

She received somewhat coolly the congratulations with which her friends and relations overwhelmed her; and when the folding doors of the saloon were thrown open, and the king gave his hand to the Duchess de Montmorenci to lead her into the banqueting-room, where a sumptuous entertainment had been laid out in honour of the occasion, she took the offered arm of the man to whom she had just affianced herself, with an averted head, and a sigh escaped her.

"I fear," said he, in a low voice, "that you have been compelled to do violence to your feelings in signing that contract."

These were the first words that Conde had ever addressed to his beautiful fiancée, and there was a deep and tender melody in the rich but melancholy tones of his voice, that thrilled to her heart not less strangely than the penetrating glances of his fine dark eyes had previously done.

"I shall not hate him quite so much as I thought I should," was her mental response to this considerate question; but instead of answering the prince with reciprocal frankness, she replied with some hauteur—

"I am not accustomed to do any thing on compulsion, Monsieur."

It was now Conde's turn to sigh—he did so from the bottom of his heart: and Charlotte felt angry with herself for the perverseness which had prompted her to repel his first advance towards a confidential understanding.

A ball succeeded the banquet. The prince de Conde did not dance, though reminded that courtly etiquette required that he should at least tread the measure with his bride elect; and Charlotte found a more gallant, if not a more suitable partner, in her admiring sovereign, with whom she once more danced the graceful pavon, and bounded, with flying feet, through the light courante, heedless of the grave looks of disapprobation with which her vivacious enjoyment of her favourite amusement was regarded by him to whom her hand was now plighted.

An early day had been fixed by the king for the nuptials of Bassompierre, and Mademoiselle D'Aunale. Charlotte expressed a wish that the marriage should precede theirs, and, in the meantime, the Prince de Conde availed himself of the privilege of a betrothed lover, in passing much of his time at the hotel de Montmorenci; but when there, his attention appeared more engrossed by the parents and the youthful brother of his fiancée, than by herself. In conversation with them, the "shy reserved boy of Conde," as Henri Quatre was accustomed to call his studious cousin, could be eloquent, graceful, and even witty. He possessed talents of the finest order; his mind had been highly cultivated; and there was sound sense, and beautiful morality in every thing he said. Charlotte, seated at her tapestry frame, beside her mother, could not help listening, at first with girlish curiosity, but, by degrees, with profound attention, to the observations which he addressed to her brother on the course of history he was reading; and when she saw his pale cheek kindling with the glow of virtuous and heroic feeling, and his dark, penetrating eyes beaming with intellectual brightness, she blushed at the thought that those eyes should have witnessed so much vanity and frivolity in herself.

Sometimes she felt mortified that he addressed so little of his conversation to her; and then, without reflecting that she had rebuffed and repelled him in the first instance, she was piqued into a haughty imitation of his reserve, when alone with him: and when surrounded by the gay crowd of her courtly admirers, she endeavoured, by the exercise of coquetry, to shake his equanimity, and provoke him either into a quarrel, or an acknowledgment of love.

She was convinced that he had ceased to regard her with indifference; for she had more than once detected his illustrious dark eyes fixed upon her with that intense expression of passionate feeling, which can never be mistaken by its object; yet he had resolutely refrained from giving to that feeling words; and it seemed hard to the most beautiful girl in France, that she should be wedded, unwedded, by him of all others, from whom she most desired to hear the language of love.

"If I could but once see this youthful stoic at my feet, I should feel prouder of that triumph than of all the homage which has been offered to me this night by 'him of the white plume,' and his gallant peers," sighed Charlotte to herself, as she was returning from the last ball at the Louvre at which she was to appear as Mademoiselle de Montmorenci.

It was the most brilliant she had ever attended; and though on the eve of her bridal, Charlotte ventured on the hazardous experiment of exciting the jealousy of her betrothed. She succeeded only too well, and Conde, unable to conceal his emotion, quitted the royal salon at an early hour. All the interest that the beautiful and admired Mademoiselle de Montmorenci had taken in the gay soiree, departed with the pale agitated stripling, whom every one present suspected of being the object of her aversion: and pleading a head-ache to excuse her from fulfilling her engagement of dancing a second time with the king, she retired almost immediately afterwards.

On entering her own apartment her attendant presented her with a billet. It was from the Prince de Conde—the first he had ever addressed to her.

"CHARLOTTE DE MONTMORENCI,"

"Late as it may be when you receive this, I must see you before you retire to rest. You will find me in the east saloon."

"HENRI DE CONDE."

"Not even the common forms, unmeaning though they be which courtesy requires, observed in this his first, his only communication to me!" thought Mademoiselle de Montmorenci as she crushed the paper together in her hand. She took the silver lamp from the toilet, and dismissing her damsel, repaired to the appointed trysting place; then, unclosing the door with a tremulous hand, she stood before Conde with a cheek so pale, that when he first caught a glimpse of her dimly shadowed reflection, in the cold glassy surface of the mirrored panel, opposite to which he was standing, he absolutely started; so different did she look from the sparkling animated beauty whom he had left, scarcely an hour ago, leading off the dance with Royalty in the glittering salons of the Louvre.

"Charlotte de Montmorenci," said he, addressing her in a low deep voice, "I hold in my hand the contract of our betrothment. That contract was signed by you with evident reluctance, and it will cost you no pain to cancel it." He paused, and fixed his dark penetrating eyes on her face as if to demand an answer.

Charlotte tried to speak, but there was a convulsive rising in her throat that prevented articulation. The glittering carcanet that encircled her fair neck appeared, at that moment, to oppress her with an insufferable weight, and to have suddenly tightened almost to suffocation. She drew a deep inspiration, and raising her trembling hands, essayed to unloose the clasp, but in vain. It seemed to her that the hysterical emotion that oppressed her was occasioned by the weight of this costly ornament, and its rich appendages, and that her life depended on her instant release from their pressure; and after a second ineffectual attempt to unclasp the jewelled circlet, she actually turned an imploring glance for help upon the real cause of her distress—her offended lover. Conde's assistance was promptly accorded; but, either through the intricacy of the spring, or his inexperience in all matters relating to female decorations, or, it might be, that he was at that moment not less agitated than his pale and trembling fiancée, his attempts to unclasp the carcanet were as unsuccessful as her own. While thus employed, her silken ringlets were unavoidably mingled with his dark locks; and more than once his brow came in contact with her polished cheek, and when, at last, by an effort of main strength, he succeeded in bursting the fastening of the jewelled collar, she sunk with a convulsive sob into the arms that were involuntarily extended to receive her. For the first time, Conde held that form of perfect loveliness to his bosom, and, forgetful of all the stern resolves that had, for the last few hours, determined him to part with her for ever—forgetful of pride, anger, jealousy, and reason itself, he covered her cold forehead with passionate kisses, and implored her, by every title of fond endearment, to revive. Those soothing words those tender caresses, recalled her to a sweet but agitating consciousness; and when she perceived on whose breast she was supported, a burst of tears relieved her full heart, and she sobbed with the vehemence of a child that cannot cease to weep even when the cause of its distress has been removed.

"Speak but one word," cried Conde. "Have I occasioned this emotion—these tears?"

Charlotte could not speak, but her silence was eloquent.

"Nay, but I must be told, in explicit terms, that you love me," cried Conde; "it is a point on which I dare not suffer myself to be deceived."

"Mighty fine!" said the fair Montmorenci, suddenly recovering her vivacity and smiling through her tears, "and so you have the vanity to expect that I am to reverse the order of things, and play the wooer to you, for your more perfect satisfaction, after you have informed me of your obliging intention of canceling our contract of betrothment."

"Ah, Charlotte! if you did but know how much I have suffered before I could resolve to resign the happiness of calling you mine!"

"Well, if you are resolved, I have no more to say," rejoined Charlotte proudly extricating herself from his arms.

"But I have," said Conde, taking her by both her hands, which he retained in spite of one or two perverse attempts to withdraw them. "Fie, this is childish petulance!" cried he, pressing them to his lips; "but, my sweet Charlotte. The moment is passed for trifling on either side. These coquetries might have cost us both only too dear. We have caused each other much pain for want of a little candour."

"Why, then, did you not tell me that you loved me?" whispered Charlotte.

"Because I dared not resign my heart into your keeping before I was assured that I might trust you with my honour."

"Oh, heavens!" exclaimed Charlotte, becoming very pale; "and is it possible that you could doubt?"

"Charlotte, I was too well acquainted with the king's character to behold the undisguised manifestations of his passion for my affianced bride with indifference. The attentions of a royal lover were flattering, I perceived, to the vanity of a young and beautiful

woman. The complacency with which they were, at times, received, and my knowledge of the motives which induced the king to break your first engagement with Bassompierre were sufficient to alarm a man of honour," said Conde with a darkening brow.

"You are talking in enigmas, Henri de Conde," rejoined Mademoiselle de Montmorenci.

"If you are ignorant of the fact, that Henri of France separated you from his handsome favourite, because he feared that such a husband would be a formidable rival to himself, no one else is: for Bassompierre has made the particulars of his sovereign's conversation with him on that subject too public for it to remain a matter of doubt. You look incredulous, Charlotte, but you shall hear the very words in which the king made this audacious declaration—'I am, myself,' said he to Bassompierre, 'madly in love with your beautiful Montmorenci.'"

"Ha! did he, a married man, dare to make such an acknowledgment?"

"Yes, Charlotte; and, moreover, impudently added—'If she loves you, I shall detest you. You must give up either her or me. You will not of course risk the loss of my favour. I shall marry her to my cousin Conde.' Yes, Charlotte, the plain 'shy boy of Conde,' as he generally styles me, was designed for the honour of being this husband of convenience; but had I known his guileful project at the time, when he required me to sign the contract, not all the power of France, nor even the influence of your charms, should have bribed me to subscribe that paper."

"It is not now irrevocable," said Charlotte, proudly.

"It is if you are willing to accede to the conditions on which I am ready to join in its fulfilment."

"Name them."

"You must see the king no more after our marriage."

"That will be no sacrifice; and, after your communication, I could not look upon him without indignation. How little did I imagine that such baseness could sully the glory of him of whom fame has spoken such bright things!"

"Charlotte, it is his prevailing foible. The sin that was unchecked in youth, gained strength in middle age, and now amounts to madness. There will be no security for our wedded happiness if we remain in his dominions; but can I ask you to forsake friends and country for me?" said Conde.

"Shall I not find all these things, and more also, in the husband of my heart?" returned Charlotte, tenderly.

"Ah, Charlotte! can you forgive my ungentle doubts?" said Conde, throwing himself at her feet.

"Yes, for they are proofs of the sincerity of your affection; and had you been less jealous of my honour, I should not have loved you so well," said she. "From this hour we are as one; and it will be the happiness of my life to resign myself to your guidance."

"Then, my sweet Charlotte, I must, for the sake of the fading roses on these fair cheeks, dismiss you to your pillow, without farther parlance," returned Conde. They exchanged a mute caress, and parted.

The marriage was celebrated with royal pomp on the following day, at high noon, in the church of Notre Dame. Conde received his lovely bride from the hand of his royal rival; but the king's exultation in the success of the deep laid scheme, by which he had separated the object of his lawless passion from her first lover, to unite her with one from whom he vainly imagined he should have little to fear, was of brief duration. The nuptial festivities received a sudden interruption on the following morning, in consequence of the disappearance of both bride and bridegroom; and what was stranger still, it was soon discovered that they had eloped together. The good people of Paris were thrown into the most vivacious amazement at an event so entirely without parallel, either in history, poetry, or romance, as the first prince of the blood running away with his own wife; and their astonishment increased, when the circumstances of this lawful abduction transpired, by which it appeared that the Prince de Conde, accompanied by his illustrious bride, quitted their chamber an hour before dawn, and that he had actually carried her off, riding behind him on a pillion, disguised in the grey frieze cloak and hood of a farmer's wife.

The enamoured king, transported with rage at having been thus outwitted by the boy-bridegroom, gave orders for an immediate pursuit. The wedded lovers were, however, beyond his reach. They had crossed the Spanish frontier before their route was traced, and Philip the Third afforded them a refuge in his dominions.

The refusal of that monarch to give up these illustrious fugitives, produced a declaration of war from Henri. He was, in fact, so pertinacious in his attempts to obtain possession of the object of his lawless passion, that it was not till after his death that Conde ventured to return, with his lovely wife, from the voluntary exile to which they had devoted themselves as a refuge from dishonour. The splendid talents and noble qualities of Henri de Conde have obtained for him so distinguished a place in the annals of his country that the title of the "Great Conde" would undoubtedly have pertained to him, if the renown of his illustrious