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## CHARLOTTE DE MONTMORENCI.

A TALE OF THE FRENCH CHRONICLES.

By Agnes Strickland.

IT was the second morning after Charlotte de Montmorenci's first ball; but the enchantments with which that memorable evening had been fraught still floated before her youthful fancy. She had thought of nothing but the Louvre and its glittering pageantry all day; and her pillow had been haunted with dreams of Henri Quatre, and the gay and gallant nobles of his court who had vied with each other in offering the most intoxicating homage to her charms. Charlotte de Montmorenci was the most beautiful girl in France, and the sensation produced by her first appearance at court, was enough to dazzle the mind of a damsel only just emancipated from the sober restraints of a conventual education. She had danced the *pavon* with Henri himself, who had been lavish, on that occasion, of the seductive flattery which he was so well skilled to whisper in a lady's ear. Charlotte had found this incense only too agreeable; but the pleasure with which she was disposed to listen to the compliments of Royalty, received something very like a check from the impertinent espionage of a pair of penetrating dark eyes, which, whenever she raised her own, she encountered, fixed upon her with looks expressive rather of reproof than admiration.

How dared any eyes address language so displeasing to the reigning beauty of the evening, especially when her affianced lover, the sprightly heir of Bassompierre, appeared highly gratified with the brilliant success that had attended her presentation at court? Bassompierre was the handsomest and most admired of all the peers of France. He stood very high in the favour of his sovereign; and so generally irresistible was he considered by the ladies, that his choice of Mademoiselle de Montmorenci had entitled her to the envy of half the females of the court, who had vainly endeavoured to fix his roving heart.

Charlotte, in accepting him, had driven a hundred lovers to despair; for the beautiful and wealthy daughter of the most illustrious peer of France, from the moment she quitted her convent, had been surrounded by suitors. The provoking dark eyes, whose impertinent observations had annoyed and offended her in the royal *salon de danse*, did not belong to any of these luckless gallants. It would have been difficult, perhaps, for any lady, however fair, to reject the addresses of a man with such a pair of eyes, if their owner had rendered them as eloquent in impassioned pleading as they were in reproof. These unauthorised monitors, too, pertained not to the grave and stately Sully, or any of the elder worthies of the court, whom wisdom, virtues, and mature years might entitle to play the moralist, but to a pale, melancholy stripling, who engaged the attention of no one in the glittering circle but the neglected queen. With her he appeared to be on terms of affectionate confidence; and it was from behind her chair that he directed those glances which excited the surprise and displeasure of the fair Montmorenci.

The expression of those eyes, to say nothing of their singular beauty, haunted Charlotte after her return to the hotel de Montmorenci; and she regretted that she had not asked Bassompierre who the person was that had conducted himself in so extraordinary a manner. She had thought of propounding the inquiry more than once during the evening, but was unwilling to call her lover's attention to a circumstance that was mortifying to her self-love. She fell asleep with the determination of amusing Bassompierre, when he called to pay his *devoir* to her the next morning, with a whimsical description of the pale dark-eyed boy; trusting that her powers of mimicry would elicit from her sprightly lover the name of the person she sketched without betraying her curiosity.

The following day, at as early an hour as courtly etiquette permitted, the salons of the Duchess de Montmorenci were crowded with visitors of the highest rank, all eager to offer their compliments to her beautiful daughter. He of the mysterious dark eyes, and Francois Bassompierre, were however not among the visitors. Charlotte was surprised and piqued at this neglect on the part of her lover, and resolved to punish him by a very haughty reception the next time he entered her presence; but he neither came nor sent to enquire after her health that day.

The next morning the Duke de Montmorenci, after his return from the king's levee, said to his daughter—

"Charlotte, the king has forbidden your marriage with young Bassompierre."

"Vastly impertinent of the king, I think! What reason does he give for this unprecedented act of tyranny?"

"That you are worthy of a more illustrious alliance."

"I wish King Henri would mind his own business, instead of interfering in mine," said Charlotte angrily.

"My dear child, you are ungrateful to our gracious sovereign, who has expressed his intention of marrying you to his own kinsman, the first prince of the blood."

"And who may he be?"

"The young Prince de Conde, the illustrious descendant of a line of heroes, and, after Henri's infant sons, the heir-presumptive to the throne of France. Think of that, my daughter!"

"I will not think of anything but Bassompierre," replied Charlotte resolutely. "It is very barbarous of the king to endeavour to separate those whom love has united."

"Love!" repeated the Duke. "Bah! you cannot say that you seriously love young Bassompierre."

"I think him very handsome and agreeable, at any rate; and I am determined to marry him, and no one else. Ah! I comprehend the reason of his absence now. He has been forbidden to see me by that cruel Henri."

"You are right, Charlotte; it is in obedience to the injunctions of the sovereign, that Bassompierre has discontinued his visits to you. You will see him no more."

"Have I not said that I will not resign him?"

"Yes, my child, but he has resigned you."

"Resigned me!" exclaimed Charlotte, starting from her chair with a burst of indignant surprise; "Nay, that is impossible; unless, indeed, you have told him that I am faithless, or that I wish him to sacrifice his happiness in order to contract a nobler alliance."

"On the word of a Montmorenci, he has been told nothing, except that it was the king's pleasure that he should relinquish his engagement with you, and marry the heiress of the Duke d'Anmale."

"How, marry another? But I know Bassompierre too well to believe he will act so basely."

"My poor Charlotte, you are little acquainted with the disposition of men of the world and courtiers, or you would not imagine the possibility of your hand being placed in competition with the loss of the royal favour. Bassompierre, instead of acting like a romantic boy, and forfeiting the king's regard for the sake of a pretty girl, who cares not a whit more for him than he does for her, has cancelled his contract with Charlotte Marguerite de Montmorenci, and affianced himself to Mademoiselle d'Anmale."

"The heartless minion!" cried Charlotte, with flashing eyes; "would that I had some means of evincing my scorn and contempt of this baseness!"

"The surest way of doing that, my child, will be to accept the illustrious consort whom the king has been graciously pleased to provide for you."

"I think so too," replied Charlotte, after a pause; "but what sort of a man is the Prince de Conde?"

"He is said to possess great and noble qualities," said the duke; but he is at present only in his minority, and is withal of a reserved disposition. There is, however, no doubt but the companionship of a wife of your brilliant wit and accomplishments will draw out the fine talents with which this amiable prince is endowed, and render him worthy of his distinguished ancestry."

"I confess," observed Charlotte, "that I should prefer a man whose claims to my respect were of a less adventitious character. I should like to be the wife of a hero."

"So you will, in all probability, if you marry Henri de Conde. He is the last representative of a line whose heritage is glory, and of whose alliance even a Montmorenci might be proud," returned her father.

He then hastened to communicate to the king the agreeable intelligence that his daughter had offered no objections to a marriage with his youthful ward and kinsman the Prince de Conde.

"It is well, replied the monarch; I will myself present the Prince de Conde to his fair bride, and the contract shall be signed in my presence this evening."

The Duke and Duchess de Montmorenci were charmed at the idea of an alliance that offered to their only daughter no very remote prospect of sharing the throne of France. As for the fair Charlotte, her pride alone having been wounded by the desertion of Bassompierre, she took the readiest way of dissipating any chagrin his defection had caused, by making *une grande toilette* for the reception of the new candidate for her hand. So long was she engaged in this interesting occupation, that a pompous and continuous flourish of trumpets announced the arrival of the royal cortege at the hotel de Montmorenci, before she had concluded

the arrangement of ruff and fardingale to her own satisfaction.

Her entrance was greeted with a suppressed murmur of admiration, and the graceful manner with which she advanced to offer her homage to the sovereign, excited fresh applause.

"Ah, my cousin," cried the enamoured monarch, turning to the Prince de Conde, "what an enviable man am I not about to render you, in uniting you to so charming a bride! By the mass, if I were a bachelor, I must have kept her for myself, and laid my crown at her feet; and, even as it is, I feel more pain than I am willing to confess in bestowing her upon another."

Henri Quatre felt the hand of the youthful beauty, which he had retained in his own, while addressing this high-flown compliment to her future husband, tremble in his grasp. Charlotte was conscious that her sovereign was availing himself of this opportunity of pressing her fairy fingers, with more ardour than became the paternal character he had assumed. A deep blush overspread her countenance as the question suggested itself to her mind. "Wherefore has he taken so much pains to separate me from Francois Bassompierre?" and, at the same moment, she stole a furtive glance at him, whose destiny was, from that hour, to be so closely connected with her own, and encountered the dark penetrating eyes, whose scrutiny had so much disturbed her at the Louvre. They were still bent on her face with the same grave mournful expression, as if intended to pierce into her very soul. Those beautiful but searching eyes belonged to Henri de Conde. Scarcely had she made this startling discovery, when the king, assuming the imposing characteristics of majesty, which so much better became his mature age than the light and reckless tone of gallantry in which he had before indulged, presented the Prince de Conde to her in due form. Then, putting her hand into that of his pale, thoughtful kinsman, he pronounced the patriarchal blessing of the sovereign on their approaching union.

Charlotte started, and impulsively drew back from the icy touch of the cold hand that then faintly closed on hers. There was nothing of tenderness, or encouragement, in the sternly-composed features of Conde; no trait of that silently expressive homage, which is so dear to the heart of woman; nothing, in fact, to compensate for the absence of manly beauty and courtly grace in a very young man. Though the habits of politeness and self-control, which are so early impressed upon the daughters of the great, prevented the fair Montmorenci from betraying her secret dissatisfaction, she ventured to direct an appealing look to her parents, as if to implore their interference; but her mother turned away, and her father gave her a glance which intimated that it was too late to recede.

The marriage contract was read, and subscribed by the king in his threefold capacity of *suzerain*, or paramount liege-lord of the contracting parties; and also as the next of kin and guardian of the illustrious bridegroom, who was an orphan and a minor. It was next witnessed by the parents of the bride. The pen was then presented to the Prince de Conde. He paused, and appeared irresolute; darted a glance of suspicious inquiry at the king, and bent one of his searching looks on the face of her to whom he was required to plight himself. Mademoiselle de Montmorenci was unconscious of his scrutiny. Overpowered by the strangeness and agitating nature of the scene, she stood, with downcast eyes and a varying colour, leaning her clasped hands for support on the shoulder of her only brother, afterwards so celebrated in the annals of France as the illustrious and unfortunate Henri de Montmorenci. Never had she appeared so charming as that moment, when the feminine emotions of fear and shame had lent their softening shade to beauty, which was, perhaps, too dazzling in its faultless perfection, and calculated rather to excite wonder and admiration, than to inspire tenderness. The stern expression of Conde's features relaxed as he gazed upon her, and observed the virgin hues of "celestial rosy red," and "angel whiteness," that came and went in her fair cheek. His countenance brightened, he took the pen with sudden animation, and, with a firm hand, and in bold free characters, subscribed his name to the contract.

"Charlotte Marguerite de Montmorenci, your signature is required," said the duke her father to the evidently reluctant damsel.

"I have a great mind not to sign," said she, in a confidential tone aside to her brother, who was two years younger than herself.

"Are you minded to offer an unprovoked affront to an honourable gentleman, and to afford a triumph to a recreant lover?" was the whispered response of the youthful heir of Montmorenci.

Charlotte advanced to the table, and signed the instrument