The Lady of the Mount

By

Frederic S. Isham

CONTENTS

CHAPTER

THE LADY OF THE MOUNT

CHAPTER I

A CHANCE ENCOUNTER

"Don't you know, boy, you ought not to get in my way?"

The tide was at its ebb; the boats stranded afar, and the lad addressed had started, with a fish--his wage--in one hand, to walk to shore, when, passing into the shadow of the rampart of the Governor's Mount, from the opposite direction a white horse swung suddenly around a corner of the stone masonry and bore directly upon him. He had but time to step aside; as it was, the animal grazed his shoulder, and the boy, about to give utterance to a natural remonstrance, lifted his eyes to the offender. The words were not forthcoming; surprised, he gazed at a tiny girl, of about eleven, perched fairy-like on the broad back of the heavy steed.

"Don't you know you ought not to get in my way?" she repeated imperiously.

The boy, tall, dark, unkempt as a young savage, shifted awkwardly; his black eyes, restless enough ordinarily, expressed a sudden shyness in

the presence of this unexpected and dainty creature.

"I--didn't see you," he half stammered.

"Well, you should have!" And again the little lady frowned, shook her disordered golden curls disapprovingly and gazed at him, a look of censure in her brown eyes. "But perhaps you don't know who I am," she went on with a lift of the patrician doll-like features. "I don't think you do, or you wouldn't stand there like a booby, without taking off your hat." More embarrassed, he removed a worn cap while she continued to regard him with the reverse of approval. "I am the Comtesse Elise," she observed; "the daughter of the Governor of the Mount."

"Oh!" said the boy, and his glance shifted to the most important and insistent feature of the landscape.

Carrying its clustered burden of houses and palaces, a great rock reared itself from the monotony of the bare and blinding sands. Now an oasis in the desert, ere night was over he knew the in-rushing waters would convert it into an island; claim it for the sea! A strange kingdom, yet a mighty one, it belonged alternately to the land and to the ocean. With the sky, however, it enjoyed perpetual affiliation, for the heavens were ever wooing it; now winding pretty ribbons of light about its air-drawn castles; then kissing it with the tender, soft red glow of celestial fervor.

"Yes; I live right on top among the clouds, in a castle, with dungeons underneath, where my father puts the bad people who don't like the nobles and King Louis XVI. But where," categorically, "do you live?"

His gaze turned from the points and turrets and the clouds she spoke of--that seemed to linger about the lofty summit--to the mainland, perhaps a mile distant.

"There!" he said, and specifically indicated a dark fringe, like a cloud on the lowlands.

"In the woods! How odd!" She looked at him with faint interest. "And don't the bears bother you? Once when I wanted to see what the woods were like, my nurse told me they were filled with terrible bears who would eat up little girls. I don't have a nurse any more," irrelevantly, "only a governess who came from the court of Versailles, and Beppo. Do you know Beppo?"

"No."

"I don't like him," she confided. "He is always listening. But why do you live in the woods?"

"Because!" The reason failed him.

"And didn't you ever live anywhere else?"

A shadow crossed the dark young face. "Once," he said.

"I suppose the bears know you," she speculated, "and that is the reason they let you alone. Or, perhaps, they are like the wolf in the fairy-tale. Did you ever hear of the kind-hearted wolf?"

He shook his head.

"My nurse used to tell it to me. Well, once there was a boy who was an orphan and everybody hated him. So he went to live in the forest and there he met a wolf. 'Where are you going, little boy?' said the wolf. 'Nowhere,' said the boy; 'I have no home.' 'No home!' said the kind-hearted wolf; 'then come with me, and you shall share my cave.' Isn't that a nice story?"

He looked at her in a puzzled manner. "I don't know," he began, when she tossed her head.

"What a stupid boy!" she exclaimed severely. A moment she studied him tentatively through her curls, from the vantage point of her elevated seat. "That's a big fish," she remarked, after the pause.

"Do you want it?" he asked quickly, his face brightening.

"You can give it to Beppo when he comes," she said, drawing herself up loftily. "He'll be here soon. I've run away from him!" A sudden smile replaced her brief assumption of dignity. "He'll be so angry! He's fat and ugly," more confidentially. "And he's so amusing when he's vexed! But how much do you ask for the fish?"

"I didn't mean--to sell it!"

"Why not?"

"I--don't sell fish."

"Don't sell fish!" She looked at the clothes, frayed and worn, the bare muscular throat, the sunburned legs. "You meant to give it to me?"

"Yes."

The girl laughed. "What a funny boy!"

His cheek flushed; from beneath the matted hair, the disconcerted black eyes met the mocking brown ones.

"Of course I can't take it for nothing," she explained, "and it is very absurd of you to expect it."

"Then," with sudden stubbornness, "I will keep it!"

Her glance grew more severe. "Most people speak to me as 'my Lady.' You seem to have forgotten. Or perhaps you have been listening to some of those silly persons who talk about everybody being born equal. I've heard my father, the Governor, speak of them and how he has put some of them in his dungeons. You'd better not talk that way, or he may shut you up in some terrible dark hole beneath the castle."

"I'm not afraid!" The black eyes shone.

"Then you must be a very wicked boy. It would serve you right if I was to tell."

"You can!"

"Then I won't! Besides, I'm not a telltale!" She tossed her curls and went on. "I've heard my father say these people who want to be called 'gentilhomme' and 'monsieur' are low and ignorant; they can't even read and write."

Again the red hue mantled the boy's cheek. "I don't believe you can!" she exclaimed shrewdly and clapped her hands. "Can you now?" He did not answer. "'Monsieur'! 'Gentilhomme'!" she repeated.

He stepped closer, his face dark; but whatever reply he might have made was interrupted by the sound of a horse's hoofs and the abrupt

appearance, from the direction the child had come, of a fat, irascible-looking man of middle age, dressed in livery.

"Oh, here you are, my Lady!" His tone was far from amiable; as he spoke he pulled up his horse with a vicious jerk. "A pretty chase you've led me!"

She regarded him indifferently. "If you will stop at the inn, Beppo--"

The man's irate glance fell. "Who is this?"

"A boy who doesn't want to sell his fish," said the girl merrily.

"Oh!" The man's look expressed a quick recognition. "A fine day's work is this--to bandy words with--" Abruptly he raised his whip. "What do you mean, sirrah, by stopping my Lady?"

A fierce gleam in the lad's eyes belied the smile on his lips. "Don't beat me, good Beppo!" he said in a mocking voice, and stood, alert, lithe, like a tiger ready to spring. The man hesitated; his arm dropped to his side. "The very spot!" he said, looking around him.

A moment the boy waited, then turned on his heel and, without a word, walked away. Soon an angle in the sea-wall, girdling the Mount, hid him from view.

"Why didn't you strike him?" Quietly the child regarded the man. "Were you afraid?" Beppo's answering look was not one of affection for his charge. "Who is he?"

"An idle vagabond."

"What is his name?"

"I don't know."

"Don't you?"

A queer expression sprang into his eyes. "One can't remember every peasant brat," he returned evasively.

She considered him silently; then: "Why did you say: 'The very spot'?" she asked.

"Did I? I don't remember. But it's time we were getting back. Come, my Lady!" And Beppo struck his horse smartly.