

M A D E L E I N E.

CHAPTER I.

LOST IN THE WOODS.

Like almost all villages traversed by a royal road, Neuville-les-Bois is a frightful market-town, muddy in winter, dusty in summer, in all seasons devoid of poetry and mystery. Such was its importance, moreover, that prior to the day at which this simple story commences, the inhabitants had no recollection of any public vehicle stopping within their walls. This disdain that the postillions and drivers had at all times affected towards Neuville-les-Bois gives a poor enough idea of the quality of its wines.

It was in autumn, one Sunday, between mass and vespers. Grouped at the entrance to the hamlet, under a fiery sun, whose rays fell perpendicularly upon their heads, the natives gravely awaited the passage of the diligence from Paris to Limoges; for this was, on holidays, their only diversion,—short, it is true, but intoxicating, like all joys that are of brief duration. When they heard it coming in the distance, they solemnly ranged themselves upon each side of the road; then, when this great rolling machine, spinning along at the rapid trot of the horses between two rows of noses in air, of dull eyes and gaping mouths, had disappeared at a turn in the road in a cloud of dust, these honest people returned to their homes, their hearts overflowing with sweet satisfaction.

Now, the Sunday of which we speak, nothing foreshadowed a possible departure from the usual custom; but it was written on high that Neuville-les-Bois should be that day the theatre of a wonder upon which this modest village, profoundly discouraged by a half century of expectation, no longer dared to count. Instead of spinning along like a cannon-ball as customary, the diligence stopped short in the middle of the road, between the two living hedges formed upon its track. At this unexpected spectacle, at this unforeseen stroke of fate, all Neuville-les-Bois stood stock still, without even dreaming to ask one another whence came such a rare honour. Even the dogs, who were accustomed to run yelping after the ve-

hicle, inviting the kicks of the postilion, seemed to share the astonishment of their masters, and remained, like them, immobile and dumb from stupor. Meanwhile the driver had got down; he opened the door of the stage-coach, and upon this single word,—‘Neuville-les-Bois!’ pronounced by him in a dry tone, a young girl descended from it, having for her whole baggage a little package under her arm. The paleness of her face, her eyes scalded with tears, her sad and suffering air, told her story more plainly than her mourning habit. The driver had already remounted his box, and the young girl had only time to exchange a silent adieu with her travelling companions. She was hardly more than a child, only more grave than one is at this age. When she saw herself alone upon that great road in the blazing sun, at the entrance to this miserable hamlet in which not a soul knew her, alone in the midst of all those faces that examined her with an expression of silly and suspicious curiosity, she seated herself upon a heap of stones, and there, feeling her heart fail within her, she hid her face in her hands and burst into tears. The peasants continued to regard her with the same air, neither breathing a word nor moving a step. Happily, in this group of rustics there were some women, and among these one a mother who was nursing at the breast a little new-born babe. She approached the sorrowful young girl and remained some moments considering her with a hesitating pity; for although everything announced with this child forlornness, almost poverty, the natural distinction of her person retrieved the simplicity of her costume, and commanded, without effort, deference and respect.

‘Poor demoiselle,’ said she at last, ‘since you are here alone, at your age upon the highway, you must have lost your mother!’ ‘Yes, madame, I have lost my mother,’ responded the young girl in a sweet voice, in which a slight foreign accent appeared. ‘Alas! I have lost all, everything, even the patch of earth where I was born and where repose the bones which are dear to me. Nothing more is left me under heaven,’ added she snaking her head.