Chapter 13

WHO DIANA WAS.

Bussy rose, bewildered at his own happiness, and entered with Diana into the room which M. de Monsoreau had just quitted. He looked at Diana with astonishment and admiration; he had not dared to hope that the woman whom he had sought for, would equal the woman of his dream, and now the reality surpassed all that he had taken for a caprice of his imagination. Diana was about nineteen, that is to say in the first éclât of that youth and beauty which gives the purest coloring to the flower, the finest flavor to the fruit. There was no mistaking the looks of Bussy; Diana felt herself admired. At last she broke the silence.

"Monsieur," said she, "you have told me who you are, but not how you came here."

"Madame, the cause of my presence here will come naturally out of the recital you have been good enough to promise me; I am sure of it, from some words of your conversation with M. de Monsoreau."

"I will tell you all, monsieur; your name has been sufficient to inspire me with full confidence, for I have always heard of it as of that of a man of honor, loyalty, and courage."

Bussy bowed, and Diana went on.

"I am the daughter of the Baron de Méridor--that is to say, the only heiress of one of the noblest and oldest names in Anjou."

"There was," said Bussy, "a Baron de Méridor, who, although he could have saved himself, came voluntarily and gave up his sword at the battle of Pavia, when he heard that the king was a prisoner, and begged to accompany

Francis to Madrid, partook his captivity, and only quitted him to come to France and negotiate his ransom."

"It was my father, monsieur, and if ever you enter the great hall of the Château de Méridor you will see, given in memory of this devotion, the portrait of Francis I., painted by Leonardo da Vinci."

"Ah!" said Bussy, "in those times kings knew how to recompense their followers."

"On his return from Spain my father married. His two first children, sons, died. This was a great grief to the Baron de Méridor. When the king died, my father quitted the court, and shut himself with his wife in the Château de Méridor. It was there that I was born, ten years after the death of my brothers.

"Then all the love of the baron was concentrated on the child of his old age; his love for me was idolatry. Three years after my birth I lost my mother, and, too young to feel my loss, my smiles helped to console my father. As I was all to him, so was he also all to me. I attained my sixteenth year without dreaming of any other world than that of my sheep, my peacocks, my swans, and my doves, without imagining that this life would change, or wishing that it should.

"The castle of Méridor was surrounded by vast forests, belonging to the Duc d'Anjou; they were filled with deer and stags, whom no one thought of tormenting, and who had grown quite familiar to me; some of them would even come when I called them, and one, a doe, my favorite Daphne, my poor Daphne, would come and eat out of my hand.

"One spring I had missed her for a month, and was ready to weep for her as for a friend, when she reappeared with two little fawns. At first they were afraid of me, but seeing their mother caress me, they soon learned to do the same.

"About this time we heard that the Duc d'Anjou had sent a governor into the province, and that he was called the Comte de Monsoreau. A week passed, during which everyone spoke of the new governor. One morning the woods resounded with the sound of the horn, and the barking of dogs. I ran to the park, and arrived just in time to see Daphne, followed by her two fawns, pass like lightning, pursued by a pack of hounds. An instant after, mounted on a black horse, M. de Monsoreau flew past me.

"I cried out and implored pity for my poor protegee, but he did not hear me. Then I ran after him, hoping to meet either the count or some of his suite and determined to implore them to stop this chase, which pierced my heart. I ran for some time without knowing where, for I had lost sight of both dogs and hunters.

"Soon I could not even hear them, so I sat down at the foot of a tree, and began to cry. I had been there about a quarter of an hour, when I heard the chase again. The noise came nearer and nearer, and, darting forward, I saw my poor Daphne again; she had but one fawn with her now, the other had given way through fatigue. She herself was growing visibly tired, and the distance between her and the hounds was less than when I saw her first.

"As before, I exerted myself in vain to make myself heard. M. de Monsoreau saw nothing but the animal he was chasing; he passed more quickly that ever, with his horn to his mouth, which he was sounding loudly. Behind him two or three hunters animated the dogs with horn and voice. All passed me like a tempest, and disappeared in the forest. I was in despair, but I ran on once more and followed a path which I knew led to the castle of Beaugé. belonging to the Duc d'Anjou, and which was about six miles from the castle of Méridor. It was not till I arrived there that I remembered that I was alone, and far from home.

"I confess that a vague terror seized me, and that then only I thought of the imprudence and folly of my conduct. I followed the border of the lake, intending to ask the gardener (who, when I had come there with my father, had often given me bouquets) to take me home, when all at once I heard the

sound of the chase again. I remained motionless, listening, and I forgot all else. Nearly at the same moment the doe reappeared, coming out of the wood on the other side of the lake, but pursued so closely that she must be taken immediately. She was alone, her second fawn had fallen, but the sight of the water seemed to reanimate her, and she plunged in as if she would have come to me. At first she swam rapidly, and I looked at her with tears in my eyes, and almost as breathless as herself; insensibly her strength failed her, while the dogs seemed to grow more and more earnest in their pursuit. Soon some of them reached her, and, stopped by their bites, she ceased to advance. At this moment, M. de Monsoreau appeared at the border of the lake, and jumped off his horse. Then I collected all my strength to cry for pity, with clasped hands. It seemed to me that he saw me, and I cried again. He heard me, for he looked at me; then he ran towards a boat, entered it, and advanced rapidly towards the animal, who was fighting among the dogs. I did not doubt that, moved by my voice, he was hastening to bring her succor, when all at once I saw him draw his hunting knife, and plunge it into the neck of the poor animal. The blood flowed out, reddening the water at the lake, while the poor doe uttered a doleful cry, beat the water with her feet, reared up, and then fell back dead.

"I uttered a cry almost as doleful as hers, and fell fainting on the bank. When I came to myself again, I was in bed, in a room of the château of Beaugé, and my father, who had been sent for, standing by me. As it was nothing but over-excitement, the next morning I was able to return home; although I suffered for three or four days. Then my father told me, that M. de Monsoreau, who had seen me, when I was carried to the castle, had come to ask after me; he had been much grieved when he heard that he had been the involuntary cause of my accident and begged to present his excuses to me, saying, that he could not be happy until he had his pardon from my own lips.

"It would have been ridiculous to refuse to see him, so, in spite of my repugnance, I granted his request. He came the next day; I felt that my behavior must have seemed strange, and I excused it on the ground of my affection for Daphne. The count swore twenty times, that had he known I had any interest in his victim, he would have spared her with pleasure; but his protestations did not convince me, nor remove the unfavorable impression I had formed of him. When he took leave, he asked my father's permission to come again. He had been born in Spain and educated at

Madrid, and it was an attraction for my father to talk over the place where he had been so long a prisoner. Besides, the count was of good family, deputy-governor of the province, and a favorite, it was said, of the Due d'Anjou; my father had no motive for refusing his request, and it was granted. Alas! from this moment ceased, if not my happiness, at least my tranquillity. I soon perceived the impression I had made on the count; he began to come every day, and was full of attentions to my father, who showed the pleasure he took in his conversation, which was certainly that of a clever man.

"One morning my father entered my room with an air graver than usual, but still evidently joyful. 'My child,' said he, 'you always have said you did not wish to leave me.'

"'Oh! my father,' cried I, 'it is my dearest wish.'

"'Well, my Diana,' continued he, embracing me, 'it only depends now on yourself to have your wish realized.' I guessed what he was about to say, and grew dreadfully pale.

"'Diana, my child, what is the matter?' cried he.

"'M. de Monsoreau, is it not?' stammered I. 'Well?' said he, astonished. 'Oh! never, my father, if you have any pity for your daughter, never----'

"'Diana, my love,' said he, 'it is not pity I have for you, but idolatry; you know it; take a week to reflect, and if then----'

"'Oh! no, no,' cried I, 'it is useless; not a day, not a minute! No, no, no!' and I burst into tears. My father adored me, and he took me in his arms, and gave me his word that he would speak to me no more of this marriage.

"Indeed, a month passed, during which I neither heard of nor saw M. de Monsoreau. One morning we received an invitation to a grand fête which M. de Monsoreau was to give to the Duc d'Anjou, who was about to visit the province whose name he bore. To this was added a personal invitation from the prince, who had seen my father at court. My first impulse was to beg my father to refuse, but he feared to offend the prince, so we went. M. de Monsoreau received us as though nothing had passed, and behaved to me exactly as he did to the other ladies.

"Not so the duke. As soon as he saw me, he fixed his eyes on me, and scarcely ever removed them. I felt ill at ease under these looks, and begged my father to go home early. Three days after M. de Monsoreau came to Méridor; I saw him from the windows, and shut myself up in my own room. When he was gone, my father said nothing to me, but I thought he looked gloomy.

"Four days passed thus, when, as I was returning from a walk, the servants told me that M. de Monsoreau was with my father, who had asked for me several times, and had desired to be immediately informed of my return. Indeed, no sooner had I entered my room, than my father came to me.

"'My child,' said he, 'a motive which I cannot explain to you, forces me to separate myself from you for some days. Do not question me, but be sure that it is an urgent one, since it determines me to be a week, a fortnight, perhaps a month, without seeing you.' I trembled, I knew not why, but I fancied that the visits of M. de Monsoreau boded me no good.

"'Where am I to go, my father?' asked I.

"'To the château of Lude, to my sister, where you will be hidden from all eyes. You will go by night.' 'And do you not accompany me?' 'No, I must stay here, to ward off suspicion; even the servants must not know where you are going.' 'But then, who will take me there?' 'Two men whom I can trust.' 'Oh! mon Dieu! father,' I cried. The baron embraced me. 'It is necessary, my child,' said he.

"I knew my father's love for me so well that I said no more, only I asked that Gertrude, my nurse, should accompany me. My father quitted me, telling me to get ready.

"At eight o'clock (it was dark and cold, for it was the middle of winter) my father came for me. We descended quietly, crossed the garden, when he opened himself a little door leading to the forest, and there we found a litter waiting, and two men; my father spoke to them, then I got in, and Gertrude with me.

"My father embraced me once more, and we set off. I was ignorant what danger menaced me, and forced me to quit the castle of Méridor. I did not dare to question my conductors, whom I did not know. We went along quietly, and the motion of the litter at last sent me to sleep, when I was awoke by Gertrude, who, seizing my arm, cried out, 'Oh, mademoiselle, was is the matter?'

"I passed my head through the curtains. We were surrounded by six masked cavaliers, and our men, who had tried to defend me, were disarmed. He who appeared the chief of the masked men approached me, and said; 'Reassure yourself, mademoiselle, no harm will be done to you, but you must follow us.'

"'Where?' I asked. 'To a place,' he replied, 'where, far from having anything to complain of, you will be treated like a queen.' 'Oh! my father! my father!' I cried. 'Listen, mademoiselle,' said Gertrude, 'I know the environs, and I am strong; we may be able to escape.'

"'You must do as you will with us, gentlemen,' said I, 'we are but two poor women, and cannot defend ourselves.' One of the men then took the place of our conductor, and changed the direction of our litter."

Here Diana stopped a moment, as if overcome with emotion.

"Oh, continue, madame, continue," cried Bussy.

It was impossible for Diana not to see the interest she inspired in the young man; it was shown in his voice, his gestures, his looks. She smiled, and went on.

"We continued our journey for about three hours, then the litter stopped. I heard a door open, we went on, and I fancied we were crossing a drawbridge. I was not wrong, for, on looking out of the litter, I saw that we were in the courtyard of a castle. What castle was it? We did not know. Often, during the route, we had tried to discover where we were, but seemed to be in an endless forest. The door of our litter was opened, and the same man who had spoken to us before asked us to alight. I obeyed in silence. Two men from the castle had come to meet us with torches; they conducted us into a bedroom richly decorated, where a collation waited for us on a table sumptuously laid out.

"'You are at home here, madame,' said the same man, 'and the room for your servant is adjoining. When you wish for anything, you have but to strike with the knocker on this door, and some one, who will be constantly in the antechamber, will wait on you.' This apparent attention showed that we were guarded. Then the man bowed and went out, and we heard him lock the door behind him.

"Gertrude and I were alone. She was about to speak, but I signed her to be silent, for perhaps some one was listening. The door of the room which had been shown us as Gertrude's was open, and we went in to examine it. It was evidently the dressing-room to mine, and was also locked. We were prisoners. Gertrude approached me, and said in a low tone: 'Did demoiselle remark that we only mounted five steps after leaving the court?' 'Yes,' said I. 'Therefore we are on the ground floor.' 'Doubtless.' 'So that----' said she, pointing to the window. 'Yes, if they are not barred.' 'And if mademoiselle had courage.' 'Oh! yes, I have.'

"Gertrude then took a light, and approached the window. It opened easily, and was not barred; but we soon discovered the cause of this seeming negligence on the part of our captors. A lake lay below us, and we were guarded by ten feet of water better than by bolts and bars. But in looking out I discovered where we were. We were in the château of Beaugé, where they had brought me on the death of my poor Daphné. This castle belonged to the Duc d'Anjou, and a sudden light was thrown upon our capture. We shut the window again, and I threw myself, dressed, on my bed, while Gertrude slept in a chair by my side. Twenty times during the night I woke, a prey to sudden terror; but nothing justified it, excepting the place where I found myself, for all seemed asleep in the castle, and no noise but the cry of the birds interrupted the silence of the night. Day appeared, but only to confirm my conviction that flight was impossible without external aid; and how could that reach us? About nine they came to take away the supper and bring breakfast. Gertrude questioned the servants, but they did not reply. Our morning passed in fruitless plans for escape, and yet we could see a boat fastened to the shore, with its oars in it. Could we only have reached that, we might have been safe.

"They brought us our dinner in the same way, put it down, and left us. In breaking my bread I found in it a little note. I opened it eagerly, and read, 'A friend watches over you. To-morrow you shall have news of him and of your father.' You can imagine my joy. The rest of the day passed in waiting and hoping. The second night passed as quietly as the first; then came the hour of breakfast, waited for impatiently, for I hoped to find another note. I was not wrong, it was as follows:--'The person who had you carried off will arrive at the castle of Beaugé at ten o'clock this evening; but at nine, the friend who watches over you will be under your windows with a letter from your father, which will command the confidence you, perhaps, might not otherwise give. Burn this letter.

"I read and re-read this letter, then burned it as I was desired. The writing was unknown to me, and I did not know from whom it could have come. We lost ourselves in conjectures, and a hundred times during the morning we went to the window to see if we could see any one on the shores of the lake, but all was solitary. An hour after dinner, some one knocked at our door, and then entered. It was the man who had spoken to us before. I recognized his voice; he presented a letter to me.

"'Whom do you come from?' asked I. 'Will mademoiselle take the trouble to read, and she will see.' 'But I will not read this letter without knowing whom it comes from.' 'Mademoiselle can do as she pleases; my business is only to leave the letter,' and putting it down, he went away. 'What shall I do?' asked I of Gertrude. 'Read the letter, mademoiselle; it is better to know what to expect.' I opened and read."

Diana, at this moment, rose, opened a desk, and from a portfolio drew out the letter. Bussy glanced at the address and read, "To the beautiful Diana de Méridor."

Then looking at Diana, he said--

"It is the Duc d'Anjou's writing."

"Ah!" replied she, with a sigh, "then he did not deceive me."

Then, as Bussy hesitated to open the letter--

"Read," said she, "chance has initiated you into the most secret history of my life, and I wish to keep nothing from you."

Bussy obeyed and read--

"An unhappy prince, whom your divine beauty has struck to the

heart, will come at ten o'clock to-night to apologize for his

conduct towards you--conduct which he himself feels has no other

excuse than the invincible love he entertains for you.
"FRANÇOIS.""Then this letter was really from the duke?" asked Diana.

"Alas! yes; it is his writing and his seal."

Diana sighed. "Can he be less guilty than I thought?" said she.

"Who, the prince?"

"No, M. de Monsoreau."

"Continue, madame, and we will judge the prince and the count."

"This letter, which I had then no idea of not believing genuine, rendered still more precious to me the intervention of the unknown friend who offered me aid in the name of my father; I had no hope but in him. Night arrived soon, for it was in the month of January, and we had still four or five hours to wait for the appointed time. It was a fine frosty night; the heavens were brilliant with stars, and the crescent moon lighted the country with its silver beams. We had no means of knowing the time, but we sat anxiously watching at Gertrude's window. At last we saw figures moving among the trees, and then distinctly heard the neighing of a horse.

"It is our friends,' said Gertrude. 'Or the prince,' replied I. 'The prince would not hide himself.' This reflection reassured me. A man now advanced alone: it seemed to us that he quitted another group who were left under the shade of the trees. As he advanced, my eyes made violent efforts to pierce the obscurity, and I thought I recognized first the tall figure, then the features, of M. de Monsoreau. I now feared almost as much the help as the danger. I remained mute, and drew back from the window. Arrived at the wall, he secured his boat, and I saw his head at our window. I could not repress a cry.

"'Ah, pardon,' said he, 'but I thought you expected me.' 'I expected some one, monsieur, but I did not know it was you.' A bitter smile passed over his face. 'Who else,' said he, 'except her father, watches over the honor of Diana de Méridor?' 'You told me, monsieur, in your letter, that you came in my father's name.' 'Yes, mademoiselle, and lest you should doubt it, here is a note from the baron,' and he gave me a paper. I read--

"'MY DEAR DIANA,--M. de Monsoreau can alone extricate you from

your dangerous position, and this danger is immense. Trust, then,

to him as to the best friend that Heaven can send to us. I will

tell you later what from the bottom of my heart I wish you to

do to acquit the debt we shall contract towards him,"'Your father, who begs you to believe him, and to have pity on

him, and on yourself, "'BARON DE MÉRIDOR.'"I knew nothing against M. de Monsoreau; my dislike to him was rather from instinct than reason. I had only to reproach him with the death of a doe, a very light crime for a hunter. I then turned towards him. 'Well?' said he. 'Monsieur, I have read my father's letter, it tells me you will take me from hence, but it does not tell me where you will take me.' 'Where the baron waits for you.' 'And where is that?' 'In the castle of Méridor.' 'Then I shall see my father?' 'In two hours.'

"'Ah I monsieur, if you speak truly----' I stopped. The count waited for the end of my sentence. 'Count on my gratitude,' said I in a trembling tone, for I knew what he might expect from my gratitude. 'Then, mademoiselle,' said he, 'you are ready to follow me?' I looked at Gertrude. 'Reflect that each minute that passes is most precious,' said he, 'I am nearly half an hour behind time now; it will soon be ten o'clock, and then the prince will be here.' 'Alas! yes.' 'Once he comes, I can do nothing for you but risk without hope that life which I now risk to save you.' 'Why did not my father come?' I asked. 'Your father is watched. They know every step he takes.' 'But you----' 'Oh! I am different; I am the prince's friend and confidant.' 'Then if you are his friend----' 'Yes, I betray him for you; it is true, as I told you just now, I am risking my life to save you.' This seemed so true, that although I still felt repugnance, I could not express it. 'I wait,' said the count, 'and stay; if you still doubt, look there.' I looked, and saw on the opposite shore a body of

cavaliers advancing. 'It is the duke and his suite,' said he, 'in five minutes it will be too late.'

"I tried to rise, but my limbs failed me. Gertrude raised me in her arms and gave me to the count. I shuddered at his touch, but he held me fast and placed me in the boat. Gertrude followed without aid. Then I noticed that my veil had come off, and was floating on the water. I thought they would track us by it, and I cried, 'My veil; catch my veil.' The count looked at it and said, 'No, no, better leave it.' And seizing the oars, he rowed with all his strength. We had just reached the bank when we saw the windows of my room lighted up. 'Did I deceive you? Was it time?' said M. de Monsoreau. 'Oh I yes, yes,' cried I, 'you are really my saviour.'

"The lights seemed to be moving about from one room to the other. We heard voices, and a man entered who approached the open window, looked out, saw the floating veil, and uttered a cry. 'You see I did well to leave the veil,' said the count, 'the prince believes that to escape him you threw yourself into the lake.' I trembled at the man who had so instantaneously conceived this idea."