

eyes the delicious certainty of her unchanged affection. He had once more clasped her warm and yielding hand, and in whispered tones they had exchanged the tender greetings of love. Highborn ladies also graced the board, and a select number of artists and amateurs, whom the Count, piquing himself on his love for the fine arts, was fond of assembling at his house—though on this occasion they were convened expressly to discuss the merits of the Magdalen, which formed almost the sole topic of conversation.

In order that it might engross the entire attention of his guests, the Count had caused it to be brought from the gallery, and placed in a niche opposite that side of the table where were ranged those deemed most competent to decide upon its merits. He was excessively solicitous to hear the general voice pronounce it an undoubted Guido; for, like many weak persons, he felt a pride in being an object of envy to those who, with probably more taste, had less wealth to expend in the purchase of pictures and statuary. Mignard had silenced every fear respecting his claim to the piece, but the Count was greatly annoyed when he heard him reply to Lebrun, who asked his opinion of it,

"I do not believe it to be a Guido; strongly marked as are the paintings of that great master, it is still possible to be deceived by a good imitation. But even if it can be proved his beyond all doubt, I do not hesitate to declare that, in my opinion, it is far from being executed in his best manner."

"Pardon me, sir, if I differ from you," replied the amateur; "I have studied not only this picture, but the general style and manner of Guido, till they are as familiar to me as the lines of my child's face, and I unhesitatingly pronounce this Magdalen to be his, and executed, too, in his very best and most faultless manner."

"The proud exultation with which the youthful artist listened to these words, uttered by one whose opinion in matters of taste had become a law, could scarcely be suppressed. He dared not trust himself to speak, but he bowed in silence, while the bevy of amateurs around the table echoed the decision of one from whom to have dissented would have been to cast a stigma on their own powers of discrimination.

"What say you now M. Mignard?" asked the Count, in a tone of triumph; "surely you will no longer venture to stand alone against the host opposed to you?"

"My opinion remains unchanged, sir," said the artist, firmly, but modestly; "nay so persuaded am I of its justice, that I will willingly wager three hundred louis with any person present, that the piece is not a Guido."

"Absurd!" ejaculated Lebrun, angrily; "Mignard, you are yet too young, both in years and in

your art, to hold out in this manner against older and more experienced men—but as your obstinacy merits punishment, I will accept your foolish wager; the sum, which I am sure of winning, will be a matter of convenience to me just now, and its loss a lesson that may profit you."

Every word which had been uttered relative to the picture, heightened the glory of Mignard; nothing could be added to enhance it, and moreover he felt that the affair was producing too much excitement, and that, were he longer to conceal the truth, it would seem that he did so, to feed upon the praise which every tongue lavished on his work, and therefore, with a blush of mingled pride and modesty, he replied to Lebrun,

"No, sir, I cannot permit you to accept a wager which I am certain of winning, nor was I in earnest when I proffered it. Count De Clairville, that Magdalen cost you two thousand crowns, but the gold remains untouched, and shall be restored to you,—believe me or not; and you, gentlemen, who have criticised the painting,—for, before these witnesses, I declare it to be my own work, an imitation only, as you will perceive on closer inspection, of that great artist, to whom you have been pleased to assign it."

Rosalie actually gasped for breath, as her lover made this announcement, so intense was her emotion, and the eyes of the friendly Roussard glistened with tears of delight, while the words "Impossible!" "absurd!" "presumption!" were uttered from various parts of the table.

"Give us the proof of what you thus boldly assert," shouted the Count, reddening with anger and disappointment; "yesterday you disclaimed the honour attributed to you: on what ground, then, are we to believe your word to-day?"

"Recollect, sir," said Mignard, calmly, "I did not disclaim it—I only evaded your charge."

"And from what motive did you do so?"

"Because, sir, I wished to substantiate the fact in the presence of witnesses, and because the moment had not arrived when to acknowledge it, would confer on me the greatest honour and advantage. You are aware of the guerdon it is to win for me, and therefore cannot marvel if I wish for the voices of those who have your confidence, to corroborate my truth, and banish all doubt from your mind."

The Count too well understood an allusion which was enigmatical to most of his guests; but he affected not to notice it, though a dark frown lowered upon his brow, as in a petulant tone he exclaimed,

"We will bandy no more words on the subject, M. Mignard, neither do we dispute your claim—though we require you to substantiate it by incontrovertible proof before we feel bound to yield our acknowledgments."

"That is easily done, sir," said the artist, un-