

CHAPTER IV

A DANCE ON THE BEACH

The great vernal equinox of April 178-, was the cause of certain unusual movements of the tide, which made old mariners and coast-fishermen shake their heads and gaze seaward, out of all reckoning. At times, after a tempest, on this strange coast, the waters would rise in a manner and at an hour out of the ordinary, and then among the dwellers on the shore, there were those who prognosticated dire unhappiness, telling how the sea had once devoured two villages overnight, and how, beneath the sands, were homes intact, with the people yet in their beds.

Concerned with a disordered social system and men in and out of dungeons, the Governor had little time and less inclination to note the caprices of the tide or the vagaries of the strand. The people! The menacing and mercurial ebb and flow of their moods! The maintenance of autocratic power on the land, and, a more difficult task, on the sea--these were matters of greater import than the phenomena of nature whose purposes man is powerless to shape or curb. My lady, his daughter, however, who had just returned from seven years' schooling at a convent and one year at court where the Queen, Marie Antoinette, set the fashion of gaiety, found in the conduct of their great neighbor, the ocean, a source of both entertainment and instruction for her guests, a merry company transported from Versailles.

"Is it not a sight well worth seeing after your tranquil Seine, my Lords?" she would say with a wave of her white hand toward the restless sea. "Here, perched in mid air like eagles, you have watched the 'grand tide,' as we call it, come in--like no other tide--faster than a horse can gallop! Where else could you witness the like?"

"Nowhere. And when it goes out--"

"It goes out so far, you can no longer see it; only a vast beach that reaches to the horizon, and--"

"Must be very dangerous?"

"For a few days, perhaps; later, not at all, when the petites tides are the rule, and can be depended on. Then are the sands, except for one or two places very well-known, as safe as your gardens at Versailles. But remain, and--you shall see."

Which they did--finding the place to their liking--or their hostess; for the Governor, who cared not for guests, but must needs entertain them for reasons of state, left them as much as might be to his daughter. She, brimming with the ardor and effervescence of eighteen years, accepted these responsibilities gladly; pending that period she had referred to, turned the monks' great refectory into a ball-room, and then, when the gales had swept away, proposed the sands themselves

as a scene for diversion both for her guests and the people. This, despite the demur of his Excellency, her father.

"Is it wise," he had asked, "to court the attention of the people?"

"Oh, I am not afraid!" she had answered. "And they are going to dance, too!"

"They!" He frowned.

"Why not? It is the Queen's own idea. 'Let the people dance,' she has said, 'and they will keep out of mischief.' Besides," with a prouder poise of the bright head, "why shouldn't they see, and--like me?"

"They like nothing except themselves, and," dryly, "to attempt to evade their just obligations."

"Can you blame them?" She made a light gesture. "Obligations, mon pere, are so tiresome!"

"Well, well," hastily, "have your own way!" Although he spoke rather shortly, on the whole he was not displeased with his daughter; her betrothal with the Marquis de Beauvillers, a nobleman of large estates,--arranged while she was yet a child!--promised a brilliant marriage and in a measure offered to his Excellency some compensation for that old and long-cherished disappointment--the birth of a girl

when his ambition had looked so strongly for an heir to his name as well as to his estate.

And so my lady and her guests danced and made merry on the sands below, and the people came out from the mainland, or down from the houses in the town at the base of the rock, to watch. A varied assemblage of gaunt-looking men and bent, low-browed women, for the most part they stood sullen and silent; though exchanging meaning glances now and then as if to say: "Do you note all this ostentation--all this glitter and display? Yes; and some day--" Upon brooding brows, in deep-set eyes, on furrowed faces a question and an answer seemed to gleam and pass. Endowed with natural optimism and a vivacity somewhat heedless, my lady appeared unconscious of all this latent enmity until an unlooked-for incident, justifying in a measure the Governor's demur, broke in upon the evening's festivities and claimed her attention.

On the beach, lighted by torches, a dainty minuet was proceeding gaily, when through the throng of onlookers, a young man with dark head set on a frame tall and powerful, worked his way carefully to a point where he was afforded at least a restricted view of the animated spectacle. Absorbed each in his or her way in the scene before them, no one noticed him, and, with hat drawn over his brow, and standing in the shadow of the towering head-dresses of several peasant women, he seemed content to attract as little attention to himself as possible. His look, at first quick and alert, that of a man taking stock of his surroundings, suddenly became intent and piercing, as, passing in

survey over the lowly spectators to the glittering company, it centered itself on the young mistress of festivities.

In costume white and shining, the Lady Elise moved through the graceful numbers, her slender supple figure now poised, now swaying, from head to foot responsive to the rhythm of that "pastime of little steps."

Her lips, too, were busy, but such was the witchery of her motion--all fire and life!--the silk-stockinged cavaliers whom she thus regaled with wit, mockery, or jest, could, for the most part, respond only with admiring glances or weakly protesting words.

"That pretty fellow, her partner," with a contemptuous accent on the adjective, "is the Marquis de Beauvillers, a kinsman of the King!" said one of the women in the throng.

"Ma foi! They're well matched. A dancing doll for a popinjay!"

The young man behind the head-dresses, now nodding viciously, moved nearer the front. Dressed in the rough though not unpicturesque fashion of the northern fisherman, a touch of color in his apparel lent to his bearing a note of romance the bold expression of his swarthy face did not belie. For a few moments he watched the girl; the changing eyes and lips, shadowed by hair that shone and flashed like bright burnished gold; then catching her gaze, the black eyes gleamed. An instant their eyes lingered; hers startled, puzzled.

"Where have I seen him?" My lady, in turning, paused to swing over her shoulders a glance.

"Whom?" asked her companion in the dance--a fair, handsome nobleman of slim figure and elegant bearing.

"That's just what I can't tell you," she answered, sweeping a courtesy that fitted the rhythm of the music. "Only a face I should remember!"

"Should?" The Marquis' look followed hers.

But the subject of their conversation, as if divining the trend of their talk, had drawn back.

"Oh, he is gone now," she answered.

"A malcontent, perhaps! One meets them nowadays."

"No, no! He did not look--"

"Some poor fellow, then, your beauty has entrapped?" he insinuated.

"Humble admirer!"

"Then I would remember him!" she laughed as the dance came to an end.

Now in a tented pavilion, servants, richly garbed in festal costume,

passed among the guests, circulating trays, bright with golden dishes and goblets, stamped with the ancient insignia of the Mount, and once the property of the affluent monks, early rulers of the place. Other attendants followed, bearing light delicacies, confections and marvelous frosted towers and structures from the castle kitchen.

"The patron saint in sugar!" Merry exclamations greeted these examples of skill and cunning. "Are we to devour the saint?"

"Ah, no; he is only to look at!"

"But the Mount in cake--?"

"You may cut into that--though beware!--not so deep as the dungeons!"

"A piece of the cloister!"

"A bit of the abbey!"

"And you, Elise?"

The girl reached gaily. "A little of the froth of the sea!"

Meanwhile, not far distant, a barrel had been broached and wine was being circulated among the people. There, master of ceremonies, Beppo dispensed advice with the beverage, his grumbling talk heard above the

light laughter and chatter of the lords and ladies.

"Drink to his Excellency!" As he spoke, the Governor's man, from the elevated stand upon which he stood, gazed arrogantly around him.

"Clods! Sponges that sop without a word of thanks! Who only think of your stomachs! Drink to the Governor, I say!"

"To the Governor!" exclaimed a few, but it might have been noticed they were men from the town, directly beneath the shadow of his Excellency's castle, and now close within reach of the fat factotum's arm.

"Once more! Had I the ordering of wine, the barrels would all be empty ones, but her ladyship would be generous, and--"

Beppo broke abruptly off, his wandering glance, on a sudden, arrested.

"Hein!" he exclaimed, with eyes protruding.

A moment he stammered a few words of surprise and incredulity, the while he continued to search eagerly--but now in vain! The object of his startled attention, illumined, for an instant, on the outskirts of the throng, by the glare of a torch, was no more to be descried. As questioning the reality of a fleeting impression, his gaze fixed itself again near the edge of flickering lights; shifted uncertainly to the pavilion where servants from the Mount hurried to and fro; then back to the people around him. His jaw which had dropped grew suddenly firm.

"Clear a space for the dance!" he called out in tones impatient, excited. "It is her ladyship's command--so see you step blithely! And you fellows there, with the tambourin and hautbois, come forward!"

Two men, clad in sheepskin and carrying rude instruments, obediently advanced, and at once, in marked contrast to the recent tinkling measures of the orchestra, a wild, half-barbaric concord rang out.

But the Governor's man, having thus far executed the orders he had received, did not linger to see whether or not his own injunction, "to step blithely," was observed; some concern, remote from gaillarde, gavotte or bourree of the people, caused him hastily to dismount from his stand and make his way from the throng. As he started at a rapid pace across the sands, his eyes, now shining with anticipation, looked back.

"What could have brought him here? Him!" he repeated. "Ah, my fine fellow, this should prove a lucky stroke for me!" And quickening his step, until he almost ran, Beppo hurried toward the tower gate of the Mount.