



A QUIET VILLAGE



Many, very many years ago, in the outskirts of a quiet village, situated near the town of Saumur, in France, stood a quaint looking house; its high-pitched roof, and curiously twisted chimneys, bore witness to its antiquity, as well as the chequered woodwork, which crossed and re-crossed its somewhat dilapidated exterior. It has evidently resisted the storms of long past years, and at the time of which we write, was falling gradually into decay. Still, there was an air of neatness about it, and about the little plot of garden which divided it from the high road, that said much in favour of its occupants.

The persons who inhabited this house were Protestants, or Huguenots, as they were then called; and the family consisted of a father, mother, and their five children, the eldest of whom, Suzanne, is the heroine of our tale. Monsieur de l'Orme had inherited his house from his father, a country gentleman of





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moderate fortune, who had brought up his only son in the faith he had himself received from his ancestors. Pierre de l'Orme had amply repaid the care bestowed on his early training, and was a truly religious and conscientious man, respected and beloved by all who knew him. At the time our story begins, he was about forty years of age; tall and slight in figure, with a dark complexion and regular features. His wife was some years younger, and although her character was very different to his, yet never were two people so thoroughly suited to each other. Monsieur de l'Orme was of a thoughtful turn of mind, which was greatly increased by the troubled times in which he lived; whilst his wife, naturally merry and cheerful, tended to enliven a disposition which might have become morose, but for her pleasing influence. She was quite different to him also in personal appearance; in early youth she had been very beautiful, and even now, as she sat engaged in some household task, she was very fair to look upon. With an extremely delicate complexion, hair of the palest brown, and an ever-varying expression of countenance, you could scarcely have fancied her old enough to be the wife of the grave man who entered the room where she sat.

This room was large and low, panelled with oak. It ran across one end of the house, and was lighted up by long narrow windows at each end. The floor, black with age, was carefully polished; and the old well-worn furniture carried one's thoughts back to times gone by.

Madame de l'Orme, as she sat by the open window, in a curiously carved high-backed chair, cushioned with crimson velvet, looked like an old picture. She was dressed in the fashion of the time, which was at once quaint and picturesque; a robe of soft, rich brown silk fell around her in massive and graceful folds; cut square in the bodice, it was relieved by a snowy kerchief, fastened with a gold pin at the throat; the sleeves which only reached just below the elbow, were finished by deep ruffles of lace, and her fair features were shaded by a cap of the

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same delicate material. Very curious in shape it was; high in the crown, and brought forward so as almost to touch her forehead; it was fastened back at either side of the head, so as to form two long broad lappets, which reached the shoulder on each side. An apron of embroidered muslin completed her costume.

As she sat mechanically pursuing her task, her soft blue eyes were often filled with tears, which fell in spite of herself on the work she held in her hand. It was a hot afternoon in the month of August. Not the slightest breeze stirred the leaves on the surrounding trees; and the very insects seemed to have gone to sleep, wearied by the intensity of the heat. Nothing was heard but the ticking of the old clock, which marked the hours as they slowly passed away. At length a well-known step was heard on the gravel path; and Madame de l'Orme started up to greet her husband as he entered, exclaiming eagerly, 'Well, Pierre?'

'My poor Madeleine!' he replied, 'I have no news for you; I have been again unsuccessful.'

With a cry of anguish she fell back on her seat, and for some moments seemed a prey to the most uncontrollable grief; all at once she remembered her husband, and stifling her sobs, she looked up with a faint smile, and said, 'Pierre, how selfish I am!'

'No, Madeleine! You are not selfish, your grief is natural. Mine too is great, almost too great to bear, except that I know that it is God who sends the trial.'

The better to understand the foregoing conversation, we must go back many years; and, moreover, trace an outline of events which belongs to history.