickle monarch's favourite. She was abbess of the convent of Montmartre; Henry had first seen her during the siege of Paris. Her convent had been dismantled, and in fact nearly demolished, by his soldiers, and to Henry she appealed for redress. Her beauty won a favorable answer to her petition. But here the work stopped; the intentions never became executions. Thus thrown into the world, the gay and beautiful lady seemed in no hurry again to close the convent door upon herself. Chance had once more thrown her in Henry's way, and now for some little time she had appeared to reign with absolute power over the monarch's fancy.

It is night, and in the apartments of the soldier king, is collected a group of some five or six. But they are not grey-haired statesmen and veterans, seated at the council board. No! to-night he banished care! give a laugh for a grave shake of the head, and a gay song for a wise speech; swords drain not now the crimson tide of life, but high the red wine sparkles in the cup. Fortune provides the feast of to-night, the fickle goddess may hold a fast to-morrow; but take the good the gods provide to-day,—to them belongs to-morrow. Ceremony and courtly rule are resting side by side, in quiet oblivion—no difficult exertion when we remember the familiarity that must ensue under circumstances which forced the royal Bourbon; “to seek in breakfast here, go without a dinner in his pursuit of a supper, and enjoy the luxury of a bed, *when it was offered.*” But to-night, Henry plays the host, and offers rare and goodly cheer to his guests.

Briskly the wine cup circles, gaily the merry laugh and song ring on the clear still air. The revel was at its height, when the Chevalier d'Essarts, with eyes whose brilliancy was in part borrowed from the wine cup, rose and called them to pledge to Marie de Beauvilliers, the fairest woman in France. All but one rose and eagerly accepted the pledge.

“What means this, Bellegarde?” fell simultaneously from the lips of those around.

“Will ye not drink to the beautiful Marie de Beauvilliers, the fairest woman in France?”

“Aye! I will drink to the beautiful Marie de Beauvilliers, but not to her as the fairest woman in France. For that, gallants, ye must fill a second cup.”

“And to whom shall we pledge it, Bellegarde?” said Henry, in a gay unconcerned tone, though the expression of his eye was more anxious. “To which of our court beauties will the Duke de Bellegarde drain that cup?”

“To none of these garden flowers, Sire! it is to a wild flower, that glowing with beauty still hides herself in the depth of her forest home.”

“What pretty rustic, Bellegarde, hath turned thy philosophic brain, and filled thee with poetry and flowers?” cried d'Essarts.

“Of whom do you speak?” said Henry, in a tone whose very calmness made Bellegarde start.

“I speak, Sire, of Gabrielle d'Estrées, a younger daughter of the Marquis de Cœuvres, and I affirm that he, who hath not beheld the fair Gabrielle, hath yet to see all beauty.”

There was a pause of an instant, for Henry's reply. His eyes were cast down, the whole expression of his face was changed, from gaiety, to one of seriousness, even sternness. All noted this; inquiring glances were exchanged; could it be anger, that any one should dare dispute his favorite's precedence? Again d'Essarts, spoke:

“A bold assertion—whence comes the confirmation! So bold a challenge should not rest here. How shall it be decided? who shall be the umpires?”

Bellegarde turned upon the noisy d'Essarts a glance full of bitterness, but excited, as d'Essarts was, with wine, this only provoked him to pursue the subject. In a tone of laughing railery, he continued:

“So weighty an affair may not rest, even on your testimony; most noble Bellegarde. You may have drank of some enchanted spring in that same wood where blooms this wondrous flower; under its influence these pretty conceits and this daring spirit, may have been nursed. Another must try his fortune in the wood, and steadfastly refusing all enchanted draughts, he must pursue