

**MADAME
FONTENOY**

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Madame Fontenoy by Margaret Roberts

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MARGARET ROBERTS

**MADAME
FONTENOY**

Warne's Star Series.

MADAME FONTENOY.

BY

THE AUTHOR OF "MADEMOISELLE MORI,"
"SYDONIE'S DOWRY," "DENISE,"

ETC.



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CONTENTS.

CHAP.	PAGE
I. HELENA'S HOME	1
II. HELENA'S FAMILY	27
III. A HOUSEHOLD TREASURE	47
IV. VISITING THE POOR	69
V. ROBERT LEICESTER	83
VI. ROGER'S WARNING	98
VII. SUZANNE'S STORY	115
VIII. A BITTER SORROW	131
IX. HELENA'S DESPAIR	166
X. IN THE WRONG PLACE	185
XI. THE DAWN OF HAPPINESS	199
XII. AT LAST	225

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MADAME FONTENOY.

CHAPTER I.

HELENA'S HOME.

FAR away from the usual route of tourists, amid vineyards, rich meadows, and low sunny hills, and skirted by a broad sleepy river, stands the old town of Rheims in Champagne. So far away that few travellers have entered it, though its cathedral is one hallowed by innumerable associations, and so beautiful, that popular tradition says the Virgin herself was often seen in the silence of night working with noiseless hands on the rich sculpture which adorns its exterior. There is little modern in Rheims, except the two or three large manufactories on its outskirts; the town itself is a nest of quaint old houses, retired within their courtyards, through the open gateways of which a pleasant glimpse of acacias and oleanders may be caught. A few steps brings you to the vegetable market, with a view of the Hôtel de Ville down a

side street ; a busy characteristic scene is that market, full of buyers and sellers and covered carts ; a peasant, looking strong and patient and sleepy, holding the fat horse ; women sitting by their stalls, dressed almost invariably in black and white, and chattering as fast as the magpies whose costume they copy, chattering with animated gestures ; the peculiar dialect of the place resounds on all sides ; all is colour and movement, noise, and bright French sunshine ; here are market stalls covered with fruit and vegetables ; huge baskets cumber the ground, piled to overflowing with peaches, pears, carrots, turnips, and scarlet tomatoes ; great heaps of cabbages are tossed among them ; the picturesque high-roofed houses frame it in, their dark background and the shadow of their projecting eaves contrasting with the abundance of life and colour and sound everywhere. Such is the market of Rheims on a fine day in autumn.

Night gives a different aspect to the place ; by nine o'clock all is so still that the town seems deserted, but a passer-by, or a light gleaming here and there, show life exists, only it is suspended for a little while.

One of the oldest houses in the town stands opposite the cathedral, looking on its west end ; a house full of passages and unexpected steps, and cross-shaped windows with little diamond panes in

them. Unlike most of the same date, it has no courtyard, and looks into the square, "la Grande Place." Some years ago it had been long inhabited by the widow of a manufacturer, of the name of Fontenoy, who died leaving one daughter—in her turn married, not to a Frenchman, not to the son of her father's partner, as all the world expected; Mdlle. Renée Fontenoy was won by an Englishman, who came for a week's visit to a countryman settled at Rheims, where several of the factories were in the hands of English people—who stayed three months, and carried off a bride with him. Rarely after that day did any one hear Madame Fontenoy name her daughter; but five years later Renée reappeared, bringing with her a dark-eyed little girl, who was left behind when Mrs. Desmond returned to England. Since then the very name of Renée had been apparently forgotten; she came no more, and her little Helena took her place—more than took it; for there were those who said that Madame Fontenoy had never loved her daughter, and all knew that Helena was her idol, though so controlled, concentrated, silent an affection as hers was very unlike the usual love of grandmother for grandchild. It was a jealous love, too, ever vigilant, ever despotic; Helena had never been out of her sight for a single day, and yet now she was about to let her go—to allow her to visit England; but it was not till many appeals had been set aside, and only the argument

that her word was passed that Helena should return home if her mother were ill, at last prevailed. No one ever felt a promise as more inviolable than Madame Fontenoy; she acceded at once, only saying very emphatically, that at the end of six weeks her grandchild must return.

And Helena was to go: with a very strange mixture of feelings she leant her face against the stone mullion of her window, and thought that before she returned she should have made acquaintance with the scarcely remembered mother, the sister left as a baby, the one born since she left England. That sister was now sixteen, a year younger than herself; she had never been in England since she left it, a child of four! "They never came to see me; they have done all these years without me!" was the thought which made her heart throb proudly and painfully; and yet she was glad to be going to see them all.

As she lingered, musing and gazing, the moonlight began to brighten a sky of tender blue covered by faint spray-like clouds, but without diminishing the lustre of the few stars which were shining like pure white sparks in the firmament. Gradually mounting above the surrounding buildings, the full moon illumined the front of the cathedral, bringing into relief here a pinnacle, there a fretted shaft or statue, gleaming under its wrought canopy, and throwing the three deep doorways and the marigold window

into unfathomable shade. Down in the Place below burnt a single lamp with a yellow earthly flame, most unlike the pure light of the clear moon and steady stars above. Now and then voices broke the solemn hush for a moment, while a group of dark figures flitted across the square; but for the most part all was very still, except when sweet chimes rang out from the cathedral, and were repeated by those of another church far away like an echo; and once a deep-toned bell rang for some minutes, each sound vibrating full and musically, and dying softly away before another stroke succeeded, as if the rich notes were passing one by one in a solemn procession to Heaven. Then they ceased, and a gleam of light was seen in the belfry, flitting from window to window, as the old sacristan descended the winding stairs. A little fountain near the doorways babbled in the unknown language of waters, and a man and woman stopped for a moment in the moonlight to drink there, and then passed into the deep shadow of the building and disappeared. By daylight scaffolding would have been seen, and lighter coloured stone where new had been joined to old, but in the moonlight all was blended harmoniously together, majestic, solemn, and vast, as if time and man had no part there. It was no longer a building of old grey stone, piled up by toilful hands, time-worn and labour-patched, but a glorious vision of light, which seemed to brighten and dilate as