

lovely image of the enchanted lady of the masque. The king rallied him upon his absence of mind, and Rochester was well pleased when the banquet ended, and the signal was given to retire.

The thought of Alice and her quiet beauty visited not the young viscount's pillow that night, for the radiance of the lovely masquer had dazzled him, and her graceful form and brilliant eye were ever intruding between him and his sweet wildflower. The next morning was to be devoted to hunting, and the queen and ladies of the court were to accompany the king. Robert had excused himself on some frivolous plea from accompanying them; but he soon regretted having done so, as the thought occurred to him that the young countess might form one of the party; therefore, aware that he would receive a welcome from the king, he presented himself in his hunting suit, abruptly before his master.

"Ah! Robie, lad," said the pleased monarch. "I thought you could not resist the pleasure of such a day; I am glad you are come, my boy, and you shall have the prettiest dove in my cote for your companion."

Rochester well understood what the king meant, but he feigned a wish to be allowed to ride by His Majesty.

"No, no," said the king, his usually stolid face bright with good nature; "we will ride by our fair Annie, and illa bird must find his ain mate; but come, Robie, 'tis time we were going," and leaning familiarly on his favourite's arm, they descended to the court-yard. The horns sent forth their summons, and the queen and her attendants appeared equipped in the costly riding dresses of the time. The king insisted upon assisting Lady Annie, as he gaily termed her, to mount, and having done so, he turned round to the lady who stood near her, and in whom Rochester recognised the young Countess of Essex.

"Ah! fair lady, by your leave," he said, courteously, kissing her cheek, "this for last evening's divertisement—truant though you were, not to return to us; many an eye was sad with watching for you, and this young gallant's among the number," turning to Rochester and presenting him, he added, "I commit you, bonnie lassie, to safe charge for the day; my lord of Rochester is a true knight, and will guard you well."

It seemed to Rochester as if the fair girl whose hand he now took, to assist her to the saddle, was even more beautiful in her riding costume, than she had appeared amid all the decorations of the previous evening; and his heart thrilled at the thought that he should be her companion for many hours.

The countess was at first very reserved, almost shy; for, owing to the peculiar circumstances in

which she had been placed, a wedded child, she had lived a secluded life, and had all a rustic's diffidence and modesty, without any of her *gaucherie*. But her reserve soon yielded to the fascination of Rochester's manner, and as she looked up to him with her large soft eyes, full of a confiding expression, his heart sickened at the thought of those ties which bound her to another. Yet, even as the remembrance of Alice forced itself upon him, he thanked God that he was saved from the danger of forsaking her, by the impossibility of obtaining the object of his new fancy; but little did he know the weakness of his own heart, and the fearful strength which unrestrained passion will acquire.

This was but the commencement of the intoxication which was to prove his ruin. Day after day he met the countess, in walks, in rides, and in the evening dance; they were, in short, constantly together, and though they had not as yet spoken of love, each knew it was in their hearts. Overbury, aware of all that passed, rather encouraged the intercourse, for he thought it would be the means of detaching Rochester from his first love; and viewing the young countess as already married, he supposed, of course, the affair would go no further than harmless gallantry allowed. Reasoning thus sophistically, for so wise a man, he lent his aid in facilitating their interviews, and wrote for the young viscount letters full of love and poetry, which did much for his cause with the countess. Overbury was a man of cultivated taste and imagination, and could write with fluency; but to Rochester it was an almost impossible task, and when attempted, there was no grace nor life in his compositions.

But soon a rumour of the immediate return of the Earl of Essex put a stop to this state of things, and aroused the lovers to a sense of the misery of their situation. Then, breaking through all restraint, Rochester poured forth his passionate love at the feet of the countess, and she solemnly vowed never to receive Essex as her husband, but by coldness and disdain, to force him to divorce her.

When Rochester told Overbury what was the intention of the countess, he found, to his surprise, that Sir Thomas, who had before seemed to encourage his passion, now opposed it; for seeing but too clearly the effect of such a course, he implored the infatuated lover, not only for his own sake, but for that of the young and pretty countess, not to consent to the measure; she had proposed, since disgrace and wretchedness must follow a union founded on the rupture of the most sacred ties. A powerful party, he said, would be found among the nobility against him, who would effect his ruin; and finally, he reminded him,