

She is never seen except by a very few of Master Philip's ancient and chosen friends, but they have spread abroad a report of her beauty, and the young gallants are all on fire to behold her. But in vain, for if she rides forth her father is ever by her side, and even there she is so closely masked or veiled, that not a feature can be seen, except indeed her eyes, for they will sparkle through both mask and veil, and they have pierced so many hearts, that the wary merchant hath been sorely pestered with countless suitors for her hand."

"And have none found favour with him?" asked Sir Enguerrard.

"Not one as yet," returned Simon. "In truth, he hath seemed to scorn all who could think of wooing while our king remained in durance, and the keys of our city were in the hands of strangers. A brief time since, an old knight of Flanders, who was with the English at the siege of Calais, chancing to sup with Master Philip, recounted so many cunning stratagems, by which many strongholds about that time were captured, with little loss of life, that my good friend hath since dwelt upon these relations, and seemed to think it an easy matter, for one skilled in war, to contrive some ruse by which yon castle might be recaptured, and the city again restored to us. Nay, so much did he brood upon it at one time that I sometimes thought on this subject his mind was disordered; for, once being in an adjoining room, I heard him dismiss a young gallant, who came to sue for his daughter, with these words: 'Yes, thou shalt have her when thou hast wrested yonder fortress from the knaves who hold it; and not till then. To him who will achieve this deed I will give her—and to him only. Thou hast thy answer, and now go bruit it abroad, that I may be free from further persecution.'"

"There is a touch of insanity upon his brain, surely," said the knight. "But thinkest thou he will hold his fair child in a state of constraint, till one who shall have performed this task appear to claim her?"

"I know not; the idea that for a time so earnestly possessed him, had well nigh faded, as I deemed, from his mind, for till this eve he hath not for many weeks alluded to it, convinced, so I believed, of its impracticability; but thou hast put him upon the scent again, yet how it will end I know not. Of one thing, however, I am certain—pretty Mistress Gabrielle will never wed till her father finds for her a wooer in all points suited to his taste—and then, if she sanction his choice, but not without, these old rascals may stand a chance to ring with the sounds of bridal merriment."

"This is passing strange," said the knight, with a thoughtful smile. "And how, Master de Vaux, doth the maiden herself affect the life of seclusion she is constrained to lead?"

"How—dost thou ask? why cheerily, forsooth, and blithely, as the caged bird that sings guiltily in the gilded cage where it hath been reared, nor pines for the liberty which it hath never known. The girl is but a child as yet, and takes upon sure trust all her father tells her—thinking it naught strange, that in these unsettled times, he should choose for her a calm and gentle retirement; nay, ignorant of the world, she would herself sink abashed from contact with strangers, and the rude topics that now-a-days form the chief discourse of men."

"And knows she aught of his singular resolve concerning the bestowal of her hand?" asked the knight.

"Naught, either of his plans or purposes, fair sir. She is happy in his affection, confident in his care and goodness, and, with a cheerful temper and an active mind, finds interest and amusement in the many and varied sources of enjoyment with which his love surrounds her; for he seems to live only for her happiness, and the fear of losing her, as he once lost an idol quite as dear, and for whom he still mourns, is his only motive for secluding her from all eyes and all temptation, till he can give his treasure to one well tried and proved, and thus only, worthy of the dear and sacred trust."

Sir Enguerrard's imagination was fired by the lovely picture which Master Simon's careless touches presented to it. The beauty of the young Gabrielle, her innocence, her gaiety, her child-like contentment and submission, filled him with a deep interest in her welfare, and an earnest desire to behold her. The air of mystery and romance that her father undesignedly cast around her, heightened this interest and desire, till, imbued as he was with the chivalry of a most gallant and chivalrous age, a passionate longing possessed him to win the hand, whose value was so greatly enhanced by the dangers and difficulties to be conquered, before he could obtain it.

The return of Master Philip put an end to the conversation. He reported well of Brown Griseld, for her malady, as he found, proceeded from disinclination to make her supper of some musty provender, with which the careless groom had supplied her crib, the pampered brute giving audible testimony, by loud snorting, and other marks of disapprobation, that she thought herself grievously imposed upon.

Simon de Vaux, shortly after, took his leave; but Sir Enguerrard sat till a late hour, discussing with his host of battles and sieges, and recount-