

GABRIELLE D'ESTRÈES.*

BY C.

CHAPTER V.

It was the fifth morning after the chase. Henry, alone in his chamber, paced to and fro with quick uneven steps, now pausing to gaze upon the storm which rioted without, or yet more frequently with half smothered exclamations, upon the messenger which had raised this tempest in his own breast. The unwelcome envoy had come in the shape of a letter, bearing date some few days back; the hand writing he had at once recognized,—it was that of his friend De Rosny. He briefly informed him of the breaking of the brittle truce, the renewal of hostilities, the recapture of Corbeil, and their success at Noyon, which they were then besieging, mentioned the reports as to the overwhelming force, which Philip of Spain was already preparing to place under the command of the Duke of Parma, and concluded by begging of Henry to return to his army, as treason was already busy, and but too successful with his mercenary and faithless troops.

Henry's face was pale and flushed by turns, as he read his trusted friend's letter, and pondered on the troubled course of his own life. From infancy he had inhaled the breath of the battle field—struggle after struggle; he had been forced to contend, even for his personal liberty, with the tyrannic Catherine de' Medici, who strove to enslave and debase not only body but soul. But the proud branch for which she had worked so unceasingly, so unscrupulously, was extinct. One by one its healthy boughs had become shrivelled, sapless; had fallen, leaving none to bear its name or diadem. The awful crimes by which she had laboured to consolidate and fix its power, had been met with a retribution as terrific, and now the persecuted Bourbon was heir to the throne of the Valois.

Happy had it been for France, could the seeds which their monarchs' crimes had sown, have been eradicated from her soil, when they had borne their retributive harvest to the guilty authors; but, alas! the offences of the sovereigns were doomed to be heavily visited on the people. The divisions which they had engendered, or nursed, still produced plentiful and bitter fruit.

Henry IV. had succeeded to a realm, where

religion was the mask for crime, and patriotism for selfishness. Ever since his accession to the title of its sovereign, for the sway was not yet accorded him, Henry had been in arms against, perhaps, the strongest portion of his subjects, sustaining himself by the tardy and ill-paid supplies with which the Protestant powers furnished him. The Leaguers were, in the meantime, assisted with heavy good will by Catholic Spain, whose king offered the Infanta's hand, as a prize to the winner of the crown. Yet in spite of difficulties, Henry's courageous and powerful mind, had hitherto succeeded in wresting the advantage to his own party; but now he again saw himself menaced with defeat and ruin, not only from his mercenaries, but also from many of his own subjects, who, regarding France as a wreck, sought only how they might secure to themselves the largest portion of the spoil.

And now, as Henry gazed back upon the troubled stream of his past life, and stretching forward into the future, saw but an ocean of war and turmoil, his heart sickened, and for the moment, influenced perhaps by some vague dream, he fancied he could willingly resign the throne for a less haughty seat, the paths to which were less rugged, where in quiet, he might escape from this enormity of treachery and selfishness. But not long did these thoughts rest, nor deeply did they sink in the monarch's soul, for even as he sadly muses on the noise and clangour of the battle field, memory has caught the peals of its spirit stirring music, and rouses his soul from this dream of sloth. In action too, only in incessant action, both of body and of mind, he felt he could escape from those feelings which were now giving a new and more sombre colouring to his existence. This very day, he determined to leave the castle. Ah! would he could also leave the feelings which there had birth. Though sad at heart, Henry felt, at least, the happy consciousness of right doing, when he resolved to say "Farewell," with his heart's secret untold, glad that he had not striven to wake a response in that young guileless heart,—that he had planted no thorns there,—grateful that he had resisted the desire of offering a love, which he felt would now be an insult to purity and truth.