

ing with an indifferent eye around him, when this magnificent pageant was rolled into the room. At first he scarcely noticed it, for he was weary of the common and fantastic spectacles he had so often gazed upon, till a voice of exquisite melody attracted his attention, and he turned to see from whence it came. Then he was rivetted, not indeed by the fancy and beauty of the scenery, though surpassing as it did, any he had ever seen before, but by the lovely maiden who was threading the labyrinthine walks of the forest of Ludlow. Never had any being so brilliantly beautiful met his eye before; he feared to speak, lest he should dissolve the charm, for he could not believe her mortal; if she were so, from whence had she come, and why had he never till now beheld her? These questions passed rapidly through his mind, and he was turning to ask from some one a solution of his doubts, when the appearance of the other actors in the scene arrested his attention. As Comus and his crew of drunken revellers encircled the fair girl, Rochester hastily sprung forward, as if to her assistance, then recollecting himself, drew suddenly back. But the impatient gesture had been noticed by a keen observer, Sir Thomas Overbury, who quickly read all that was passing in his friend's mind, and he hoped through the impression which he saw the beauty of the unknown had produced on the young earl, to win him from his connexion with the humble Alice.

"Is she not beautiful?" he said, approaching Robert.

"Is she mortal, or a divinity?" asked the young man; "surely she must have winged her way hither from some brighter sphere, and I tremble lest she depart as suddenly as she has appeared."

"You need have no such fear," answered his friend. "Can you be ignorant that this transcendent creature is no other than the youthful Countess of Essex? She has just arrived at court, and this is her first appearance; surely you must have heard her history?"

"She is a daughter of the house of Howard—is she not?"

"Yes; and was married when only thirteen by the king's order, to the young Earl of Essex, but one year her senior; the poor children thought it a pretty thing to be wedded, and could not realize how much of their future happiness was involved by the act. He was sent to the continent to complete his education, and she returned to the nursery from which she is now just freed; the earl is expected home shortly, and her parents have sent the young bride to court, that she may be prepared to adorn the high place to which she is destined. You must be introduced to her—report speaks of her as more fascinating than any of the hours of the court."

Rochester waited with impatience till the pageant was finished; the beauty of the language, the purity of the sentiment had not power to interest him. He doubted not he should be presented to the countess when the entertainment ended; but he was disappointed; the masque was concluded, and the ponderous machinery was rolled from the stately hall; but the beautiful vision returned no more that night.

The gifted author of the masque, which had so delighted the company, had been invited to be present at its performance, and he was now sought out, by Queen Anne's commands, to receive her thanks for the pleasure he had afforded her. Milton was then in extreme youth, and so delicate and beautiful was his person, that in the university, of which he was still a member, he was known by the appellation of the "Lady of Christ's College," and in later life, when he visited Italy, the poet Manso celebrated his charms in an epigram which is still preserved, and has been thus translated:

"So perfect thou in mind, and form, and face,
Thou'rt not of English, but Angelic race."

As he approached the queen, and bent humbly before her, his colour deepened, and he looked like the impersonation of his own exquisite sentiments.

The queen gave him her hand to kiss, and complimenting him on the beauty of the masque, which so far excelled any she had ever before seen, she expressed the hope that he would remain at court, and often thus contribute to their divertisement. Then unclasping a chain from her neck, to which was attached a miniature of the king, set with brilliants—

"Wear this," she said, "as a token of our appreciation of your talents, and let it remind you, whether you remain near us or not, that you will always find a friend and patron in your sovereign."

The young bard gracefully bowed his thanks, and hastened to a more retired spot, where he could indulge, unobserved, the gratified feelings caused by the unexpected success of his first poetic effort.

The evening's amusements were crowned by a banquet, where all that was rich and rare, that could please the eye or the palate, were collected; an immense party, representing a fortified city, formed the centre of the table; and around it were clustered many a Chinese pagoda, Grecian temple, and Egyptian pyramid, wrought with cunning hand from various confections.

Rochester was placed at the king's left hand; but he did not as usual contribute to the gaiety of the evening, for his thoughts were filled with the