

# THE LACE KERCHIEF

BY S. LEVITT YEATS.

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Affairs were going badly at court. I was seized with a fit of the blues, and for once, leaving Pompon, my ape, behind, made my way from the Louvre across the river to a little inn called the Chapeau Rouge, where the wine was old and the cookery excellent. I ordered a wing of capon and a flask of burgundy to be brought to me in the summer-house in the garden, and when I had supped I leaned back in my seat, inhaling the fragrance of the roses, and for a space went back in dreamland to my home in the Quercy.

A slight noise—a restrained cough—arrested my attention, and through the space between the leaves of my shelter I caught a glimpse of a face at a gable window of the inn, directly overlooking me, a face that peered out for a second and was gone. So, thick, however, was my cover that I was totally concealed—an unsought for but fortunate circumstance.

But, although the face was immediately withdrawn, I had recognized it at once. The man in the room above me was Chantonay, the Spanish ambassador to France.

In a moment my megrims vanished. I felt that there was something here worth prying into, and that perhaps the poor gentleman of the Quercy, the King's jester, and the grandee of Spain might have another rubber to play against each other—we had played one once before.

I determined to wait. Fortunately I had paid my score, and was at liberty to stay all night where I was if I listed. Fortunately, also, there was an execution that evening at the place Maubert, which had drawn all the

striking the palm of his hands together, laughed a low, cackling laugh to himself.

"Every man his own way of woe-ing," I muttered, and when he had disappeared continued my route. The lady had gone straight on toward the river with the two men who had joined her when Chantonay left, and my way lay in the same direction. As I passed the spot where the couple parted, something white lying on the roadway caught my eye. I picked it up, and found it was a delicate lace kerchief. I handled it for a moment. In one corner there appeared to be a monogram, or crest, but it was too dark to see; so, thrusting it into my vest pocket, I pursued my way.

During this I had a little time to reflect, and, considering all things, I was almost forced to the conclusion that it was not quite a love affair my don was engaged in; and then somehow I began to think of my old friend, Blaise de Lorgnac. His power of rapid action would have been much to me now. It was he and I together who had checked the Spaniard once before—before Lorgnac was away at Marlenbourg with Conde, trying to heal his heart wounds by getting other wounds on his body, and this would be a solo hand I was to play.

My apartments were in the wing of the palace overlooking the rue St. Thomas du Louvre. As I approached them, I saw that the door was half open, and that the room within was in light. Some one within, too, struck a chord on my lute—it was Lorgnac. Lorgnac came back, I knew, and a moment after we had clasped hands in warm greeting.

"You are well?" I asked, looking into his eyes.

"As ever," he smiled back at me. Making Lorgnac be seated, I pulled

and time presses—au revoir!" He wrung my hand and was gone.

For a moment I listened to his departing footsteps, and then bolting the door carefully, came back to my seat. Taking up the kerchief, I put it before me and began to reflect.

"Eh! eh!" I exclaimed, speaking my thoughts aloud. "Why not look at that kerchief? There are a thousand chances to one that it belongs to someone you never knew or heard of. In which case there will be no harm done. On the other hand, if it does belong to someone you know, it might give a clue to a somewhat mysterious affair. It seems to me that stilted notions of honor have no place here, and you will be idiot as well as fool to miss your chance."

With this I held up the pretty lace thing, and it fell in a light, loose fold in my hand. I swear if it had not been for Chantonay I would have troubled no more about the matter; but as it was, I seemed to hear that low cackle of his, a presentiment of evil to come seized me, and without more ado I spread out the kerchief and examined it carefully.

It was, as I have said, of lace. It was scented with musk, and in one corner was an embroidered O, and nothing more. There was no crest, and I could make nothing of it. Amidst the galaxy of fair dames at the court, I could think of no one whose name bore this initial, and there was no crest to serve as a pointer. Some little bourgeois, after all! A vulgar intrigue! Half unconsciously I put the bit of lace in my pocket, and, picking up my lute, made my way to the Pavillon du Puy, with Pompon at my heels.

I was far from easy in my mind. This affair of Lorgnac's was bad, and if discovered meant the scaffold for



"Mademoiselle, you are very unfortunate in losing things.

population of the students' quarter to the other end of the city, and but for my gentleman upstairs and myself below there were, as I thought, no other guests in the Chapeau Rouge.

About an hour passed, and it became dusk. Then, to my surprise, three figures appeared at the door of the inn: one was the innkeeper, the other was Chantonay, and the third was a lady, closely veiled. Her features were not distinguishable; but under her cloak there seemed to be a tall and graceful figure, and the foot and ankle—I am a judge in these matters—left no doubt in my mind that the lady was young and probably handsome.

Monsieur put something in mine host's hand, who bowed to the ground, and, giving his arm to his fair companion, they both left the inn together.

"Ho! ho!" I laughed under my breath. "At his age, too! St. Siegel! But he has a pretty taste."

And half-laughing, half-disgusted with myself for having wasted my time, I emerged from my lair and, exchanging some light words of badinage with the innkeeper, I also left the Chapeau Rouge and hastened homeward.

I took the road by the barrier, outside the moat of St. Germain, but it was not until I reached St. Peter's Chapel that I saw my turtle doves once more. They were pressing on toward the river; but no longer in arm.

At the quay the pair stopped and exchanged some earnest words together. The Spaniard once laying his hand on the lady's shoulder, as if to emphasize what he was saying. Finally Chantonay rounded a low whistle, and after a moment's delay two other figures, emerging from the darkness joined the pair. Chantonay appeared to give them some orders, and then, bowing to the lady, he turned sharply round and began to walk back in my direction. At the time I was standing in the shadow of some piles of wood. I slipped round these as he came near and let Chantonay pass, which he did at a round pace—though once he stopped, and,

out some wine and bade him give me the news of the war.

In the excitement of the moment and our meeting, I had no opportunity to speak about my adventure of the evening; but at last some allusion was made to Chantonay, and I told him the story. As I finished I pulled the kerchief from my vest pocket, and threw it on the table. "Here," I said, "is the toy I picked up—and now to look at the crest and the monogram. It should tell us who she is."

I stretched out my hand, but Lorgnac was before me. "No! no! This is not your way or mine, de Besme. Why should we pry into a woman's secrets?"

"You forget I am La Fontaine—the ferret—and the secret is Chantonay's as well as hers."

He hesitated for a moment, and then, insisting on his point, "Even so! Let it be, old friend."

"As you will, sir Amadis of Gaul!" I replied, a little petulantly, putting the kerchief aside, adding, "But I will make my Spaniard dance tonight at the masquerade. You are, of course, coming."

"No. I leave Paris at dawn for Marlenbourg."

"Where Conde, they say, lies ill?"

"Ill, yes—but not with the fever you think. It is another kind of fever. I was taken that way once, but I am over—thank God! And de Besme!"

Here he rose from his seat and began to pace the room, as he continued, "Nothing would satisfy the prince but that I should ride to Paris—see her—our Queen—and ride back and tell him I had done so. I was not to exchange a word. On my faith as a gentleman! I bore no message."

"And you have seen her—the Queen of Scotland?"

"Yes! But she saw me, too; it was on the ladies' terrace that we met."

"Alone?"

"No; one of her tirewomen was with her—and the short of it is that I—ass and fool—have promised to bear a letter to the prince."

"You! I burst out. 'You!' And then I rose too, and in bitter jest handed him my cap and bells.

"Take that! My baton, and the ape, too, if you will. As and fool, you called yourself, and I agree. Take my office! You are better fitted for it than I!"

"Be still!" he said hoarsely. "I could not say no. She is a woman and a queen."

"And Blaise de Lorgnac, seigneur of Lorgnac of Tully, and Mallezeux, Knight of the King's Order, is a man of honor."

I put my hand on his shoulder and he stood glowering at me. I felt his frame shiver, and then he mumbled as if speaking to himself. "I have given my word. This once and no more!" My hand dropped to his side. "And this letter—you have it?"

"Not yet. I receive it in an hour,

my friend. There was yet another thing that moved me powerfully, and perhaps those who read may guess what it was. She is dead and gone, and Lorgnac is the only man in the world I followed him. We left the Pavillon du Puy without notice, and then went down the long corridors that led to the apartments of the Dauphin. Beyond there lay those of his wife, Mary of Scotland, the 'little Queen,' as she was called.

During all this time we exchanged no word together, until at last we stopped before a door and the boy turned to me.

"The Queen's apartments," he said; "you are free to pass. I remain on guard here." So saying he drew his little sword, and pointed with it at the door.

There were three people in the room—one was Mary of Scotland, standing near a table; the other was de Lorgnac, booted and spurred as if for a long journey; and the third was a young woman, a tall young woman, who was leaning against the open window, her face buried in her hands, and sobbing bitterly. All this I took in at a glance as I entered, and kneeling before my Queen, said:

"Madame, I have come."

She made me rise. "Monsieur," she said, "I have come to you for help. Before you saved me from a great danger, I am in a greater danger now. I want your help."

"Madame! All that—"

But she interrupted me. "Lorgnac here tells me that you know of the object of his coming to Paris."

"Yes, madame!" And in spite of my self, my voice hardened.

She saw the change and looked at me in pitiful entreaty. "Monsieur, I do not speak to you as a Queen, but as a woman."

"Ah! madame! Say not a word more!" I burst out. "My life is yours!"

And as I spoke the girl at the window burst into fresh weeping.

"Tell me," I said, turning to de Lorgnac, "what has happened? We waste time in talking if there is serious business afoot."

"The letter I spoke of is lost."

"Who lost it? You?"

He laughed harshly. "No! It was given by her highness to mademoiselle Odou below to deliver to me in the garden below the ladies' terrace, and the short of it is that the letter is gone."

"We had a little distance to go; but at last we came to the dark, solid outline of the old oak, and Lorgnac turned to mademoiselle.

"It was here we met, mademoiselle, and you said you lost the letter."

"Hum!" I said. "A most curious loss!" And there was a note in my voice that could not be mistaken.

"Yes," she answered, holly; "I did lose it. It must have dropped somewhere here, and then, with a sudden gust of southern anger, 'Messieurs! I like not your manner of speech, and I know not why I should be dragged here like this. The letter is gone, and here I am!'"

I have lost it; I own to it. It was an accident. It slipped from my pocket and fell here somewhere, and any breeze might have blown it anywhere—and now let me go. I shall stay here no longer."

She stood at bay, a splendid creature, her dark eyes flashing through the night. The time had come for me to play my trump card.

"Eh, bien! Mademoiselle! We do not seek to detain you. We will do the search; but let me tell you as a friend that the moment you go back you will be arrested!"

I turned and saw young de Lorgnac,

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Montgomery's son, who was then a page to the Dauphiness, Mary of Scotland. His face was pale, and the hand that rested on my sleeve was trembling.

"What has happened?" I said, interrupting him before he could speak.

"I do not know," he said, "but you are wanted at once—come!" He tugged at my sleeve once more; and without another word I followed him. We left the Pavillon du Puy without notice, and then went down the long corridors that led to the apartments of the Dauphin. Beyond there lay those of his wife, Mary of Scotland, the 'little Queen,' as she was called.

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I turned and saw young de Lorgnac,

In a flash it all came to me, and I thanked God in my heart that I had looked at the kerchief. The O stood for Odou. I could swear it. I looked at the girl. She had ceased weeping as de Lorgnac spoke, and was looking at him with a flushed face and dry eyes. There was not a tear in those bold black orbs. I knew the type. She was Arlesienne, and as I looked at the straight dark brows and full, passionate mouth I understood the nature I had to deal with. All this went through my brain like lightning, as turning to her I said:

"Will mademoiselle tell me how it was she lost this letter?"

"Sit down, Odou," said Mary, kindly, "and tell us all you know."

This brought on a fresh burst of sobbing as mademoiselle sank on to a tabouret, and began to rub her eyes with another little square of embroidered ery which appeared uncommonly like my find.

"Traitor!" I muttered under my breath, but to her, "And tell us of the letter."

"I lost it in the garden," she began, and then, hesitating, went on with an effort, "It was near the oak toward the riding school."

"Now, mademoiselle! You will please accompany Monsieur de Lorgnac and myself, and show us the spot where you missed the letter—come!"

"Is this all you can do?" said Mary, with a ring of despair in her voice.

"Rest assured, madame," I said, "that we will trace your letter—come, mademoiselle!"

"What good would it be?" She began pettishly, but I interrupted her, seeing into her plan delay matters.

"It is gone, and time we were away," and, leaning forward, I whispered, "for your own sake, come."

The shot told. She glanced at me and then turned aside, red to her neck, and her hands began to tremble, but she made no further attempt at parley, and of her own accord now led the way, Lorgnac following her.

A minute later we were on the ladies' terrace, and crossing it descended the gallery that led to the garden. It was broad moonlight, so bright and clear that one might have read a scroll by it. As we went on, we looked hither and thither, but saw no trace of the lost letter. What was passing in the tirewoman's mind I know not, as for me, the puzzle was whether mademoiselle had the letter or not. If she had delivered it to the Spaniard the matter was over, whatever revenge we might afterwards take, but I had my doubts about this, and if she had it still—there was our chance.

We had a little distance to go; but at last we came to the dark, solid outline of the old oak, and Lorgnac turned to mademoiselle.

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"Arrested!" said she and de Lorgnac in the same breath.

"Yes," I went on coolly. "Arrested—that is the word. Mademoiselle, you are very unfortunate in losing things. You recognize this? You lost it today, or this afternoon, rather, across the river."

With this I pulled out the kerchief and showed it to her. Lorgnac was looking at me in blank amazement; but as for the girl, she made no answer, but stood there, white as a sheet, and I could hear her breathing thick and fast.

"Mademoiselle! You have forgotten how long the arm of God is. You were seen this afternoon at an inn called the Chapeau Rouge with Chantonay. You there made your bargain with him. How he persuaded you to be a traitress—what your price was for your shame I know not, nor care to know. But you made your bargain, and on your way you dropped this kerchief."

She began to sob now and cry. The tears were real enough this time, and I believe she would have fallen had not Lorgnac supported her.

"De Besme! De Besme!" he said, his tender heart melting. "Remember she is a woman."

"Yes; and I want her to remember it, too. Mademoiselle, you are young and strong, and beautiful—too beautiful for the rack."

"O, have pity—have pity!" she gasped, and now I changed my note.

"Mademoiselle, you see that little cloud passing across the moon! Before it crosses I must have that letter in my hands. If not, you know what awaits you."

Lorgnac had stepped aside from her, and we all stood gazing at each other. The little cloud had darkened the moon, so that for a moment I could not see the girl's face, half-covered with one hand, while the other was clutching at her neck. She was fighting with herself; a hundred emotions were at play within her. But I was sure of my game now, and at last the end came.

"Mademoiselle, the cloud has nearly passed. Give me the letter and you are safe. If not—"

"With a low cry she thrust her hand into the bosom of her dress, and pulling out the letter, handed it to me, with a whispered 'Take it!' and as my fingers closed over it, I heard Lorgnac's deep—

"Thank God!"

We returned as we had come, and regained the Queen's apartment. As we entered she came running to meet us.

"The letter!" she cried.

"Madame!" And I placed it in her hands.

She looked at us two for a moment—mademoiselle had stayed in the ante-room—and she was about to hand the letter to de Lorgnac, when he pointed to the tall wax candles that burned on the table.

"Madame," he said, "there is a fire there, and it leaves no trace." She made no answer, but held the letter over the candle, and as it leaped into flame, cast it into the fireplace, where it burned to a cinder.

And then we knelt and took leave of her in profound silence.

Provide, or chance, call it what you will, had won us the game; and it will not be a matter of surprise to note that it was Chantonay who had the megrims the next morning, and that he was unable to accompany his majesty to Fontainebleau.

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