

Levett Yeats Sidney

# The Heart of Denise, and Other Tales



Yeats Levett

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# Levett Yeats S. Sidney

## The Heart of Denise, and Other Tales

### THE HEART OF DENISE

#### CHAPTER I.

#### M. DE LORGNAC'S PRICE

One afternoon I sat alone in the little anteroom before the Queen Mother's cabinet. In front of me was an open door. The curtains of violet velvet, spangled with golden lilies, were half drawn, and beyond extended a long, narrow, and gloomy corridor, leading into the main salon of the Hôtel de Soissons, from which the sound of music and occasional laughter came to me. My sister maids of honour were there, doubtless making merry as was their wont with the cavaliers of the court, and I longed to be with them, instead of watching away the hours in the little prison, I can call it no less, that led to the Queen's closet.

In the corridor were two sentries standing as motionless as statues. They were in shadow, except where here and there a straggling gleam of light caught their armour with dazzling effect, and M. de Lorgnac, the lieutenant of the guard, paced slowly up and down the full length of the passage, twisting his dark moustache, and turning abruptly when he came within a few feet of the entrance to the anteroom.

I was so dull and wearied that it would have been something even to talk to M. de Lorgnac, bear though he was, but he took no more notice of me than if I were a stick or a stone, and yet there were, I do not know how many, who would have given their ears for a *tête-à-tête* with Denise de Mieux.

I ought not to have been surprised, for the lieutenant showed no more favour to any one else than he did to me, and during the year or more I had been here, enjoying for the first time in my life the gaieties of the Court, after my days in apron-strings at Lespaille, my uncle de Tavannes' seat, I had not, nor had a soul as far as I knew, seen M. de Lorgnac exchange more than a formal bow and a half-dozen words with any woman. He was poor as a homeless cat, his patrimony, as we heard, being but a sword and a ruined tower somewhere in the Corrèze. So, as he had nothing to recommend him except a tall, straight figure, and a reputation for bravery-qualities that were shared by a hundred others with more agreeable manners, we left Monsieur L'Ours, as we nicknamed him, to himself, and, to say the truth, he did not seem much discomposed by our neglect.

As for me I hardly noticed his existence, sometimes barely returning his bow; but often have I caught him observing me gravely with a troubled look in his grey eyes, and as ill-luck would have it, this was ever when I was engaged in some foolish diversion, and I used to feel furious, as I thought he was playing the spy on me, and press on to other folly, over which, in the solitude of my room, I would stamp my foot with vexation, and sometimes shed tears of anger.

This afternoon, when I thought of the long hours I had to spend waiting the Queen's pleasure, of the mellow sunlight which I could see through the glazing of the dormer window that lit the room, of the gaiety and brightness outside, I felt dull and wearied beyond description. I had foolishly neglected to bring a book or my embroidery, so that even my fingers had to be still, and in my utter boredom I believe I should have actually welcomed the company of Catherine's hideous dwarf, Majosky.

It had come to me that perhaps M. de Lorgnac, who had, no doubt, a weary enough watch in the corridor, might feel disposed to beguile a little of his tedium, and to amuse me for a few minutes, and I had purposely drawn the curtains and opened the door of the anteroom so that he might see I

was there, and alone, and that the door of the Queen Mother's cabinet was shut. I then, I confess it, put myself in the most becoming attitude I could think of, but, as I have said before, he took not the slightest notice of me, and walked up and down, *tramp, tramp*, backwards and forwards as if he were a piece of clockwork-like that which Messer Cosmo, the Italian, made for Monsieur, the King's brother.

I began to feel furious at the slight-it was no less I considered-that he was putting on me, and wished I had the tongue and the spirit of Mademoiselle de Chateauneuf, so that I could make my gentleman smart as she did M. de Luxembourg. For a moment or so I pulled at the silken fringe of my *tourette-de-nez*, and then made up my mind to show M. de Lorgnac that the very sight of him was unpleasant to me. So I waited until in his march he came to a yard or so from the spot where he regularly turned on his heel, and then, springing up, attempted to draw the curtains across the door. Somehow or other they would not move, and de Lorgnac stepped forward quietly and pulled them together. As he did this our eyes met, and there was the twinkle of a smile in his glance, as if he had seen through my artifices and was laughing at them. I felt my face grow warm, and was grateful that the light was behind me; but I thanked him icily, and with his usual stiff bow he turned off without a word.

I came back to my seat, my face crimson, my eyes swimming with tears, and feeling if there was a man on earth that I hated it was the lieutenant of the guard.

It had a good two hours or so to run before my time of waiting would be over, and I may take the plunge now, and confess that the lengthened period of attendance to which I was subjected, was in a measure a punishment, for my having ridden out alone with M. de Clermont, and, owing to an accident that befell my horse, had not been able to return until very late. The ill-chance which followed all my girlish escapades was not wanting on this occasion, with the result, that whereas ten others might have escaped, I was observed in what was after all but a harmless frolic, and my conduct reported on-and Madame, who had a weak enough eye for follies, and sometimes sins, that were committed by rule-she loved to direct our ill-doings-rated me soundly and imposed this penance, and perhaps the worse punishment that was to follow, on me.

In the anteroom there was but a cushioned stool for the lady in waiting, and this was placed close to the door, so that one could hear Queen Catherine calling, for she never rang for us, as did the Lorrainer for even such ladies as the Duchesse de Nemours, the mother of Guise.

I pushed the seat closer towards the door and, hardly thinking what I was doing, leaned my head against the woodwork and dropped off into a sort of troubled doze. How long I slept in this manner I cannot say; but I was suddenly aroused by the distinct mention of my name, followed by a laugh from within the cabinet. I looked up in affright, for the laugh was the King's, and for the moment I wondered how he had passed in, then recollecting the private passage I knew that he must have come in thence. I would have withdrawn, but the mention of my name coupled with the King's laughter aroused my curiosity, and I remained in my position, making, however, a bargain with my conscience by removing my head from the carved oak of the door. It was my duty to be where I was, and although I would make no effort to listen, yet if those within were talking of me, and loud enough for me to hear, I thought it no harm to stay, especially as it was Henri who was speaking, for I knew enough to be aware that no one was safe from his scandalous tongue. I may have been wrong in acting as I did, but I do not think there is one woman in a thousand who would have done otherwise, supposing her to be as I was-but one-and-twenty years of age.

So thick, however, was the door, that, my head once removed, I could hear but snatches of the converse within.

"It is his price, Madame," I heard the King say, "and, after all, it is a cheap one, considering her escapade with de Clermont. *Morbleu!* But he is a sad dog!"

And then came another surprise, for the gruff voice of my uncle, the Marshal de Tavannes, added:

"Cheap or dear! I for one am willing that it should be paid, and at once. She has brought disgrace enough on our house already. As for the man; if poor he is noble and as brave as his sword. He is well able to look after her."

"If he keeps his head," put in the King, whilst my ears burned at the uncomplimentary speech of my guardian, and my heart began to sink. Then came something I did not catch from Catherine, and after that a murmur of indistinct voices. At last the King's high-pitched tones rose again. It was a voice that seemed to drill its way through the door.

"Enough! It is agreed that we pay in advance-eh, Tavannes? Send for the little baggage, if she is, as you say, here, and we will tell her at once. The matter does not admit of any delay. St. Blaise! I should say that after thirty a man must be mad to peril his neck for any woman!"

I rose from my seat trembling all over with anger and apprehension, and as I did so the Queen Mother's voice rang out sharply:

"Mademoiselle de Mieux!"

The next moment the door opened, and the dwarf Majosky put out his leering face.

"Enter, mademoiselle!" he said, with a grotesque bow, adding in a rapid, malignant whisper as I passed him, "You are going to be married-to me."

At any other time I would have spared no pains to get him punished for his insolence; but now, so taken aback was I at what I had heard, that I scarcely noticed him, and entered the room as if in a dream. Indeed, it was only with an effort that I recollected myself sufficiently to make my reverence to the King. He called out as I did so, "*Mordieu!* I retract, Tavannes! I retract! Faith! I almost feel as if I could take the adventure on myself!"

A slight exclamation of annoyance escaped the Queen, and Tavannes said coldly:

"Perhaps your Majesty had better inform my niece of your good pleasure," adding grimly, "and I guarantee mademoiselle's obedience."

There was a minute or so of silence, during which the King was, as it were, picking his words, whilst I stood before him. Majosky shuffled down at Catherine's feet, and watched me with his wicked, blinking eyes. I do not remember to have looked around me, and yet every little detail of that scene will remain stamped on my memory until the day I die.

Madame, the Queen Mother, was at her secretary, her fingers toying with a jewelled paper-knife, and her white face and glittering eyes fixed steadily on me, eyes with that pitiless look in them which we all knew so well, and which made the most daring of us tremble. A little to my right stood de Tavannes, one hand on the back of a chair, and stroking his grizzled beard with the other. Before me, on a coffer, whereon he had negligently thrown himself, was the King, and he surveyed me without speaking, with a half-approving, half-sarcastic look that made my blood tingle, and almost gave me back my courage.

In sharp contrast to the solemn black of Catherine's robes and the stern soldierly marshal was the figure of the King. Henri was dressed in his favourite colours, orange, green, and tan, with a short cloak of the same three hues hanging from his left shoulder. His pourpoint was open at the throat, around which was clasped a necklet of pearls, and he wore three ruffs, one such as we women wear, of lace that fell over the shoulders, and two smaller ones as stiff as starch could make them. He wore earrings, there were rings on his embroidered gloves, and all over his person, from his sleeves to the aigrette he wore on the little turban over his peruke, a multitude of gems glittered. On his left side, near his sword hilt, was a bunch of medallions of ladies who had smiled on him, and this was balanced on the other hand by an equally large cluster of charms and relics. As he sat there he kept tapping the end of one of his shoes with a little cane, whilst he surveyed me with an almost insulting glance in the mocking eyes that looked out from his painted cheeks.

The silence was like to have become embarrassing had not Catherine, impatient of delay, put in with that even voice of hers:

"Perhaps I had better explain your Majesty's commands;" and then without waiting for an answer she went on, looking me straight in the face-

"Mademoiselle. In his thought for your welfare-a kindness you have not deserved-the King has been pleased to decide on your marriage. Circumstances necessitate the ceremony being performed at once, and I have to tell you that it will take place three hours hence. His Majesty will do you the honour of being himself present on the occasion."

This was beyond my worst fears. I was speechless, and glanced from one to the other in supplication; but I saw no ray of pity in their faces. Alas! These were the three iron hearts that had sat and planned the Massacre.

The Queen's face was as stone. The King half closed his eyes, and his lips curled into a smile as if he enjoyed the situation; but my uncle, within whose bluff exterior was a subtle, cruel heart, spoke out harshly:

"You hear, mademoiselle! Thank the King, and get you gone to make ready. I am sick of your endless flirtations, and there must be an end to them-there must be no more talk of your frivolities."

Anger brought back my courage, and half turning away from Tavannes, I said to the Queen:

"I thank the King, madame, for his kindness. Perhaps you will add to it by telling me the name of the gentleman who intends to honour me by making me his wife."

"*Arnidieu!* She makes a point," laughed the King.

"She shall marry a stick if I will it," said de Tavannes; but Madame the Queen Mother lifted her hand in deprecation.

"It is M. de Lorgnac," she said.

"De Lorgnac! De Lorgnac!" I gasped, hardly believing my ears. "Oh, madame! It is impossible. I hate him. What have I done to be forced into this? Your Majesty," and I turned to the King, "I will not marry that man."

"Well, would you prefer de Clermont?" he asked, with a little laugh; but de Tavannes burst out:

"Sire! This matter admits of no delay. She shall marry de Lorgnac, if I have to drag her to the altar."

"Thank you, monsieur," I said with a courtesy; "it is kindness itself that you, the Count de Tavannes, peer and marshal of France, show to your sister's child."

He winced at my words; but Catherine again interposed.

"Mademoiselle! you do not understand; and if I hurt you now it is your own fault. Let me tell you that for a tittle of your follies Mademoiselle de Torigny was banished from court to a nunnery. You may not be aware of it, but the whole world, at least our world, and that is enough for us, is talking of your affair with de Clermont, who, as you well know, is an affianced man. It is for the sake of your house, for your own good name, and because you will do the King a great service by obeying, that this has been decided on, and you must-do you hear? – must do as we bid you."

She dropped her words out one by one, cool, passionless, and brutal in their clearness. My face was hot with shame and anger, and yet I knew that the ribald tongues that spared not the King's sister would not spare me. I, the heiress of Mieux, to be a by-word in the court! I to be married out of hand like a laundress of the *coulisse!* It was too much! It was unbearable! And to be bound to de Lorgnac above all others! Was ever woman wooed and wed as I?

I burst into a passion of angry tears. I went so far as to humble myself on my knees; but Henri only laughed and slipped out by the secret door, and de Tavannes followed him with a rough oath.

"Say this is a jest, madame!" I sobbed out to the Queen. "I am punished enough. Say it is a jest. It must be so. You do not mean it. It is too cruel!"

"No more is happening to you than what the daughters of France have to bear sometimes."

"That should make you the more pitiful, madame, for such as I. Let me go, madame, to a nunnery-even to that of Our Lady of Lespaille-but spare me this!"

"It is impossible," she said sharply. "See, here is Madame de Martigny come, and she will conduct you to your room. Tush! It is nothing after all, girl. And it will be better than a convent and a lost name. Do not make a scene."

I rose to my feet stunned and bewildered, and Madame de Martigny put her arm through mine, and dried my eyes with her kerchief.

"Come, mademoiselle," she said, "we have to pass through the corridor to gain your apartment. Keep up your heart!"

"I offer my escort," mocked the dwarf, "and will go so far as to take M. de Lorgnac's place, if your royal pleasure will allow-ah! ah!" – and he broke into a shriek, for Catherine had swiftly and silently raised a dog-whip, and brought it across his shoulders as he sat crouching at her feet.

"Begone!" she said. "Another speech like that and I break you on the wheel!" Then she turned to Madame de Martigny.

"Take her away by the private door. She is not fit to see or be seen now. Tell Pare to give her a cordial if she needs it, and see that she is ready in time. Go, mademoiselle, and be a brave girl!"

## CHAPTER II. THE ORATORY

You who read this will please remember that I was but a girl, and that my powers of resistance were limited. Some of you, perhaps, may have gone through the same ordeal, not in the rough-and-ready way that I had to make the passage, but through a slower if not less certain mill. The result being the same in both cases, to wit, that you have stood, as I did, at the altar with vows on your lips that you felt in your heart were false.

A thought had struck me when I was led back to my room, and that was to throw myself on the mercy of de Lorgnac. But means of communication with him were denied to me by the foresight of my persecutors. Even my maid, Mousette, was not allowed to see me, and Madame de Martigny, though kindness itself in every other way, absolutely refused to lend herself to my suggestion that she should aid me, if only to the extent of bearing a note from me to my future husband, in which I meant to implore him, as a man of honour and a gentleman, not to force this marriage upon me. I then tried Pare, who, by the Queen's command, had been sent to me. He brought me a cordial with his own hands, and to him I made my request, notwithstanding all Madame de Martigny's protests, to carry my note to de Lorgnac. He listened with that acute attention peculiar to him, and answered:

"Mademoiselle! I have not yet discovered the balsam that will heal a severed neck—you must excuse me."

When he left, Madame de Martigny tried to comfort me in her kindly way.

"My dear," she said, "after all it is not so very terrible. I myself never saw M. de Martigny more than twice before we were married, and yet I have learned to love him, and we are very happy. Believe me! Love before marriage does not always mean happiness. In five years it will become a friendship—that is all. It is best to start as I did, so that there will be no awakenings. As for de Lorgnac—rest you assured that monsieur is well aware of the state of your mind towards him, else he would never have taken the course he has adopted. Be certain, therefore, that all appeal to him will be in vain!"

I felt the force of the last words and was silent, and then de Clermont's face came before me, very clear and distinct, and with a sob I broke down once again and gave way to tears.

I will pass over the rest of the time until I found myself ready for the ceremony, noting only with surprise, that I was to be married in a riding-habit, as if the wedding was to be instantly followed by a journey. Unhinged though I was, I asked the reason for this, but Madame de Martigny could only say it was the Queen's order, and I honestly believe she had no further explanation to offer.

At the door of the oratory the marshal met me, and led me into the chapel, which was but dimly lighted, and where my husband that was to be, was already standing booted and spurred, ready, like myself, to take to horse. There were a dozen or so of people grouped around, and one seated figure which I felt was that of the King. I made a half-glance towards him, but dared not look again, for behind Henri's chair was de Clermont, gay and brilliant, in marked contrast to the sombre, if stately, figure of de Lorgnac.

At last the time came when I placed a hand as cold as stone in that of my husband, and the words were spoken which made us man and wife. When it was all over, and we had turned to bow to the King, de Clermont stepped forward and clasped a jewelled collar round my neck, saying in a loud voice, "In the King's name," and then, aided by the dim light, and with unexampled daring, he swiftly snatched away one of my gloves, which I held in my hand, with a whisper of "This for me."

Henri spoke a few jesting words, and then rising, left the chapel abruptly, followed by de Clermont; but those who remained, came round us with congratulations that sounded idle and hollow to me. It was then that I noticed for the first time that Catherine was not present, although I saw Queen Margot, and Madame de Canillac there. The marshal, however, cut the buzz of voices short.

"The horses are ready, de Lorgnac, and, as arranged, you start to-night. And now, my good niece, adieu, and good fortune be with you and your husband."

With that he bent, and touching my forehead with his stiff moustache, stepped back a pace to let us pass.

As I walked by my husband's side, dazed and giddy, with a humming in my ears, there came back to me with a swift and insistent force, the words of the vows, which, if I had not spoken, I had given a tacit assent to. They were none the less binding on this account. Two of them I could not keep. One cannot control one's soul, and I felt that in this respect my life would be henceforth a living lie; but one I thought I might observe, and that was the oath to obey; yet even in the short passage leading from the oratory to the entrance to the chapel, my heart flamed up in rebellion, and, with a sudden movement, I withdrew my hand from my husband's arm, and biting my lips till the blood came, forced myself to keep by his side. He made no effort to restrain me, spoke never a word, until we came to the door where the horses were waiting, with half-a-dozen armed and mounted men. Here de Lorgnac turned to me, saying, almost in a whisper, "May I help you to mount?"

I made a movement of my hand in the negative, and he stepped back; but the animal was restive, and at last I was forced to accept his aid. As we passed out of the gateway, riding side by side, I spoke for the first time.

"May I ask where you are going to take me, Monsieur de Lorgnac?"

He answered, speaking as before, in low tones, "I thought you knew-you should have been told. We go first to the house of Madame de Termes."

Like lightning it came to me that the man was afraid of me. I cannot say how I knew it. I felt it, and made up my mind to use my advantage, with a vengeful joy at being able to make my bear dance to my tune. I therefore broke in upon his speech.

"Enough, monsieur! I should not have asked the question. It is a wife's duty to obey without inquiry."

I looked him full in the face as I said this coldly, and he touched his horse with the spur and rode a yard or two in front of me, muttering something indistinctly. But my heart was leaping at the discovery, and I inwardly thanked God that it was to Madame de Termes we were to go, for apart from the fact that both she and her husband, whose lands of Termes marched with mine, had been life-long friends of our house, she was one whom I knew to be the noblest and best of women. I was not aware that she was known to de Lorgnac; but I hid my curiosity and asked no questions, and there was no further speech between my husband and myself until we came to our destination. As we entered the courtyard of the Hôtel de Termes all appeared to be bustle and confusion within, and the flare of torches fell on moving figures hurrying to and fro, on saddled horses and packed mules, and on the flash and gleam of arms. My surprise overcame my resolve of silence, and I asked aloud, "Surely Madame de Termes is not leaving Paris?"

"News has come that the Vicomte is grievously ill in his government of Périgueux, and Madame is hastening there."

"And we travel with her? There! It is impossible, monsieur, that I can face so long a journey without some preparation. It is cruel to expect this of me."

"It is the King's order that we leave Paris to-night, and I have done my best."

"Say your worst, monsieur; it will be more correct," and then we came to the door. We appeared to be expected, for we were at once ushered up the stairway into a large reception room, where Madame stood almost ready to start, for her cloak was lying on a chair, and she held her mask in her hand. She came forward to meet us, but as the light fell on my face, she started back with a little cry:

"You, Denise-you! My dear, I did not know it was you who were to travel with me. You are thrice welcome," and she took me in her arms and kissed my cold cheek. "I was but told," she went on, "that a lady travelling to Guyenne would join my party, which would be escorted by M. de Lorgnac."

But what is the matter, child? You are white as a sheet, and shiver all over. You are not fit for a long journey."

"M. de Lorgnac thinks otherwise, madame."

"Blaise de Lorgnac! What has he to do with it?" and the spirited old lady, one arm round my waist, turned and faced my husband, who stood a little way off, fumbling with the hat he held in his hand.

"It is a wife's duty to obey, madame, not to question."

I felt her arm tighten round my waist, and I too turned and faced de Lorgnac, who looked like a great dog caught in some fault.

"A wife's duty to obey!" exclaimed Madame; "but that does not concern you. Stay! What do you mean, child?"

"I mean, madame, that I was married to M. de Lorgnac scarce an hour ago."

Her hand dropped from my side, and she looked from one to the other of us in amazement.

"I cannot understand," she said.

"It is for my husband to explain," I said bitterly. "It is for the gentleman, to whom we are to trust our lives on this journey, to say in how knightly a manner he can treat a woman."

And there de Lorgnac stood, both of us looking at him, his forehead burning and his eyes cast down. Even then a little pang of pity went through me to see him thus humbled, so strangely does God fashion the hearts of us women. But I hardened myself. I was determined to spare him nothing, and to measure out in full to him a cup of bitterness for the draught he had made me drink.

"Speak, man," exclaimed Madame. "Have you no voice?"

"He works in silence, madame," I burst in with an uncontrollable gust of anger; "he lies in silence. Shall I tell you what has happened? I, Denise de Mieux, am neither more nor less than M. de Lorgnac's price—the hire he has received for a business he has to perform for the King. What it is I know not—perhaps something that no other gentleman would undertake. All that I know is that I, and my estates of Mieux, have become the property of this man, who stands before us, and is, God help me, my husband. Madame, five hours ago, I had not spoken ten words to him in my life, and now I am here, as much his property, as the valise his lackey bears behind his saddle."

"Hush, dear—be still—you forget yourself," and Madame drew me once more to her side and turned to my husband.

"Is this true, Blaise de Lorgnac? Or is the child ill and raving? Answer, man!"

"It is," he answered hoarsely, "every word."

In the silence that ensued I might have heard my glove fall, and then Madame, with a stiff little bow to my husband, said, "Pray excuse me for a moment," and stepped out of the room. He would have held the door for her, but she waved him aside, and he moved back and faced me, and for the first time we were alone together.

In the meanwhile I had made up my mind. I had repeated parrot-like the words that it was my duty to obey. I had vowed to follow my husband whithersoever he went; but vow or no vow I felt it was impossible, and I spoke out.

"Monsieur, you stand self-convicted. You have pleaded guilty to every charge I have made. Now hear me before Madame comes back, for I wish to spare you as much as possible. I have been forced into this marriage; but I am as dead to you as though we had never met. I decline to accept the position you have prepared for me, and our paths separate now. Would to God they had never crossed! I shall throw myself on the protection of Madame de Termes, and at the first opportunity shall seek the refuge of a convent. You will have to do your work without your hire, M. de Lorgnac."

He made a step forward, and laid his hand on my cloak.

"Denise—hear me—I love you."

"You mean my château and lands of Mieux. Why add a lie to what you have already done? It is hardly necessary," and I moved out of his reach.

His hand dropped to his side as he turned from me, and at the same time Madame re-entered the room.

"Monsieur," she said, "I fear the honour of your escort is too great for such as I, and I have arranged to travel with such protection as my own people can give me. As for this poor girl here, if she is willing to go with me, I will take the risk of the King's anger-and yours. She shall go with us, I say, and if there is a spark of honour left in you, you will leave her alone."

"She is free as air," he answered.

"Then, monsieur, you will excuse me; but time is pressing."

## CHAPTER III. THE SPUR OF LES ESCHELLES

De Lorgnac was gone. Through the open window overlooking the courtyard, that let in the warm summer evening, we heard him give an order to his men in a quick, resolute voice, far different from the low tones in which he had spoken before, and then he and his troop rode off at a rapid trot in the direction, as it seemed, of the Porte St. Honoré. I could hardly realize that I was free and that de Lorgnac had resigned me without a struggle. All that I could think of was that he was gone, and with a quick gasp of relief I turned to my friend.

"Oh, madame! How can I thank you? What shall I say?"

"Say nothing to me, my child, but rather thank the good God that there was a little of honour left in that man. And now, before we start, you must have some refreshment."

"I cannot-indeed, no. I am ready to go at once. I want to put leagues between me and Paris."

"You must be guided by me now, Denise," and as she spoke a servant brought in some soup and a flask of wine. Despite my protests I was forced to swallow something, though I felt that I was choking; yet the little Frontignac I drank, I not being used to wine, seemed to steady my shaking limbs and restore my scattered faculties.

As we put on our cloaks and demi-masks preparatory to starting, Madame de Termes kept saying to herself, "I cannot understand-Blaise de Lorgnac to lend himself to a thing like this! I would have staked my life on him. There is something behind this, child," and she put a hand on each of my shoulders and looked me full in the eyes. "Have you told me all-have you withheld nothing?"

"Has he not himself admitted what I said, madame? If that is not enough I will add every word of what I know;" and as we stood there I detailed what I have already told, forcing myself to go on with the story once or twice when I felt myself being unnerved, and finishing with a quick, "And, madame, I was taken by storm. Indeed, I hardly know even if this is not some frightful dream."

"Would it were so," she said, and added, "Denise, I believe every word you say; and yet there is something behind de Lorgnac's action. I know him well. He would never lend himself to be the tool of others. Once, however, at Périgueux you will be safe with the Vicomte and myself, and it will be a long arm that would drag you thence-nothing short of that of the Medicis. But Catherine owes much to de Termes; and now let us start."

What was my surprise when we reached the courtyard, to hear my maid Mousette's voice, and I saw her perched on a little nag, already engaged in a flirtation with one of the men. When I spoke to her she pressed her horse forward and began hurriedly:

"I was sent here with Madame's things," she said. "I am afraid the valises are but hastily packed, and much has had to be left behind; but Madame will excuse me, I know; it was all so quick, and I had so little time."

"Thank you, Mousette," and I turned to my horse, her address of Madame ringing strangely in my ears.

We were, including Madame de Termes' servants, who were well armed, a party of about twelve, small enough to face the danger of the road in those unsettled days, but no thought of this struck me, and as for Madame de Termes, she would, I do believe, have braved the journey alone, so anxious was she to be by the Vicomte's side, for between herself and the stout old soldier, who held the lieutenancy of Périgord, there existed the deepest affection.

As we rode down the Bourdonnais, I could not help thinking to myself how noble a spirit it was that animated my friend. Not for one moment had she allowed her own trouble to stand in the way of her helping me. Her husband, whom, as I have said, she dearly loved, was ill, perhaps dying, and yet in her sympathy and pity for me, she had let no word drop about him, except the cheery assurance of his protection. Nevertheless, as we rode on, she ever kept turning towards Lalande, her equerry,

and bade him urge the lagging baggage animals on. Passing the Grand Chatelet, we crossed the arms of the river by the Pont au Change, and the Pont St. Michel, and kept steadily down the Rue de la Harpe towards the Porte St. Martin. We gained this not a moment too soon, for as the last of the baggage animals passed it, we heard the officer give the word to lower the drawbridge and close the gates. The clanking of the chains, and the creaking of the huge doors came to me with something of relief in them, for it seemed to me that I was safe from further tyranny from the Hôtel de Soissons, at any rate for this night.

As we passed the huge silhouette of the Hôtel de Luxembourg, we heard the bells of St. Sulpice sounding Compline, and then, from behind us, the solemn notes rang out from the spires of the city churches. Yielding to an impulse I could not resist, I turned in my saddle and looked back, letting my eyes run over the vast, dim outlines of the city, so softened by the moonlight that it was as if some opaque, fantastic cloud was resting on the earth. Above curved the profound blue of the night, with here and there a star struggling to force its way past the splendour of the moon. All was quiet and still, and the church bells ringing out were as a message from His creatures to the Most High. I let my heart go after the voices of the bells as they travelled heavenward, and had it not been for Mousette's shrill tones, that cut through the quiet night and recalled me to myself, I might have let the party go onwards, I do not know how far. As it was, I had to bustle my little horse to gain the side of Madame de Termes once more. It was not, of course, our intention to travel all night. That would have been impossible, for it would have entailed weary horses, and a long halt the next day; but it was proposed that we should make for a small château belonging to Monsieur de Bouchage, the brother of the Duc de Joyeuse, which he had placed at Madame de Termes' disposal, and there rest for the remainder of the night, making a start early the next morning, and then pressing on daily, as fast as our strength would allow. Lalande had sent a courier on in advance to announce our sudden coming. We did not expect to reach de Bouchage's house until about midnight, and the equerry was fussing up and down the line of march, urging a packhorse on here, checking a restive animal there, and ever and again warning the lackeys to keep their arms in readiness, for the times were such that no man's teeth were safe in his head, unless he wore a good blade by his side.

We were, in short, on the eve of that tremendous struggle which, beginning with the Day of the Barricades, went on to the murder of the Princes of Lorraine on that terrible Christmastide at Blois, and culminated with the dagger of Clement and the death of the miscreant whom God in His anger had given to us for a king.

Already the Huguenots were arming again, and it was afloat that the Palatine had sent twenty thousand men, under Dhona, to emulate the march of the Duc de Deux Ponts from the Rhine to Guyenne. It was said that the Montpensier had gone so far as to attempt to seize the person of the King, swearing that once in her hands, he would never see the outside of four walls again, and rumours were flitting here and there, crediting the Bearnois with the same, if not deeper, resolves.

Things being so, the land was as full of angry murmurs as a nest of disturbed bees; the result being that the writ of the King was almost as waste paper, and bands of cut-throat soldiery committed every excess, now under the white, then under the red scarf, as it suited their convenience.

It was for this reason that Lalande urged us on, and we were nothing loath ourselves to hasten, but our pace had to be regulated by that of the laden animals, and do what we would our progress was slow.

Madame and I rode in the rear of the troop, a couple of armed men immediately behind us. Lalande was in front, and exercised the greatest caution whenever we came to a place that was at all likely to be used for an ambushade.

Nothing, however, happened, and finally we set down to a jogging motion, speaking no word, for we were wearied, and with no sound to break the silence of the night except the shuffling of our horses, the straining of their harness, and the clink of sword sheath and chain bit.

Suddenly we were startled by the rapid beat of hoofs, and in a moment, a white horse and its rider emerged from the moonlit haze to our right, coming as it were straight upon us. Lalande gave a quick order to halt, and I saw the barrel of his pistol flashing in his hand; but the horseman, with a cry of "For the King! Way! Way!" dashed over the road at full gallop, and sped off like a sprite over the open plain to our left.

"Did you hear the voice, Denise?" asked Madame.

"Yes."

"It is stranger than ever," she said, and I could make no answer.

There was no doubt about it. It was de Lorgnac; and instead of going to the Porte St. Honoré as I thought when he left us, he must have crossed by the Meunniers and come out by the St. Germain Gate. He had evidently, too, separated himself from his men.

"I shall be glad when we reach de Bouchage's house," I said with a shiver, for the apparition of my husband had sent a chill through me.

"It is not far now," replied Madame; and then we both became silent, absorbed in our own thoughts. She, no doubt, thinking of the Vicomte, and I with my mind full of forebodings as to what other evil fate had in store for me; and with this there came thoughts of de Clermont, whose presence I seemed absolutely to feel about me. I could not say I loved him, but it was as if he had a power over me that sapped my strength, and I felt that I was being dragged towards him. I cannot explain what it was, but others have told me the same, that when his clear blue eyes were fixed on them, they seemed to lose themselves, and that his glance had a power, the force of which no one could put into words, nor indeed, can I.

It was only by an effort and a prayer that I succeeded in collecting myself; and it was with no little joy that I saw the grey outlines of the Château de Bouchage, and knew that for the remainder of the night there was rest.

I will pass over our journey till we reached the Limousin. Going at our utmost strength, we found we could barely cover more than six leagues a day; and as day after day passed, and no news of the Vicomte came, Madame's face grew paler, and she became feverishly impatient for us to hurry onward; yet never for one moment did she lose the sweetness of her temper or falter in her kindness towards me. No mishap of any kind befell us; but at the ford of the Gartempe, there at last came good news that brought the glad tears to Madame's eyes, and the colour once more to her cheeks, for here a courier met us, riding with a red spur, to say that the Vicomte was out of danger, and striding hour by hour towards recovery. The courier further said, in answer to our questions, that the messenger whom Madame de Termes had sent on in advance, to announce her coming, had never arrived, and he himself was more than surprised at meeting us, believing Madame to be yet at Paris. No doubt the poor man who had been sent on in advance had met with ill, and we thanked God for the lucky chance that had put us in the way of the Vicomte's messenger, and also that it was not with us as with our man, for he had doubtless been killed, and indeed he was never seen again. Back we sent the courier with a spare horse to announce our speedy coming, and it was a gay and joyous party that splashed through the sparkling waters of the Gartempe. Even I, for the moment, forgot everything with the glad tidings that had come like the lark's song in the morning to cheer my friend's heart, and for a brief space I forgot de Lorgnac and my bonds, and was once more Denise de Mieux, as heedless and light-hearted as youth, high spirits, and health could make me. It was decided to push on to Ambazac at any cost by that evening. The news we had heard seemed to lighten even the loads of the pack animals, and we soon left the silver thread of the river behind us, and entered the outskirts of the Viennois. As for me, I do not know how it was, but I was, as I have said, in the wildest of spirits, and nothing could content me but the most rapid motion. At one time I urged my horse far in advance of the party, at another I circled round and round them, or lagged behind, till they were all but out of sight, and then caught them up at the full speed of my beast, and all this despite Lalande's grumbling that the horse would be worn out. He spoke truly enough, but I was in one of those moods that can brook

no control, and went my own way. I was destined, however, to be brought back sharply to the past, from which for the moment I had escaped. As we reached the wooded hills of Les Eschelles, I had allowed the party to go well in advance of me, and, stopping for a moment, dismounted near a spring from which a little brook, hedged in on each side with ferns, babbled noisily off along the hillside. To me, who after all, loved the fresh sweet country, the scene was enchanting. The road wound half-way up the side of the spur, and the rough hillside with its beech forests, amongst the leaves of which twined the enchanter's nightshade, swept downwards in bold curves into a wild moorland, covered with purple heather and golden broom. The sheer rock above me was gay with pink mallow, and the crimson of the cranesbill flashed here and there, whilst the swish of the bracken in the breeze was pleasant to my ears. Overhead, between me and the absolute blue of the sky, was a yellow lacework of birch leaves, and a wild rose, thick with its snowy bloom, scrambled along the face of the rock just above the spring. It was to gather a bouquet of these flowers for Madame that I had halted and dismounted. The task was more difficult than I imagined, and whilst I was wrestling with it, I heard the full rich baritone of a man's voice singing out into the morning, and the next moment, the singer turned the corner of a bluff a few yards from me, and Raoul de Clermont was before me. He stopped short in his song with an exclamation, and, lifting his plumed hat, said in astonishment:

"You, mademoiselle! Pardon-Madame de Lorgnac! Where in the world have you dropped from? Or, stay-are you the genius of this spot?" and his laughing eyes looked me full in the face.

I stood with my flowers in my hands, inwardly trembling, but outwardly calm.

"It is rather for me to ask where in the world you have sprung from, monsieur. It is not fair to startle people like this."

"I ask your pardon once more. As it happens, I am travelling on business and pleasure combined. My estates of Clermont-Ferrand lie but a short way from here, as you perhaps know; but let me help you to add to those flowers you have gathered," and he sprang from his horse.

"No, thank you, Monsieur de Clermont," I answered hastily. "I must hurry on lest Madame de Termes, with whom I am travelling, should think I am lost."

"So it is Monsieur de Clermont now, is it? It will be a stiff Monsieur le Marquis soon," and my heart began to beat, though I said nothing, and he went on: "For old sake's sake let me gather that cluster yonder for you, and then Monsieur de Clermont will take you to Madame."

With a touch of his poniard he cut the flowers, and handed them to me, breaking one as he did and fastening it into the flap of his pourpoint. So quiet and masterful was his manner that I did nothing to resist, and then, putting me on my horse, he mounted himself, saying with that joyous laugh of his:

"Now, fair lady, let us hasten onward to Madame de Termes. I need protection, too-I fear my knaves have lagged far behind."

## CHAPTER IV. AT AMBAZAC

The road swept onward with gentle curves, at one time hanging to the edge of the hillside, at another walled in on either hand by rocks covered with fern and bracken, to whose jagged and broken surface-whereon purples, greens, and browns seemed to absorb themselves into each other-there clung the yellow agrimony, and climbing rose, with its sweet bloom full of restless, murmuring bees.

Sometimes the path lost itself in some cool arcade of trees, where the sunlight fell in oblique golden shafts through the leaves that interlaced overhead, and then suddenly, without warning, we would come to a level stretch on which the marguerites lay thick as snowflakes, and across which the wind bustled riotously.

As we cantered along side by side, my companion again broke forth into a joyous song, that sprang full-throated and clear, from a heart that never seemed to have known a moment of pain. His was a lithe, leopard-like strength, and as I looked at him, my thoughts ran back to the time when we first met, on his return from the Venetian Embassy, whither he had gone when M. de Bruslart made a mess of things. I do not know why it was, but he singled me out for his particular notice; and though it was openly known that he was betrothed to the second daughter of M. D'Ayen, I, like a fool, was flattered by the attentions of this gay and brilliant cavalier, and day by day we were thrown together more and more, and a sort of confidence was established between us that was almost more than friendship. There was, as I have said, that in his masterful way, that had the effect of leaving me powerless; and though he could put all its light in his eyes, and all its tones in his voice, I felt instinctively that he did not love me, but was merely playing with me to exercise his strength, and dragging me towards him with a resistless force. In short, the influence of de Clermont on me was never for my good, and our intercourse always left me with the conviction that I had sunk a little lower than before; and it was at times like these, when I met de Lorgnac's grave eyes, that I felt the unspoken reproach in their glance, and would struggle to rise again, and then, in the consciousness of my own folly, I felt I fairly hated him for seeing my weakness. What right had de Lorgnac even to think of me? What did it matter to him what I did or said? So I used to argue with myself; yet in my heart of hearts, I felt that my standard of right and wrong, was being measured by what I imagined a man, to whom I had hardly ever spoken, might think.

When I make this confession, and say that the influence of de Clermont over me was never for my good, I do not mean to imply that I was guilty of anything more than foolishness; but the effect of it was to sap my high ideas, and I now know that this man, aided by his surroundings-and they were all to his advantage-took the pleasure of a devil in lowering my moral nature, and in moulding me to become "of the world," as he would put it. God be thanked that the world is not as he would have made it. At that time, however, I was dazzled-all but overpowered by him, and day by day my struggles were growing weaker, like those of some poor fly caught in a pitiless web. The knowledge of all this was to come to me later, when, by God's help, I escaped; but then I was blind, and foolish, and mad.

My companion's song was interrupted by Lalande, who came galloping back in hot haste, and in no good temper, to say that the whole party had halted to wait for me; and quickening our pace we hurried onward, and found them about a mile further on. To say that Madame de Termes was surprised at seeing de Clermont is to say little, and I could see, too, that she was not very well pleased; but he spoke to her so fairly and gracefully that, in spite of herself, she thawed; and half an hour later he was riding at her bridle hand, bringing smiles that had long been absent to her face. He was overjoyed to hear of the Vicomte's recovery, and said many flattering things about him, for he knew him well, having served under him in the campaign of Languedoc, and then he went on to become more communicative about himself, saying that he was the bearer of a despatch to the King

of Navarre, adding, with a laugh, "a duplicate, you know-the original being carried by M. Norreys, the English freelance. *Ma foi!* But I should not be surprised if I reached the Bearnnois before the sluggish islander."

"Hardly, if you loiter here, Monsieur le Marquis," I said.

"You must bear the blame for that, Madame; but I will add that my orders are to pass through Périgueux as well, and so, Madame," and he turned to my friend, "if you will permit Raoul de Clermont to be your escort there, he will look upon it as the most sacred trust of his life."

He bowed to his saddle-bow, and looked so winning and handsome that Madame replied most graciously in the affirmative. A little beyond La Jonchère something very like an adventure befell us-the first on this hitherto uneventful journey. At the cross road leading to Bourgneuf, we met with a party of six or eight men, who did not require a second glance to make us see that they were capable of any mischief. They had halted to bait their horses, and, flung about in picturesque attitudes, were resting under the trees-as ill-looking a set of fellows as the pleasant shade of the planes had ever fallen upon. Had they known beforehand that we were travelling this way, they would very probably have arranged an attack on us; but as it was we came upon them rather suddenly, and as our party-which had been added to by de Clermont's two lackeys-was somewhat too strong to assault openly, without the risk of broken heads and hard knocks-things which gentry of this kind do not much affect-they let us alone, contenting themselves with gathering into a group to watch us as we went by; and this we did slowly, our men with their arms ready. As we approached, however, and saw their truculent faces, I had doubts as to whether we should pass them without bloodshed, and begged de Clermont in a low voice to prevent any such thing. He had drawn a light rapier that he wore, but as I spoke he put it back with a snap, and holding out his hand, asked for the loan of my riding-whip-a little delicate, agate-handled thing.

"It will be enough," he said as I gave it to him, and he began to swing it backwards and forwards, as if using it to flick off flies from his horse. To my joy they made no attempt to molest us, though at one time a quarrel hung on a cobweb. For as we passed, the leader of the troop, a big burly man, with a very long sword trailing at his side, and a face as red as the constant dipping of his nose into a wine cup could make it, advanced a step into the wood, and, wishing us the day, tried deliberately to get a better look at me, with an unspeakable expression in his eyes. I saw de Clermont's face grow cold and hard, he quietly put his horse between me and the man, and checking it slightly, stretched out the whip, and touched a not very clean white scarf the creature wore over his shoulder, saying:

"You are a trifle too near Limoges to wear this, my man-take my advice and fling it away."

"That is my affair," answered the man insolently.

"Precisely, Captain la Coquille. I spoke but for your good. Ah! take care!" and de Clermont's horse, no doubt secretly touched by the spur, lashed out suddenly, causing the man to spring back with an oath and an exclamation of:

"You know me! Who the devil are you?"

To this, however, de Clermont made no answer, but as we passed on he returned my whip to me, saying, "I am glad I did not have to use it. It would have deprived you of a pretty toy had I done so."

"Thank you. Who is that horrible man? You called him by name."

"Yes, la Coquille. I know him by sight, though he does not know me. He was very near being crucified once, and escaped but by a fluke. He is robber, thief, and perhaps a murderer, and-"

"And what!"

De Clermont reached forward and brushed off an imaginary fly from his horse's ears.

"And has something of a history. I believe he was a gentleman once, and then went under-found his way to the galleys. After that he was anything, and perhaps I ought not to tell you, but in time he became de Lorgnac's sergeant-his confidential man-and it was only his master's influence that saved him from a well-deserved death. It was foolish of de Lorgnac, for the man knew too many of his secrets, and was getting dangerous. I hope I have not pained you," he added gently.

"Not in the least," I replied, and rode on looking straight before me. So this vile criminal was once my husband's confidential servant, was perhaps still connected with him in his dark designs. And then I said a bitter thing, "Like master, like man. Is not that the adage, monsieur?" But as the words escaped me, I felt a keen regret.

"God help you, Denise," I heard de Clermont murmur as if to himself, and then he turned abruptly from me, and joined Madame de Termes, leaving me with a beating heart, for his words had come to me with a sense of undying, hopeless love in them, and he was so brave, he seemed so true, and looked so handsome, that my heart went out in pity for him. How the mind can move! In a moment there rose before me thoughts of a life far different from the one to which I was doomed, and with them came the grim spectres of the vows that bound me forever, and which I would have to keep. God help me! Yes, I needed help—de Clermont was right.

We passed on, leaving the gang still under the plane-trees, and soon came in view of Ambazac, lying amidst its setting of waving cornfields. Here for a little time we suddenly missed de Clermont and one of his lackeys, and both Madame and I were much concerned, for the same thought struck us both, that he had lagged behind and then gone off hot-foot to punish la Coquille. We were about to turn after him when he came in sight, followed by his man, and caught us up, riding with a free rein. He perhaps saw the inquiry in my look, for he said softly to me, "I went back to pick up a souvenir I had dropped," and his eye fell on the lapel of his coat where my rose was, a little, however, the worse for wear. After that he did not speak to me, but kept by Madame and devoted himself to her with a delicacy for which I was grateful, for I felt I wanted all my thoughts for myself. At Ambazac, which we reached in a little, we found good accommodation at a large inn, although the town was full, it being the *fête* of St. Etienne de Muret; and after taking some light refreshment Madame and I retired to our apartments, to rest until the supper hour, for we were wearied. We supped in the common hall, but at a small table a little apart from the others, and de Clermont, who sat next to me, gave Madame an interesting account of the defence of Ambazac, made by her husband against the Prince of Condé. It was whilst he was detailing the incidents of this adventure that, with a great clattering and much loud talking, la Coquille and his men entered the dining-room, and began to shout for food and drink. Most of the people in the inn being common country folk and unarmed, made way for the crew with haste, and even an expression of alarm appeared on Lalande's face, for our own servants were but six in number, including the baggage drivers, and Madame's maid and my own, who, of course, were useless, and two of our men-servants were at the moment attending to the horses; so that we were at a decided disadvantage, and la Coquille was not slow to perceive this.

"*Dame*," he exclaimed, looking towards us, "here is my popinjay and his sugar-plum. Look you, my good fellow, join those boys there, whilst I bask in beauty's smiles."

His men crowded round our servants with rough joking, and he, picking up a stool, placed it at our table, and held out an immense greasy paw to me.

"Shake hands, *ma mignonne*! Never mind the old lady and the silk mercer. There is no lover like a brave soldier."

Madame was white with anger. I had sprung to my feet, meditating flight, and the villain's followers raised a hoarse shout, "Courage, captain! None but the brave deserve the fair."

Then de Clermont's hand was on the man's neck, and with a swing of his arm he sent him staggering back almost across the room. He recovered himself on the instant, however, for he was a powerful man, and rushed forward; but stopped when he saw de Clermont's rapier in his hand, and began to tug at his fathom of a sword. His men, however, offered no assistance to him, contenting themselves with breaking into loud laughter. As for de Clermont, he was as cool and self-possessed as if he were at a Court function.

"Out of this," he said. "Begone—else I shall have you flogged and you shall taste the *carcan*. Be off."

"The *carcan!* You silkworm, you cream-faced dancing-master!" yelled the man, who had now drawn his sword. "Who the devil are you to threaten *me-la Coquille*-with the *carcan*? Blood of a Jew! Who are you?"

"The Marquis de Clermont-Ferrand," was the answer, "and these ladies are of the household of M. de Termes, and now I will give you and your men two minutes to go. If not I shall have them stoned out of the place; and you-you know what to expect. If you are wise you will put a hundred leagues between yourself and Périgord after this; and now be off-fool."

The man dropped his sword into its sheath and stammered out, "Your pardon, monseigneur! I did not know. Come, boys," he said with an affectation of unconcern, "these ladies complain that the place is too crowded; we will go elsewhere. At your service, mesdames," and making a bow that had a sort of faded grace about it, he swaggered off followed by his men, who took his lead with surprising alacrity. The people in the inn and our servants raised a cheer, and were for going after them, doubtless to administer the stoning; but de Clermont put a stop to this, saying in a peremptory tone, "Let them go; I will see that they are dealt with."

As may be imagined we were in no mood for much supper after this. My knees felt very weak under me, and Madame de Termes was trembling all over; but she thanked de Clermont very gracefully, and he made some modest answer with his eyes fixed on me, and I-I could say nothing. We would have retired at once, but de Clermont pressed us to stay, and Madame, with a little smile, agreed, saying, "I am afraid even after all these years I am not quite a soldier's wife." So we lingered yet a little longer and found our nerves come back to us. After that we sat in the garden where the moonlight was full and bright, and the breeze brought us the scent of the roses. Then de Clermont bringing out his lute sang to us. He had a voice such as neither I, nor any one else I knew who had listened to it, had ever heard equalled. So, perhaps, sang his old troubadour ancestors, and the sweet notes had died with the days of chivalry to be born in Raoul de Clermont. The song he chose was one that was perchance written by one of his minstrel forbears, and described in that old tongue that we no longer use, a lover's agony at being separated forever from his mistress. The words were, perhaps, poor, but there was genuine feeling in them, and sung by de Clermont, it might have been the wail of an angel shut out from Paradise. Never did I hear the like-never would I care to hear the like again, and as the last of the glorious notes died away in a liquid stream of ineffable melody, I saw Madame's face buried in her hands, and there was a great sob behind me that came from the broad chest of Lalande, who had stolen up to hear, and was blubbering like a child. Then Madame de Termes rose, and hurried off followed by Lalande, and we were alone, I sitting still with my whole soul full of that wondrous song, and every nerve strung to its highest pitch, whilst de Clermont remained standing, his lute, slung by its silken sash, in the loop of his arm.

"Denise!" he said, "you understand, dear?"

"Yes." I could barely whisper the word; and then he bent down and kissed me softly on the forehead, and the touch of his lips seemed to burn into me like a red-hot seal. With a little cry I rose to my feet, and hardly knowing what I was doing, ran past him, never stopping until I reached my room. Here I remained as if lost in a dream, with a hundred mad thoughts dancing in my brain. I tried to pray, but my lips could only frame words, for there was nothing in my heart; and then I thought I would seek forgetfulness in sleep. But sleep would not come, and I lay awake watching the broad banner of moonlight that came in through the open window, and all the memories of the past awake within me. De Clermont's kiss still burned hotly on my face, and I shivered with the shame and the sin of it, for I was another's wife-and Heaven help me! I thought then that I loved de Clermont. Oh! the misery of those hours, when I tossed from side to side with dry, burning eyes and bitter shame in my heart. At last, as the moon was paling, I could endure it no longer, and, rising from my bed, began to pace the room. I felt that what I needed was motion, movement-I could not be still. If I could only pray! and as the thought came to me once more I heard a little *clink*, and stooping, picked up a small locket containing a miniature of my mother which I wore round my neck, the gold chain by which it

was suspended having broken in my restless movements. I opened the locket, and standing near the window looked at the picture, and as I live it seemed to lighten so that I could see each feature, with the soft eyes bent on me in pity; and then a voice-it was her voice-said:

"Denise, pray!"

And then my eyes were blinded with tears, and flinging myself on my knees with my hands clasped on the mullions of the window I sobbed out, "God! Dear God! Have pity on me!"

I could say no more, but my whole soul went out with these words and I knelt there, still and motionless, with the sense of a great peace falling upon me. Then it was as if the very heavens grew bright as day, and the light filled my room so that my eyes were dazzled and I could not see. And I covered my face with my hands to shield my eyes from the splendour.

When I looked up again the glory was gone, but my soul was at rest. I stood at the window and let the cool breeze fan me, whilst I peered out into the darkness, for the moon had sunk and it was now the black hour that touches the dawn. As I watched I heard the bells of St. Etienne calling the Lauds across the grave of the night, and I knew that in two hours it would be daylight, and felt that the Unseen God had heard my prayer.

## CHAPTER V. M. LE MARQUIS LEADS HIS HIGHEST TRUMP

When I came down in the morning I found we were all ready to start. Madame was mounted, and de Clermont was standing to assist me to my horse. It all seemed so strange after the crisis of last night. I had not schooled myself. I had not had time to meet de Clermont with unconcern, and overcome by a sudden shyness I declined his aid, and he said in his cool, level voice:

"You are very proud this morning."

The touch of proprietorship in his tone, which he so often used towards me, and to which I had hitherto submitted, jarred on me now, and in a moment my courage had come back. I looked him full in the face and answered:

"It is necessary to be proud sometimes, monsieur."

Our eyes held each other for an instant, and for the first time I saw in his clear blue glance an expression of hesitation and surprise, and I felt that the compelling power of his look was gone, and then he dropped his gaze, and stepping back lifted his hat without a word; but I saw the white line of his teeth close on his nether lip.

Then we started, and de Clermont dropped away to the rear of the party, leaving Madame de Termes and myself alone. She was full of the strange song of last night.

"I had heard of his voice before," she said, "but never thought it was anything like that. St. Siege!" and she gave a little shudder. "I am an old woman; but it was maddening. I forgot everything. I could think of nothing except that sorrow in that last verse-the poor man, the poor man!" And the dear old lady's eyes filled once more with tears at the recollection. "But it was not a good song," she went on in a moment, "it was a beautiful evil thing, and he shall sing it no more. I will speak to him. It is wrong. It is wicked to touch the heart as that song can. He is very silent and grave to-day. I wonder if it affected him as it did me?"

But I made no answer, for my mind was full of other things, of the hopeless love in the heart that I thought so strong and brave, and of the wondrous power that had come over me and enabled me to be victor over myself, and I cast up an unspoken prayer that this strength should be continued to me, and then I found de Clermont once more by my side.

Madame kept her word about the song, and he said gravely:

"I promise. I will never sing it again. It hurts me, too," and, changing the subject, other matters were spoken about. In a little I found myself separated from Madame, and de Clermont, bending forward, said:

"I have news I should have given before that will interest you, madame-something you ought to know-of M. de Lorgnac."

"Is it really of importance?"

"I think so. It will remain for you to decide."

"Then what is it, monsieur?"

"I cannot well tell you here. We will let them go onward, and ride slowly behind."

I agreed silently, and we soon found ourselves at a little distance from the party. We were descending the wooded valley of the Briance, and a turn in the forest road left us alone. Then de Clermont, who had up to now remained silent, began abruptly:

"Madame, it has been given to me to find out the business on which M. de Lorgnac is engaged, and over which you have been sacrificed. You are a brave woman-the bravest I have ever met-and I know you will bear with the bluntness of my speech, for this is no time to beat about the bush."

"Monsieur, it does not concern me on what business M. de Lorgnac is engaged. I only ask and pray God to give me some refuge where I may never see him again."

"Hear me a moment. I think it does concern you, and vitally too."

"Then what is it?"

"Now call to mind your race, and all that can give you strength. Denise de Mieux, your husband is nothing more than an assassin. He has been hired by the King and that she-devil the Queen Mother to murder Navarre. It is a political necessity for them, and they have found an instrument in Blaise de Lorgnac base enough for their purpose. His price was high, though-it was you, Denise, and de Tavannes, who is in the secret, has paid it. How he came to persuade himself to do so, I know not. He is your uncle, and I will not say anything against him."

I felt as if I had received a blow. There was truth in every line of de Clermont's face, in every tone of his voice; but I struggled against it, and said faintly:

"This does not concern me-I am but a wife in name. I shall never see de Lorgnac. He is dead to me."

"Would to God he were dead indeed!" he burst out. "But there is more. Catherine is tyrant to her finger nails. She has heard that you have refused to remain with your husband, and at his request an order has been sent to de Termes to deliver you up to him at Périgueux. Norreys has taken that order, and it has already reached him. If you doubt me here is the duplicate. You may read it for yourself."

He placed a letter in my hands. I knew the seal well. The red shield with the *palle* of the Medici-Catherine's private signet. But I could not read it. My mind became a chaos. "Oh! what shall I do? What shall I do?" I exclaimed aloud in my despair.

"Denise!" he said, "there is one way of escape and only one, for de Lorgnac has already made his claim at Périgueux, and you go straight into the lion's jaws."

"What is it? Tell me."

He laid his hand on my rein. "Denise-put your trust in me and come. My dear, I love you-I love you. This marriage is an infamy. Vows such as they made you swear are not binding. Come with me, my dear, and under the banner of the Emperor, with you by my side to help me, I will work out a new life, and the name of Clermont-Ferrand is already known. Denise! Last night I saw the love-light in your eyes. Let it burn there again for me. Come."

He made as if to turn my horse's head, and it was only with an effort that I restrained him. God knows I was sorry for the man. I know, too, that it was in my heart to take the great love I thought he was giving me, and, forgetting everything, to follow him to the world's end. In the few seconds that passed, I went through a frightful struggle, and then the strength of last night came back to me.

"De Clermont! It is impossible; and now go-go. If you say you love me, go in pity!"

"Denise, you know not what you say! Think, dear! In two hours we will be safe. In two hours the world itself could not part us. I will not let you sacrifice yourself. You love me, dear, and you know it, and when love like ours exists there is no right and no wrong-only our love."

"It cannot be-it cannot be. De Clermont, you are tempting the woman you say you love, to dishonour. Let me tell you plainly, I do not love you. For one moment I thought I did; but I am sure of myself now; and even did I love you, as I feel sure you deserve to be loved, I would never consent to-to what you propose."

"*Mordieu!*" he exclaimed hoarsely, "you are not yourself. Come, Denise. I hear Lalande riding back, and in a moment it will be too late."

"Let go my reins, monsieur, else I shall call out. I hear Lalande, too. Go, monsieur, whilst I can still think of you as I always have. Go and forget me."

His hand dropped to his side, and taking the occasion I struck my horse smartly with the whip and he sprang forward. De Clermont made no attempt to follow, but at the bend of the road, as I glanced across my shoulder, I saw him turn his horse's head and plunge into the forest, and a moment later I met Lalande.

I could only realize that I had escaped a great danger; beyond that my mind could not go; but I was conscious that, despite the terrible earnestness of his words, there was something that was not convincing in de Clermont. The narrow escape that I had drove all other things out of my mind, and

it was only when I came in sight of our party again that I recollected de Clermont's warning that by going to Périgueux I was going straight into the lion's mouth, and an absolute despair fell upon me.

When I rode up to Madame's side she glanced at me narrowly and asked for de Clermont.

I answered truly enough that I did not know, and she looked at me again with her clear, searching eyes. "It is odd, Denise, but do you know that his lackeys have gone, too? They left us an hour ago-and now it seems he has gone, too, without a word of good-bye."

"Monsieur made too sure of the success of his plans," I said bitterly, and Madame's answer was sharp and swift:

"Denise, there is something wrong-what is it?"

And as we rode close together, side by side, I told her every word, hiding nothing. My voice sounded hard and dry to my own ears, my eyes were burning, and when I had finished, she said, "Denise, I cannot believe M. de Clermont's story. I *feel* it is untrue. Even if it were true de Termes would never carry out the order about you. He is incapable of such baseness."

"There is always one way of escape, madame, and I am my father's daughter."

"And there is a God above, girl. Your father's daughter should never talk like that."

"Then why does He not hear my prayers?" I said, in impious forgetfulness. "Is heaven so far that our voices cannot reach there?"

And my dear old friend sighed deeply in answer.

We were to halt at Chalusset for the night, and here confirmation was received of the truth of de Clermont's story, for an equerry of the Vicomte's met us here with a letter to his wife in his own hand, in which he said that our message, the one we had sent from the Gartempe, had reached him, and that he was hastening forward himself to meet us. Then he went on to other matters, and his letter concluded with a postscript:

*"M. Norreys is here with an order from the King, or, rather, from the Queen Mother. It is very unfortunate, but must be obeyed."*

She first read the letter herself-we were sitting together in her apartment, in the one inn at Chalusset-and then she handed it to me with a request to read it aloud to her. I did so; but on coming to the postscript my voice faltered in spite of myself, and then she bent forward and kissed me.

"Denise, it will never be. Are you strong enough to do a brave thing?"

"I will try."

"It is clear to me that de Termes' postscript is a warning for you not to go to Périgueux. I knew that he would be incapable of carrying out such orders as he has received-and I can read his meaning between the lines of his message. Denise, you must not be with me when my husband and I meet."

"God Himself seems to have abandoned me. What can I do-where shall I hide?"

"I will tell you. My sister Louise is Abbess of Our Lady of Meymac. I will send you to her. The convent has special rights of sanctuary that even Catherine herself would not dare to violate-but she will never know you are there. Yet it is a long journey, and you will have to cross the mountains. Will you risk it tonight?"

"I am ready now, madame."

"Very well," and, calling to her maid, she asked for Lalande, and when the equerry came she turned to him:

"Lalande, how long is it that you have followed Monsieur le Vicomte?"

"Thirty years, madame, from the days when Monsieur was a simple cavalier of the guard."

"And you would do anything for Monsieur?"

"Madame, I have been his man in lean times and in fat-in famine and in full harvest. He saved my life at Cerisolles, and it was I who got him out of the Bastille; I have been by his side from the time he was a simple gentleman to the present day, when Monsieur is a marshal and a peer of France. You ask if I would do anything for Monsieur. If Monsieur le Vicomte were to ask me to lay down my life to-morrow I would do so willingly."

"I believe you, Lalande. Now listen. Madame de Lorgnac here is in great danger. It is Monsieur le Vicomte's wish that she should be conveyed to the Convent of Our Lady of Meymac, and we trust her to you. No one is to know where she is placed. You must protect her with your life-do you understand? And you must start now-and alone-for Madame's hiding-place is a secret."

"We could start in a few minutes, madame, and I will do what you say."

"Then be ready in half an hour."

"Madame," and he was gone.

"Do not let Mousette know whither you are bound, Denise. She is a chattering ape, and, though she loves you, can never keep a secret. As for de Termes, I will arrange to manage him-and, dear, keep a brave heart. I would go with you myself; but you know it is impossible."

The moon was just rising when, after taking an affectionate farewell of Madame de Termes, who had been to me as a mother, we started-Mousette, Lalande, and myself. Our horses had been brought to a little gate at the back of the straggling garden attached to the inn, by the equerry himself, so that we might get away unobserved. Hither Madame accompanied us, and after giving some further instructions in a low tone to Lalande, embraced me again and again, and I am afraid we both wept, whilst Mousette joined in to keep us company. Finally we started, and I turned once or twice to look back, and saw the slender grey-clad figure still at the gate, growing fainter and fainter in outline at each step we took, and seeming at last to slip away into the silver haze of the moonlight, until when I turned for the last time, I could see nothing but the winding road, the ghostly outline of the trees, and the pointed roof of the inn. I have often wondered if the girls of the present day would endure and act as we women had to do then. All women have to endure passively. This will be so for all time unless the world be made anew, but with us there were times and seasons when we had to act like men.

Last year, when I was in Paris, where I had taken my daughter for her presentation, a great lady called on me, the wife and daughter of a soldier, and she reached our house almost in hysterics, because one of the wheels of her coach had come off, and she had to walk a hundred paces or so. She was in fear of her life at the accident. And when we had made much of her and she was gone, my husband's eyes met mine, and the same thought struck us both, for he came up and kissed me, saying:

"*Mordieu!* I thank God I am not thirty years younger!"

## CHAPTER VI. AT THE SIGN OF THE GOLDEN FROG

At first we managed to get along at a fair pace, as the road was good and we were well able to see our way by the moonlight; but after crossing the Taurion by a frail wooden bridge, which creaked and groaned ominously as we passed over it, Lalande took a turn to the right and followed a narrow track whereon we had to ride nose to tail. Womanlike, I began to think he was taking the wrong road, and asked him whither he was leading us.

"St. Priest-Taurion lies on the main road, madame, and it would be well to avoid it. Let not madame have any fear. I could make my way to Meymac blindfold."

"And want to show off by picking the most horrible paths," shrilled out Mousette, whose temper, never of the best, had gone to ribbons, and little wonder, too, poor thing!

"It would be well if we speak in lower tones-better still not to speak at all," said the equerry, and silencing Mousette with a reprimand, I asked Lalande to lead on.

Whilst the motion was fast it was not possible to think, but now that we were going at something like a snail's pace, I unconsciously gave myself over to my reflections, though I had by this time reached a state of mind when it seemed impossible for me to distinguish between right and wrong, or to think coherently. The proof of the truth of de Clermont's story had accentuated the bitterness in my heart against my husband, and this was not lessened when I remembered the infamy of the enterprise which he had undertaken, and of which I was the price. I had it once or twice in my mind to try and prevent the crime he contemplated by attempting to warn the Bearnnois; but it was impossible to do so from here, and I should have to make the attempt from Meymac. Then that thought gave place to de Clermont, and with the memory of him regrets that I had not taken his offer, and by one desperate stroke freed myself forever from de Lorgnac, even at the cost of that good opinion of the world, we pretend to despise and yet value so much, even against what I felt to be the teachings of my conscience. After all I was merely holding to vows that I had never really made. The priest's benediction surely could not bind me forever to a hateful life. I had my dreams as all young women and young men have-of a life that I could share with one whom I could trust and honour and love. One whose joys would be my joys, whose sorrows would be my sorrows, whose ambitions and hopes would be my ambitions and hopes, and so to pass hand in hand with him until one or both of us were called away to fulfil the mystery of life by death. And de Clermont? Could he have been the one to have so travelled with me? Did I love him? For the life of me I could not tell at that moment. At one time I seemed dragged towards him, at another there was a positive repulsion, and through it all there was an ever-warning voice within me, like the tolling of a bell hung over a sunken rock to warn mariners of danger, telling me, "Beware! Beware!" I felt in my heart that he did not ring true metal-why, I could not tell-nor can I tell now. But I suppose that God, who has limited the capacity of us women to reason as compared with man, has given to us this faculty of intuition by which we can know. Would that it were followed more often; would that its warnings were ever heeded! Such were the thoughts that chased each other through my brain as the long hours passed, and then they seemed to twine themselves together into a network that left me powerless to follow them and unravel the tangle. Oh, it was a weary ride! Overhead hung the moon now light, then darkened by flitting clouds, with a few stars showing here and there in the sky. On all sides of us floated a dim silvery haze that made it appear as if we were going through Dreamland; dark shadows of trees, fantastic rocks that might have been thrown here and there by giants at play, and a road that turned and twisted like a serpent's track, full of stones and boulders, on which our horses continually stumbled, but, mercifully, did not come down and bring us with them. There was one advantage we derived from these boulders. They kept the horses and ourselves from sleeping, for after a stumble and a jerk, both beast and rider began to see the folly of nodding, and bravely strove to keep awake. At last we came

to something that looked like level ground, and Lalande suggested that we should increase our pace to a canter, adding truly enough that it would rouse us all up. We followed his advice, nothing loath, and kept at this pace with occasional halts to rest the horses, for the best part of the night. At last, however, neither Mousette nor myself could endure going on longer, and indeed our horses were as much, if not more worn out than we were. In short, we were so fatigued that I had got into a frame of mind in which I did not care what happened to me, one way or the other, and Mousette, poor girl, was crying softly to herself, though she kept her way with the greatest courage. This being the case, I called to Lalande that we could not go on any further; but at his intercession we made yet another effort, and at last we halted near a clump of beeches, close to which a small brook purred by. I do not think I shall ever forget the kindness and attention of the honest fellow. He made us as comfortable a resting-place as he could contrive with the aid of saddles and rugs, and then, giving us some wine to drink, bade us sleep, whilst he retired a little distance-not to rest, but to attend to the horses and keep a watch. So utterly tired out were we that we must have fallen asleep at once, and the sun was already rising when Lalande aroused us.

"If madame does not mind," he said, "it will be well if we move further up into that wood yonder and rest there, whilst I go to a village hard at hand, and procure some food, and take news of the state of the road."

To this I assented readily, and after walking for about a quarter of a mile we found a spot which exactly suited our purpose, where both we and the horses could be concealed for the remainder of the day, if it was so necessary, without any fear of discovery. Lalande then started off for the village, and we waited his coming with a hungry impatience, taking, however, the opportunity of his absence to make a forest toilet. It was some time before the equerry came back, and we were just beginning to be alarmed at his absence when he appeared, bearing with him the things he went to procure, and whilst Mousette and I were eating, he told us what he had found out, adding:

"I regret that madame will not be able to travel by daylight-that *croquemort* la Coquille and his gang passed through St. Bathilde yesterday, and are in the neighbourhood, and not they alone, but one or two others of like kidney. We shall have to make our way as best we can by night."

But this was too much-not for anything was I going to endure the misery of last night over again, and I argued and expostulated with Lalande, Mousette joining with me with shrill objurgations, and at last the poor fellow gave in, but I confess with a very bad grace, grumbling a good deal to himself and declaring he would be no longer responsible for our safety. I own now that we were wrong in persisting as we did, but I put it to any one if they would have endured what we had to endure without protest; and then we were women, and I am afraid possessed some of that contrariness of disposition which I have heard the opposite sex credit us with-though for pure, mulish obstinacy, give me a man who thinks he has made up his mind.

Lalande was, however, determined upon one thing, and that was to avoid the main road, and as I had so far successfully opposed his plan of forcing a night journey, I did not feel justified in making further objections, and allowed him to follow the by-paths he chose without further protest, though indeed, it was as if there was some truth in Mousette's remark of last night, that he was choosing the most difficult tracks to show how well he knew the way. We now entered the mountains of the Limousin, and what would have been a mile elsewhere, became three here with the ups and downs, the turns and twists. For miles we passed never a human habitation, except now and again a few woodcutters' huts, and sometimes a small outlying farm, and I felt the justice of Lalande's remark, when he defended himself from a sharp attack by Mousette, by saying he had chosen this road because it was safe from gentlemen like la Coquille, who never found any bones worth the picking on it, and therefore left it and its difficulties severely alone-though, of course, there was the odd chance of our meeting them, and so again to the old argument of travelling by night. As we went on the scenery became wilder and more savage, and once a large grey wolf, with two cubs by her side, appeared on the track about fifty paces or so in front of us, and after giving our party a quiet survey, and showing

us a line of great strong teeth as she snarled on us, trotted calmly off with her family down the hillside. Both Mousette and myself were not unnaturally alarmed; but Lalande, with a "Never fear, madame, there is no danger," kept quietly along, though I saw that he had pulled a pistol from his holster. As the day advanced we became aware that the sun was being obscured by clouds more often than it should be at this time of year, and every now and again gusts of wind would race down the ravines, and lose themselves with ominous warnings through the forest. Still, however, the horizon was clear, and high above all others we could make out the crest of Mount Odouze. I asked Lalande if he thought there was likely to be a storm.

"It is hard to tell, madame; storms come on very suddenly in these hills, but if there is one it will not be very bad, for we can see the Cradle, as that dip between the two peaks of Mount Odouze is called, quite distinctly."

But though he spoke thus reassuringly, I saw that he increased the pace, and that ever and again he would scan the horizon, and look up at the sky. Once when he thought I had caught him, he explained as he pointed upwards:

"'Tis a red eagle, madame, that must have flown here from the Pyrenees—a long journey. See—there it is—that speck in the sky."

I followed his glance, but could make out nothing. "You have sharp eyesight, Lalande," I said with a smile, and then the matter dropped. I could not, however, but think how good a heart was beneath that rough exterior, and not the finest gentleman I have ever met could have behaved to us with more chivalrous courtesy than did that simple under officer of horse. A little past midday we rested for an hour or so, more for the sake of the animals than ourselves, and then continued our journey.

"We should make St. Yriarte by about three o'clock, madame," said Lalande, "and there is a small inn there kept by my sister and her husband, for we are of the Limousin. It is called 'The Golden Frog.' We will stay there for the night, and a long march to-morrow will bring us to Meymac by nightfall."

"Thank goodness!" exclaimed Mousette, "for every bone in my body aches as if some one had beaten me."

As the time passed, bringing with it no storm, I began to think we were safe from that annoyance, and at last from the crest of a hill over which we were riding we suddenly came in sight of St. Yriarte, lying below us in a little valley. As we did so Lalande called out, "We will be there in half an hour, madame—and save all chance of a wetting for to-night."

It took us a little time to descend the slope of the hill, but after that we came to more or less level ground, and in a few moments reached the gates of the inn, which stood in a large garden some way apart from the hamlet, for St. Yriarte could be called by no other name.

As we rode in a dog commenced to bark; Lalande called out "Jeanne! Jeanne!" and, on our halting near the entrance, gay with honeysuckle, in full bloom, Lalande's sister and her husband came out to meet us, and seeing him, fell to embracing him, and there was an animated converse carried on by all three at once, whilst Mousette and I were kept waiting. Whilst we did this patiently, I began to look around me, and for the first time became aware of the presence of a stranger. He had been sitting on a garden seat, half-hidden by the falling honeysuckle, but, as my eyes fell on him, he rose politely, and stood as if in doubt, whether he should offer to assist me to dismount, or not. He was a tall well-built man, with aquiline features, fair hair, and blue eyes, and wore a short pointed beard slightly tinged with grey. His dress was simple though rich, and it was easy to see that, whoever he was, he was a person of some consequence. The position was getting just a little absurd when Jeanne's voice rang out sharply:

"Of course! Of course! Madame de Lorgnac shall have the best we can provide."

I saw the stranger start perceptibly, and an odd, curious look came into his eyes. Then as if with an effort he stepped forward, and lifting his hat said with a foreign accent:

"Will Madame de Lorgnac permit me to assist her to alight? I have the honour to be known to Monsieur le Chevalier de Lorgnac. My name is Norreys-Colonel Norreys, of whom, perhaps, you may have heard."

I became almost sick with fear and apprehension, for this was the very man whom I least wished to meet. It was he who had borne the order concerning me to de Termes. He must therefore be aware that my presence there meant that I was in flight. He acknowledged himself to be a friend of my husband, and I felt that all was lost. Mustering up as much courage as I could I thanked him for his offer, and he helped me to dismount, saying as he did so:

"Madame will find the inn more than comfortable. I have been here for two days awaiting a friend. If he comes this evening I shall have to leave to-morrow with the greatest regret. It has been so quiet and peaceful here."

I glanced at him again. It was a strong, good face. The eyes looked at me honestly, and in their clear depths I could see no deceit. That woman's instinct of which I have spoken, told me at once that here was a man to be trusted, that he was incapable of treachery. But the same feeling used to come over me whenever I saw de Lorgnac, and yet—who was more base than he?

Nevertheless, I was now moved by an impulse I could not resist.

"Monsieur de Norreys, will you see me in an hour? I have a favour to ask of you."

He looked a little surprised, but bowed. "If there is anything I can do for you, madame, command me." His tone was cold and formal, and chilled me. Then he stepped to one side to let me pass, and I entered the inn.

I had made up my mind. I felt sure that he was here to prevent my going further. What else could have brought him to this out-of-the-way place? But he looked a gentleman and a man of honour, and I would follow the dictates of my heart, and throw myself on his mercy.

## CHAPTER VII. UNMASKED

Now do I reverently thank God that by His mercy I was strong enough to take the course I adopted. For had I not done so, I know not what had been my fate. On the surface, the impulse on which I had acted seemed foolish and ill-advised, yet when I think over all calmly now, and especially of the circumstances that led to my meeting with Monsieur de Norreys, and the events which followed, I am sure and confident that the Merciful Power which had so far watched over me had heard my prayers and answered them. At the moment, however, I did not know or think of this; my one idea was to try, if possible, to enlist the Englishman on my side, and if this was not to be, then I knew not what I should do, though the most desperate resolves were rioting in my brain. I was too excited to rest, but a bath, a change of toilet, and a little food, refreshed me and steadied my nerves, and then I sat for a space by the open window of my small room to try and collect myself for my interview with M. de Norreys. The clouds seemed to have passed away, though far behind over the mountains there was a grey bank that showed that the storm was hovering over us, and the wind still blew in fitful, uncertain gusts. Below me Lalande was attending to the horses, and a bow-shot or so beyond the garden of the inn, under some walnut trees I saw what I had not noticed before, and that was a small encampment of lances. This did not tend to reassure me, and if I had any doubts as to whom the troops belonged, they were set at rest by the sight of Norreys, mounted on a powerful black horse, riding slowly towards the inn, evidently with a view of keeping his appointment with me. I had tried to set out in my mind what I would say to him, but each effort seemed to be worse than the other, and at last I determined to simply throw myself on his chivalry, and stand the hazard of the result. At one time I thought that we might perhaps make a dash for it and escape; but even I could see that our wearied horses would not have a chance against fresh ones, and if it came to a struggle we had but one sword to depend upon—a brave one, it is true—but what could one poor man do against ten? No, there was no way but the one way, the idea of which had come so suddenly to me. Now I heard Norreys dismounting at the door of the inn, and after a moment's hesitation, I took my courage in both hands, and stepped down to meet him. He was standing in the little parlour, his back to the light, as I entered, so that I could not see the expression of his face, but he bowed, I thought stiffly, on my coming in, and handed me one of the rough chairs in the room, saying as he did so, "I trust I have not kept you waiting, madame; I was delayed a little longer than I expected with my men, as I have much to arrange for." The last words, measured out in his prim, formal speech, appeared to me to convey a hint to be quick with my business, and as a natural result all but took away from me the power of saying anything. Mustering up courage, however, I took the chair he offered, saying, as I did so, "Will you not be seated, monsieur?"

"Thank you," came the answer in the same set tone, and then he fixed his eyes on me with a grave attention, in which, however, there was mingled, as I thought, much repressed curiosity.

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