

CHAPTER III

A SUDDEN RESOLUTION

After his chance encounter with my lady, the Governor's daughter, and Beppo, her attendant, the boy walked quickly from the Mount to the forest. His eyes were still bright; his cheeks yet burned, but occasionally the shadow of a smile played about his mouth, and he threw up his head fiercely. At the verge of the wood he looked back, stood for a moment with the reflection of light on his face, then plunged into the shadows of the sylvan labyrinth. Near the east door of the castle, which presently he reached, he stopped for an armful of faggots, and, bending under his load, passed through an entrance, seared and battered, across a great roofless space and up a flight of steps to a room that had once been the kitchen of the vast establishment. As he entered, a man, thin, wizened, though active looking, turned around.

"So you've got back?" he said in a grumbling tone.

"Yes," answered the boy good-naturedly, casting the wood to the flagging near the flame and brushing his coat with his hand; "the storm kept us out last night, Sanchez."

"It'll keep you out for good some day," remarked the man. "You'll be drowned, if you don't have a care."

"Better that than being hanged!" returned the lad lightly.

The other's response, beneath his breath, was lost, as he drew his stool closer to the pot above the blaze, removed the lid and peered within. Apparently his survey was not satisfactory, for he replaced the cover, clasped his fingers over his knees and half closed his eyes.

"Where's the fish?"

The boy, thoughtfully regarding the flames, started; when he had left the child and Beppo, unconsciously he had dropped it, but this he did not now explain. "I didn't bring one."

"Didn't bring one?"

"No," said the boy, flushing slightly.

"And not a bone or scrap in the larder! Niggardly fishermen! A small enough wage--for going to sea and helping them--"

"Oh, I could have had what I wanted. And they are not niggardly! Only--I forgot."

"Forgot!" The man lifted his hands, but any further evidence of surprise or expostulation was interrupted by a sudden ebullition in the

pot.

Left to his thoughts, the boy stepped to the window; for some time stood motionless, gazing through a forest rift at the end of which uprose the top of an Aladdin-like structure, by an optical illusion become a part of that locality; a conjuror's castle in the wood!

"The Mount looks near to-night, Sanchez!"

"Near?" The man took from its hook the pot and set it on the table.

"Not too near to suit the Governor, perhaps!"

"And why should it suit him?" drawing a stool to the table and sitting down.

"Because he must be so fond of looking at the forest."

"And does that--please him?"

"How could it fail to? Isn't it a nice wood? Oh, yes, I'll warrant you he finds it to his liking. And all the lands about the forest that used to belong to the old Seigneurs, and which the peasants have taken--waste lands they have tilled--he must think them very fine to look at, now! And what a hubbub there would be, if the lazy peasants had to pay their metayage, and fire-tax and road-tax--and all the other taxes--the way the other peasants do--to him--"

"What do you mean?"

"Nothing!" The man's jaw closed like a steel trap. "The porridge is burned."

And with no further word the meal proceeded. The man, first to finish, lighted his pipe, moved again to the fire, and, maintaining a taciturnity that had become more or less habitual, stolidly devoted himself to the solace of the weed and the companionship of his own reflections. Once or twice the boy seemed about to speak and did not; finally, however, he leaned forward, a more resolute light in his sparkling black eyes.

"You never learned to read, Sanchez?"

At the unexpected question, the smoke puffed suddenly from the man's lips. "Not I."

"Nor write?"

The man made a rough gesture. "Nor sail to the moon!" he returned derisively. "Read? Rubbish! Write? What for? Does it bring more fish to your nets?"

"Who--could show me how to read and write?"

"You?" Sanchez stared.

"Why not?"

"Books are the tools of the devil!" declared Sanchez shortly. "There was a black man here to-day with a paper--a 'writ,' I think he called it--or a 'service' of some kind--anyhow, it must have been in Latin," violently, "for such gibberish, I never heard and--"

The boy rose. "People who can't read and write are low and ignorant!"

"Eh? What's come over you?"

"My father was a gentleman."

"Your father!--yes--"

"And a Seigneur!--"

"A Seigneur truly!"

"And I mean to be one!" said the boy suddenly, closing his fists.

"Oh, oh! So that's it?" derisively. "You! A Seigneur? Whose mother--"

"Who could teach me?" Determined, but with a trace of color on his brown cheek, the boy looked down.

"Who?" The man began to recover from his surprise. "That's not so easy to tell. But if you must know--well, there's Gabriel Gabarie, for one, a poet of the people. He might do it--although there's talk of cutting off his head--"

"What for?"

"For knowing how to write."

The lad reached for his hat.

"Where are you going?"

"To the poet's."

"At this late hour! You are in a hurry!"

"If what you say is true, there's no time to lose."

"Well, if you find him writing verses about liberty and equality, don't interrupt him, or you'll lose your head," shouted the man.

But when the sound of the boy's footsteps had ceased, Sanchez's expression changed; more bent, more worn, he got up and walked slowly to and fro. "A fine Seigneur!" The moldering walls seemed to echo the words. "A fine Seigneur!" he muttered, and again sat brooding by the fire.

In the gathering dusk the lad strode briskly on. A squirrel barked to the right; he did not look around. A partridge drummed to the left; usually alert to wood sound or life, to-night he did not heed it. But, fairly out of the forest and making his way with the same air of resolution across the sands toward the lowland beyond, his attention, on a sudden, became forcibly diverted. He had but half completed the distance from the place where he had left the wood to the objective point in the curvature of the shore, when to the left through the gloom, a great vehicle, drawn by six horses, could be seen rapidly approaching. From the imposing equipage gleamed many lamps; the moon, which ere this had begun to assert its place in the heavens, made bright the shining harness and shone on the polished surface of the golden car. Wondering, the boy paused.

"What is that?"

The person addressed, a fisherman belated, bending to the burden on his shoulders, stopped, and, breathing hard, looked around and watched the approaching vehicle intently.

"The Governor's carriage!" he said. "Haven't you ever heard of the Governor's carriage?"

"No."

"That's because he hasn't used it lately; but in her ladyship's day--"

"Her ladyship?"

"The Governor's lady--he bought it for her. But she soon got tired of it--or perhaps didn't like the way the people looked at her!" roughly.

"Mon dieu! perhaps they did scowl a little--for it didn't please them, I can tell you!--the sight of all that gold squeezed from the taxes!"

"Where is he going now?"

"Nowhere himself--he never goes far from the Mount. But the Lady Elise, his daughter--some one in the village was saying she was going to Paris--"

"Paris!" The lad repeated the word quickly. "What for?"

"What do all the great lords and nobles send their children there for?"

To get educated--married, and--to learn the tricks of the court! Bah!"

With a coarse laugh the man turned; stooping beneath his load, he moved

grumblingly on.

The boy, however, did not stir; as in a dream he looked first at the Mount, a dark triangle against the sky, then at the carriage. Nearer the latter drew, was about to dash by, when suddenly the driver, on his high seat, uttered an exclamation and at the same time tugged hard at the reins. The vehicle took a quick turn, lurched dangerously in its top-heavy pomp, and, almost upsetting, came to a standstill nearly opposite the boy.

"Careless dog!" a shrill voice screamed from the inside. "What are you doing?"

"The lises, your Excellency!" The driver's voice was thick; as he spoke he swayed uncertainly.

"Lises--quicksands--"

"There, your Excellency," indicating a gleaming place right in their path; a small bright spot that looked as if it might have been polished, while elsewhere on the surrounding sands tiny rippling parallels caressed the eye with streaks of black and silver. "I saw it in time!"

"In time!" angrily. "Imbecile! Didn't you know it was there?"

"Of course, your Excellency! Only I had misjudged a little, and--"

The man's manner showed he was frightened.

"Falsehoods! You have been drinking! Don't answer. You shall hear of this later. Drive around the spot."

"Yes, your Excellency," was the now sober and subdued answer.

Ere he obeyed, however, the carriage door, from which the Governor had been leaning, swung open. "Wait!" he called out impatiently, and tried to close it, but the catch--probably from long disuse--would not hold, and, before the liveried servant perched on the lofty carriage behind had fully perceived the fact and had recovered himself sufficiently to think of his duties, the boy on the beach had sprung forward.

"Slam it!" commanded an irate voice.

The lad complied, and as he did so, peered eagerly into the capacious depths of the vehicle.

"The boy with the fish!" exclaimed at the same time a girlish treble within.

"Eh?" my lord turned sharply.

"An impudent lad who stopped the Lady Elise!" exclaimed the fat

man--surely Beppo--on the front seat.

"Stopped the Lady Elise!" The Governor repeated the words slowly; an ominous pause was followed by an abrupt movement on the part of the child.

"He did not stop me; it was I who nearly ran over him, and it was my fault. Beppo does not tell the truth--he's a wicked man!--and I'm glad I'm not going to see him any more! And the boy wasn't impudent; at least until Beppo offered to strike him, and then, Beppo didn't! Beppo," derisively, "was afraid!"

"My lady," Beppo's voice was soft and unctuous, "construes forbearance for fear."

"Step nearer, boy!"

Partly blinded by the lamps, the lad obeyed; was cognizant of a piercing scrutiny; two hard, steely eyes that seemed to read his inmost thoughts; a face, indistinguishable but compelling; beyond, something white--a girl's dress--that moved and fluttered!

"Who is he?"

"A poor boy who lives in the woods, papa!"

But Beppo bent forward and whispered, his words too low for the lad to catch. Whatever his information, the Governor started; the questioning glance on an instant brightened, and his head was thrust forward close to the boy's. A chill seemed to pass over the lad, yet he did not quail.

"Good-by, boy!" said the child, and, leaning from the window, smiled down at him.

He tried to answer, when a hand pulled her in somewhat over-suddenly.

"Drive on!" Again the shrill tones cut the air. "Drive on, I tell you! Diable! What are you standing here for!"

A whip lashed the air and the horses leaped forward. The back wheels of the vehicle almost struck the lad, but, motionless, he continued staring after it. Farther it drew away, and, as he remained thus he discerned, or fancied he discerned, a girl's face at the back--a ribbon that waved for a moment in the moonlight, and then was gone.

Eight years elapsed before next he saw her.