

ON THE KING'S HIGHWAY

“**T**HEN you refuse to accede to my terms?”

“Most emphatically. What! Is my love such that it can be bought by the offer of a paltry fortune? By my faith, monsieur, you speak as though you had not known me all my life.”

“Pah!” said the other, “What is love but a glittering diamond, which, once gained, is found to be but paste. And you, who know this, yet pretend to be led by any such phantom.”

“Pretend! Sir, your words, as well as your manner, seem to lean to the side of insult. Were it not that I know them to be said in a moment of passion I would force them back again into your mouth. As it is, however——”

“My words,” interrupted the other, “were spoken in a time of calmness and not without due deliberation. Put what interpretation you may please upon them.”

“Very well,” said the Count. “It is plain that you wish to pick a quarrel with me, and, as I am ever ready to humor the whim of a friend, if it pleases you, we will settle our differences in a manner which requires less discourse.”

“Please me,” exclaimed Damroche, “I shall be delighted. My second will be Monsieur Chartelot.”

“If I may beg a favor,” broke in Count D’Armand, “I should prefer no witnesses whatever. Let us go together to some secluded spot. I should not wish the king’s ears to hear of it.”

“Nor I, either. So the matter shall be as you have said,” added Damroche.

“An hour before sunset then, at the great oak on the road to Avernon. There will be a good light for sword-play.”

“Very well. Until evening, then, Count.”

Both men bowed low, and without more words left the little cafe.

The lady in question was Mademoiselle Berault, a famous prima-donna—famous not only for her rich, rare voice, but as well for her startling beauty. Dame Rumor had it that for every bead upon her rosary this woman had broken a heart. In spite of this, Damroche and Count D’Armand, both men of high position, had fallen under the spell of her beauty.