

CHAPTER II

AN ECHO OF THE PAST

Immovable on its granite base, the great rock, or "Mount," as it had been called for centuries, stood some distance from the shore in a vast bay on the northwestern coast of France. To the right, a sweep of sward and marsh stretched seaward, until lost in the distance; to the left, lay the dense Desaurac forest, from which an arm of land, thickly wooded, reached out in seeming endeavor to divide the large bay into two smaller basins. But the ocean, jealous of territory already conquered, twice in twenty-four hours rose to beat heavily on this dark promontory, and, in the angry hiss of the waters, was a reminder of a persistent purpose. Here and there, through the ages, had the shore-line of the bay, as well as the neighboring curvatures of the coast, yielded to the assaults of the sea; the Mount alone, solidly indifferent to blandishment or attack, maintained an unvarying aspect.

For centuries a monastery and fortress of the monks, at the time of Louis XVI the Mount had become a stronghold of the government, strongly ruled by one of its most inexorable nobles. Since his appointment many years before to the post, my lord, the Governor of the rock, had ever been regarded as a man who conceded nothing to the people and pursued only the set tenure of his way. During the long period of his reign he committed but one indiscretion; generally regarded as a man confirmed in apathy for the gentler sex, he suddenly, when already past middle

age, wedded. Speculation concerning a step so unlooked for was naturally rife.

In hovel and hut was it whispered the bride Claire, only daughter of the Comtesse de la Mart, had wept at the altar, but that her mother had appeared complacent, as well she might; for the Governor of the Mount and the surrounding country was both rich and powerful; his ships swept far and wide, even to the Orient, while the number of metayers, or petty farmers that paid him tribute, constituted a large community. Other gossips, bending over peat fires within mud walls, affirmed--beneath their breath, lest the spies of the well-hated lord of the North might hear them!--that the more popular, though impoverished Seigneur Desaurac had been the favored suitor with the young woman herself, but that the family of the bride had found him undesirable. The Desaurac fortune, once large, had so waned that little remained save the rich, though heavily encumbered lands, and, in the heart of the forest, a time-worn, crumbling castle.

Thus it came to pass the marriage of the lady to the Governor was celebrated in the jeweled Gothic church crowning a medley of palaces, chapels and monastery on the Mount; that the rejected Seigneur Desaurac, gazing across the strip of water--for the tide was at its full--separating the rocky fortress from the land, shrugged his shoulders angrily and contemptuously, and that not many moons later, as if to show disdain of position and title, took to his home an orphaned peasant lass. That a simple church ceremony had preceded this step was

both affirmed and denied; hearsay described a marriage at a neighboring village; more malicious gossip discredited it. A man of rank! A woman of the soil! Feudal custom forbade belief that the proper sort of nuptial knot had been tied.

Be this as it may, for a time the sturdy, dark brown young woman presided over the Seigneur's fortunes with exemplary care and patience. She found them in a chaotic condition; lands had either been allowed to run to waste, or were cultivated by peasants that so long had forgotten to pay the metayage, or owner's due, they had come to regard the acres as their own--a delusion this practical helpmate would speedily have dispelled, save that the Seigneur himself pleaded for them and would not permit of the "poor people" being disturbed. Whereupon she made the best of an anomalous situation, and all concerned might have continued to live satisfactorily enough unto themselves, when unfortunately an abrupt break occurred in the chain of circumstances. In presenting the Seigneur with a child, half-peasant, half-lord, the mother gave up her own life for his posterity.

At first, thereafter, the Seigneur remained a recluse; when, however, a year or two had gone by, the peasants--who had settled in greater numbers thereabouts, even to the verge of the forest--noticed that he gradually emerged from his solitude, ventured into the world at large, and occasionally was seen in the vicinity of the Mount. This predilection for lonely walks clearly led to his undoing; one morning he was found stabbed in the back, on the beach at the foot of the Mount.

Carried home, he related how he had been set upon by a band of miscreants, which later, coming to the Governor's ears, led to an attempt to locate the assailants among the rocky isles to the northwest, haunts of privateersmen, rogues and those reformers who already were beginning to undermine the peace of Louis XVI's northern provinces. In the pursuit of these gentry, the Governor showed himself in earnest. Perhaps his own sorrow at the rather sudden death of his lady, occurring about this time, and leaving him, a morose widower, with a child, a little girl, led him to more relentless activities; perhaps the character of the crime--a noble stabbed!--incensed him.

Certainly he revenged himself to the full; not only raked the rocks for runagates, but dragged peasants, inclined to sullenness, from their huts; clapped some in dungeons and hanged the rest. In the popular mind his name became synonymous with cruelty, but, on his high throne, he continued to exercise his autocratic prerogative and cared not what the people thought.

Meanwhile, the Seigneur Desaurac, recovering, became a prey to greater restlessness; no sooner was he able to get about, than, accompanied by a faithful servant, Sanchez, he left the neighborhood, and, for a number of years, led a migratory existence in continental capitals. The revolt of the colonies in America and the news of the contemplated departure of the brave Lafayette for the seat of hostilities, offered, at least, a pretext to break the fetters of a purposeless life. At

once, he placed his sword at Lafayette's disposal, and packed himself and servitor--a fellow of dog-like fidelity--across the ocean. There, at the seat of war's alarms, in the great conflict waged in the name of liberty, he met a soldier's end, far from the fief of his ancestors. Sanchez, the man, buried him, and, having dutifully performed this last task, walked away from the grave and out of the army.

During this while, the son by the peasant woman, intrusted to an old fishwife who had been allowed to usurp a patch of his father's lands, received scanty care and attention, even when the stipulated fees for his maintenance had continued to come; but when, at the Seigneur's death, they ceased, any slight solicitude on the caretaker's part soured to acrimony. An offspring of dubious parentage, she begrudged him his bread; kept him from her own precious brood, and taught them to address him as "brat," "pauper," or by terms even more forcible. Thus set upon, frequently he fought; but like young wolves, hunting in packs, they worried him to the earth, and, when he continued to struggle, beat him to unconsciousness, if not submission.

One day, after such an experience at the hands of those who had partaken of the Seigneur's liberality, the boy, all bruised and aching, fled to the woods, and, with the instinct of an animal to hide, buried himself in its deepest recesses. Night came; encompassed by strange sounds, unknown terrors, he crept to the verge of the forest, and lying there, looked out across the distance toward the scattered habitations, visible through the gloom. One tiny yellow dot of light which he

located held his glance. Should he return? That small stone hut, squalid as it was, had been his only remembered home. But the thought of the reception that awaited him there made him hesitate; the stars coming out, seemed to lend courage to his resolution, and, with his face yet turned toward the low long strip of land, sprinkled with the faint, receding points of light, he fell asleep.

The earliest shafts of morn, however, awaking him, sent him quickly back into the dark forest, where all day he kept to the most shadowy screens and covers, fearing he should be followed, and, perhaps, captured. But the second night was like the first, the next like the second, and the days continued to pass with no signs of pursuit. Pinched by hunger, certain of the berries and roots he ate poisoned him, until in time he profited by his sufferings and learned to discriminate in his choice of the frugal fare about him. Not that his appetite was ever satisfied, even when he extended his explorations to the beach at night, digging in the sand with his fingers for cockles, or prowling about the rocks for mussels.

Yet, despite all, he hugged to his breast a compensating sense of liberty; the biting tooth of autumn was preferable to the stripes and tongue-lashings of the old life; and, if now frugal repasts were the rule, hunger had often been his lot in the past. So he assimilated with his surroundings; learned not to fear the animals, and they, to know him; indeed, they seemed to recognize him by that sharp unsated glint of the eye as one of their kind. When the days grew bleaker and

the nights colder, he took refuge in a corner within the gray walls of the moss-grown castle of his ancestors, the old Seigneurs. No cheerful place, above all at night, when the spirits of the dead seem to walk abroad, and sobs, moans, and fierce voices fill the air! Then, creeping closer to the fire he had started in the giant hearth, wide-eyed he would listen, only at length through sheer weariness to fall asleep. Nevertheless, it was a shelter, and here, throughout the winter, the boy remained.

Here, too, Sanchez, the Seigneur's old servant, returning months later from long wanderings to the vicinity of the Mount--for no especial reason, save the desire once more to see the place--had found him. And at the sight the man frowned.

In the later days, the Seigneur Desaurac had become somewhat unmindful, if not forgetful, of his own flesh and blood. It may be that the absorbing character of the large and chivalrous motives that animated him left little disposition or leisure for private concerns; at any rate, he seemed seldom to have thought, much less spoken of, that "hostage of fortune" he had left behind; an absent-mindedness that in no wise surprised the servant--which, indeed, met the man's full, unspoken approval! The Seigneur, his master, was a nobleman of untarnished ancestry, to be followed and served; the son--Sanchez had never forgiven the mother her low-born extraction. He was, himself, a peasant!