

ONE

PROVENCE: EARLY YEARS

Adèle remembered little of the convent where she was born. Her mother always spoke with gratitude to the nuns who had taken her in, pregnant, at the instigation of the Comte Robert d'Auberoche but Adèle saw no reason for kindly remembrance. She remembered how cold she had been as a child, the meagre food, and being made to sit quiet and still during prayers in the chapel. When she was four years of age she and her mother moved to a small château some distance away as her mother became governess to two girls, aged then about seven and nine. It was much later in her life that Adèle appreciated her mother's good fortune. It was rare for a governess to be taken on, unwedded but a mother, and rarer still for such a woman to be allowed to have her child live with her. She learned as she grew to adulthood that, once again, the Count had interceded for them.

Why this had happened Adèle did not know. When she asked, "Where is my Papa?" her mother flushed or wept or tried to distract her attention by pointing to a butterfly or flower. Maman often wept. Adèle and her mother ate in the servants' hall but most of the servants treated her mother with some deference and from time to time Adèle was allowed to play with the two young daughters of the Sieur de Chabenet. Maman was pleased when this happened. The Chabenet girls spoke good French, which by the 1650s meant the *langue d'oïl* of the north, and it worried Maman to hear her daughter chattering with the servants in the *langue d'oc*, the softer dialect once spoken everywhere in the south. "It is the language of peasants now," Maman chided. "Always remember, Adèle, you are not a peasant."

Maman's concerns puzzled Adèle for her happiest hours were spent in the kitchen. Marie, the head cook, was a woman of comfortable size, red faced, sharp tongued but kind. When Adèle was small she was allowed to while away the days in the kitchen and Marie would indulge her with a little bowl and spoon. By the time she was ten Adèle was useful and Marie gave her small tasks, preparing vegetables or beating butter for cakes. Sometimes there were failures and Marie chided Adèle for inattention. "I never saw such a child for day-dreaming," she would scold. It was true that Adèle asked many questions and she was often perplexed by the answers adults gave her. Over time Adèle's skills improved. Marie was pleased to pass on her knowledge and by the time she was in her teens Adèle was an accomplished cook.

It was Marie who solved for Adèle the mystery of her absent Papa. Marie was comfortable with her body and frank in speaking of its functions. Shy Maman had not been able to bring herself to discuss puberty or marriage with her daughter but Marie had no such inhibitions. Starting with the cat that had given birth to four kittens in a kitchen drawer, she explained to Adèle how babies were made and another time she shared with Adèle the rumour of the estate that her Papa was the Count who had interceded so kindly in their lives. Maman was not a lady or only nearly so and therefore the Count could not marry her. But he intended well by them and would probably arrange a good marriage for Adèle.

Adèle could remember the Count. She had been about six years old when Comte d'Auberoche visited his friend the Sieur de Chabenet. Adèle was in the kitchen playing when a valet came in to say she was wanted and must come at once. An important Seigneur had asked to see her. Marie dropped what she was doing and dragged Adèle to a water barrel, washed her face, straightened her dress and told her, "Now, be good and, remember, call him Monsieur le Comte. Bewildered, Adèle followed the valet to the front of the main house. A tall man, holding a black horse by its bridle, was talking with Maman, who was flushed and weepy. "So this is the child," said the tall man, looking in a kindly way at Adèle. Maman nodded. She seemed incapable of speech. "Good morning, Adèle," said the tall man saluting her gravely. "I like your horse," Adèle told him, forgetting to add his title. "Shh!" said Maman, pulling Adèle towards her. "Not at all," said the tall man, and his dark blue eyes

twinkled. “Adèle has good taste. I like my horse too. He is called Valor. Would you like to pat his nose?” Adèle nodded and the tall man lifted her up and she could smell the dark, leathery smell of horse.

Maman wept for days after that visit. She said nothing to Adèle but Marie, who had a nose for gossip, explained that the Count was going to be married and he had come to tell her mother that.

The years went by. Marie grew into a stout middle age and Adèle grew into her early teens. Thanks to Maman, she had learned to read and write at any early age and the Sieur de Chabenet allowed Maman to borrow books for her daughter from the library of the château. Adèle was tall for her age, slender and straight in build. Her dark hair grew thick and straight and her eyes were dark blue. Maman, a pretty woman with fine fair hair, looked fragile beside her daughter and, indeed, by the time Adèle was fourteen Maman was in failing health. She tired easily though she continued to chaperone her charges. They were young women now with no interest in books, looking ahead to marriage and the chatelaine life that was their destiny.

In the Spring of 1665 Maman caught a chill, became feverish and in a matter of days died, gasping for breath. Adèle was shocked, scarcely able to believe in a world without her gentle mother. They had never been close because of her mother’s reticence but they lived in the small world of two not-quite servants on a small estate, treated with distant kindness by the Sieur de Chabenet, his wife and daughters. Adèle wept bitterly and fell asleep afraid for her future. She loved books and wrote a clear hand but the two daughters of the château were now grown. “What shall I do, Marie?” she asked. Marie, thoughtful and always practical, told her, “Well, you could marry young Pierre. He’ll be needing a wife soon.” Adèle recoiled. “He’s stupid and I don’t like him. He can’t read and he’s only happy working with the pigs.” “Suit yourself,” replied Marie. “Maybe they will let you stay on here, but maybe they won’t as there isn’t work for you now.” The older daughter had made a suitable marriage the year before and it would not be long before the younger followed.

As it happened, fate intervened. The Count, now a widower, rode through the portals of the château one day and after paying his respects to the Sieur de Chabenet asked to see Adèle. She had never before been in the grand salon. Rich Turkey rugs covered the dark wood floors and

family portraits lined the walls. Chabenet left the room and Adèle and the Count stood for a moment in silence looking at each other. It seemed to Adèle that he was much older than she remembered. “How old are you now, my child?” asked the Count. “Almost seventeen, Monsieur le Comte,” she replied. Silence fell again. “Please accept my condolences on the death of your mother,” he said. Adèle curtsied. “I have given some thought to your situation, Mamselle. In a month or two I shall re-marry. It is now arranged. But I wish to do what I can to ensure your future prosperity ... and happiness too, if there is happiness in this world.” He sighed and Adèle could see no trace of the crinkling smile of the man who had held her up to pat his horse’s nose.

Then the Count explained that a friend of his was now established in distant New France, that place called Canada. The friend, a merchant, had written to lament the dearth of marriageable girls in the new land. He himself was married but he knew of compatriots, merchants like himself, who longed for the companionship of women of good upbringing. “Would you consider marriage in a land across the sea, Mamselle?” Adèle’s heart beat fast. Almost as practical as Marie, she knew she had few choices. With Maman gone, the elder Chabenet girl already a chatelaine and her sister soon to follow, she had no reason to remain on the estate. Kind as they had been, the Sieur and his wife would never introduce her to their friends as an equal. Yet her education and the inheritance of her mother’s breeding set her apart from young men who worked for the estate.

The Count looked so hesitant that she was emboldened to remind him that the doubtful question of her birth might prevent the kind of marriage he had in mind. “I know more about you than you suppose, Mamselle,” the Count told her. “I know that you read and write well and that you have acquired many household skills. You have a natural grace. You would be an asset among the merchant class of a city.” With some embarrassment he went on, “Please forget the question of your birth. I can write letters that will smooth your path. If you wish, you may present yourself as an orphan.” The Count went on to speak of the opening up of the New World, the chance to play a small role in shaping the future of a land that would be French at heart but more blessed with opportunities.

Soon afterwards the Count swung his long legs over his horse and rode away. Before leaving, he had given Adèle a purse telling her to buy

whatever she might need for a voyage and a new life. He added that the young King Louis who wished to encourage the emigration of suitable girls of marriageable age would add his own dowry. Letters were still to be written to New France. He promised to return when he had learned of a suitable match and then, if Adèle wished to proceed, he would arrange her passage, probably on a ship leaving from La Rochelle that July. In Quebec where his friends lived she would be met and chaperoned until she was sure she wished to marry. "No-one will force you to marry, Mamselle," the Count assured her. "My friends will arrange suitable introductions but the choice will be yours."

From Marie, ever the source of news, Adèle learned that the Count was about to marry a widow of means. It was a second marriage for both since the Comte's young wife had died giving birth to their first child. The widow was the chatelaine of a large estate lying to the south of the Chabenet lands. According to Marie, Madame was a proud lady.

"How do you know, Marie?" asked Adèle, laughing for the first time since Maman's death.

"Oh, I know," replied Marie. "A young woman I know once worked as her maid. He'll regret this marriage." As it happened, the Count had only a few short weeks in which to regret or enjoy his second marriage. Out riding one day, his horse stumbled and the Count fell, striking his head on a rock. He did not recover consciousness. He died regretted. He and his young first wife had been popular among their tenants.

A week or so later the Sieur's wife summoned Adèle again to the great hall with its portraits and rugs. "We believe your passage to New France will go ahead but we must wait for word from Quebec or Ville-Marie de Montreal. It may be that you will have to wait. In the meantime, perhaps you would continue to instruct my daughter in her letters in place of your mother."

It was early Spring of the following year before Adèle heard more. One day she was with the younger Chabenet girl who was only half listening as Adèle read aloud when she was summoned to the great hall. A cleric awaited her. He introduced himself as Father Georges, confessor to the wife of the deceased Count. Adèle distrusted him on sight, though she could not say why. The good Father was rotund, slightly breathless and his oily skin glistened as if he had walked and yet he had come by

carriage. Wiping his forehead with an embroidered handkerchief, Father Georges spoke in a high, nasal voice. He explained that word had indeed been received from New France and Adèle should proceed as arranged with the Count the previous year. Adèle had many questions: “Are the merchants of whom the Count spoke in Quebec? What do they know about me? Where shall I live till I marry?” From Father Georges Adèle could learn little. Perhaps he meant to be reassuring but Adèle was not reassured. She knew she was being unfair. How could the Father know exactly what would await her in a land he had never seen? Nevertheless, she resented the stress he kept putting on her good fortune and the kind offices of her superiors and in particular of the extreme benevolence of the lady wife of the late Count. However, when he left Adèle was committed to a voyage out of La Rochelle in June, only three months away.

In her own way the Sieur de Chabenet’s lady was a thoughtful woman. She called Adèle soon after Father Georges’ visit and suggested that Adèle keep all the money – and it was generous – the Count had given her and sew her own clothes. “My daughter left some of her wardrobe here on her marriage and Hortense, my sewing maid, can help you alter them. If you wish an entirely new wardrobe, Adèle my dear, I shall arrange for you to travel to Auvergne but it might be wise to keep your money for the New World.” Adèle would have liked new clothes but she could see the wisdom of this plan. She and Hortense sewed for weeks and Adèle left for the north with two or three warm gowns, a shawl given by Madame and a further gift of money from the family.

Parting from Marie was the hardest blow of Adèle’s young life, worse even than the death of Maman. From Maman she had learned her letters and good manners. From Marie she had learned almost everything she knew about people and the ways of the world. At the moment of departure Marie affected indifference. “So you’re going then? Well, good luck,” she said and turned away. But as she left the kitchen Adèle could hear the gasping sobs of her dearest friend and mentor.

Adèle was to bless Marie many times for her last piece of advice – to sew the coins given her by the Count and by Madame de Chabenet into the hems of two of her gowns. “Maybe your husband will be a good man. And maybe he won’t,” said Marie. “At least this way you will be safe traveling and, who knows, you may need your own money.”