

CHAPTER V

AN INTERRUPTION

"They seem not to appreciate your fete champetre, my Lady!" At the verge of the group of peasant dancers, the Lady Elise and the Marquis de Beauvillers, who had left the other guests to the enjoyment of fresh culinary surprises, paused to survey a scene, intended, yet failing, to be festal. For whether these people were too sodden to avail themselves of the opportunity for merrymaking, or liked not the notion of tripping together at Beppo's command, their movements, which should have been free and untrammelled as the vigorous swing of the music, were characterized only by painful monotony and lagging. In the half-gloom they came together like shadows; separated aimlessly and cast misshapen silhouettes--caricatures of frolicking peasants--on the broad surface of the sands beyond. These bobbing, black spots my lady disapprovingly regarded.

"They seem not in the mood, truly!" tapping her foot on the beach.

"Here--and elsewhere!" he laughed.

But the Governor's daughter made an impatient movement; memories of the dance, as she had often seen it, when she was a child at the Mount, recurred to her. "They seem to have forgotten!" Her eyes flashed. "I should like to show them."

"You? My Lady!"

She did not answer; pressing her red lips, she glanced sharply around.

"Stupid people! Half of them are only looking on! When they can dance, they won't, and--" She gave a slight start, for near her, almost at her elbow, stood the young seaman she had observed only a short time before, when the minuet was in progress. His dark eyes were bent on her and she surprised on his face an expression half derisory, half quizzical. Her look changed to one of displeasure.

"You are not dancing?" severely.

"No, my Lady." Too late, perhaps, he regretted his temerity--that too unveiled and open regard.

"Why not?" more imperiously.

"I--" he began and stopped.

"You can dance?"

"A little, perhaps--"

"As well as they?" looking at the people.

"Wooden fantoccini!" said the man, a flicker of bold amusement returning to his face.

"Fantoccini?" spoke the girl impatiently. "What know you of them?"

"We Breton seamen sail far, on occasion."

"Far enough to gain in assurance!" cried my lady, with golden head high, surveying him disdainfully through half-closed, sweeping lashes.

"But you shall prove your right."

"Right?" asked the fellow, his eyes fixed intently upon her.

"The right of one who does not dance--to criticize those who do!" she said pointedly, and made, on the sudden, an imperious gesture.

He gave a start of surprise; audacious though he was, he looked as if he would draw back. "What? With you, my Lady?"

A gleam of satisfaction, a little cold and scornful, shone from the girl's eyes at this evidence of his discomfiture. "Unless," she added maliciously, "you fear you--can not?"

"Fear?" His look shot around; a moment he seemed to hesitate; then a more reckless expression swept suddenly over his dark features and he sprang to her side.

"At your Ladyship's command!"

My lady's white chin lifted. The presumptuous fellow knew the dance of the Mount--danced it well, no doubt!--else why such ease and assurance? Her lids veiled a look of disappointment; she was half-minded curtly to dismiss him, when a few words of low remonstrance and the sight of my lord's face decided her. She drew aside her skirts swiftly; flashed back at the nobleman a smile, capricious and wilful.

"They," indicating the peasants, "must have an example, my Lord!" she exclaimed, and stood, with eyes sparkling, waiting the instant to catch up the rhythm.

But the Marquis, not finding the reason sufficient to warrant such condescension, gazed with mute protest and disapproval on the two figures, so ill-assorted: my lady, in robe of satin, fastened with tassels of silver--the sleeves, wide and short, trimmed at the elbow with fine lace of Brussels and drawn up at the shoulder with glistening knots of diamonds; the other, clad in the rough raiment of a seaman! The nice, critical sense of the Marquis suffered from this spectacle of the incongruous; his eyes, seeking in vain those of the Governor's daughter, turned and rested querulously on the heavy-browed peasants, most of whom, drawing nearer, viewed the scene with stolid indifference. In the gaze of only a few did that first stupid expression suffer any change; then it varied to one of vague wonder,

half-apathetic inquiry!

"Is he mad?" whispered a clod of this class to a neighbor.

"Not so loud!" breathed the other in a low tone.

"But he," regarding with dull awe the young fisherman, "doesn't care!
Look! What foolhardiness! He's going to dance with her!"

"Witchcraft! That's what I call it!"

"Hush!"

My lady extended the tips of her fingers. "Attack well!" runs the old Gallic injunction to dancers; the partner she had chosen apparently understood its significance. A lithe muscular hand closed on the small one; whirled my lady swiftly; half back again. It took away her breath a little, so forcible and unceremonious that beginning! Then, obeying the mad rhythm of the movement, she yielded to the infectious measure. An arm quickly encircled her waist; swept the slender form here,--there. Never had she had partner so vigorous, yet graceful. One who understood so well this song of the soil; its wild symbolism; the ancient music of the hardy Scandinavians who first brought the dance to these shores.

More stirring, the melodies resounded--faster--faster. In a rapid

turn, the golden hair just brushed the dark, glowing face. He bent lower; as if she had been but a peasant maid, the bold eyes looked now down into hers; nay, more--in their depths she might fancy almost a warmer sparkle--of mute admiration! And her face, on a sudden, changed; grew cold.

"Certes, your Ladyship sets them an example!" murmured the audacious fellow. "Though, pardi!--one not easy to imitate!"

She threw back her head, proudly, imperiously; the brown eyes gleamed, and certain sharp words of reproof were about to spring from her lips, when abruptly, above the sound of the music, a trumpet call, afar, rang out. My lady--not sorry perhaps of the pretext--at once stopped.

"I thank your Ladyship," said the man and bowed low.

But the Governor's daughter seemed, or affected, not to hear, regarding the other dancers, who likewise had come to a standstill--the two musicians looking up from instruments now silent. A moment yet the young fisherman lingered; seemed about once more to voice his acknowledgments, but, catching the dull eye of a peasant, stepped back instead.

"Sapristi! They might, at least, have waited until the end of the dance!" he muttered, and, with a final look over his shoulder and a low laugh, disappeared in the crowd.

"Where are the enemy?" It was the Marquis who spoke--in accents he strove to make light and thereby conceal, perhaps, possible annoyance. Coming forward, he looked around toward the point whence the sound had proceeded. "If I mistake not," a note of inquiry in his tone, "it means--a call to arms!"

My lady bit her lips; her eyes still gleamed with the bright cold light of a topaz. "Why--a call to arms?" she asked somewhat petulantly, raising her hand to her hair, a little disarranged in the dance.

"Perhaps, as a part of the military discipline?" murmured the Marquis dubiously. "See!" With sudden interest, he indicated a part of the Mount that had been black against the star-spangled sky, now showing sickly points of light. "It does mean something! They are coming down!"

And even as the Marquis spoke, a clatter of hoofs on the stone pavement leading from the Mount to the sand ushered a horseman into view. He was followed by another and yet another, until in somewhat desultory fashion, owing to the tortuous difficulties of the narrow way that had separated them above, an array of mounted men was gathered at the base of the rock. But only for a moment; a few words from one of their number, evidently in command, and they dispersed; some to ride around the Mount to the left, others to the right.

"Perhaps Elise will enlighten us?" Of one accord her guests now crowded around the girl.

"Does the Governor intend to take us prisoners?"

"You imply it is necessary to do that--to keep you?" answered my lady.

"Then why--"

Her expression, as perplexed as theirs, answered.

"Beppo!" She waved her hand.

The Governor's servitor, who was passing, with an anxious, inquiring look upon his face, glanced around.

"Beppo!" she repeated, and beckoned again.

The man approached. "Your Ladyship wishes to speak with me?" he asked in a voice he endeavored to make unconcerned.

"I do." In her manner the old antipathy she had felt toward him as a child again became manifest. "What do the soldiers want? Why have they come down?"

His eyes shifted. "I--my Lady--" he stammered.

The little foot struck the strand. "Why don't you answer? You heard my question?"

"I am sorry, my Lady--" Again he hesitated: "Le Seigneur Noir has been seen on the beach!"

"Le Seigneur Noir?" she repeated.

"Yes, my Lady. He was caught sight of among the peasants, at the time the barrels were opened, in accordance with your Ladyship's command. I assure your Ladyship," with growing eagerness, "there can be no mistake, as--"

"Who," interrupted my lady sharply, "is this Black Seigneur?"

Beppo's manner changed. "A man," he said solemnly, "his Excellency, the Governor, has long been most anxious to capture."

The girl's eyes flashed with impatience, and then she began to laugh.

"Saw you ever, my Lords and Ladies, his equal for equivocation? You put to him the question direct, and he answers--"

The loud report of a carbine from the other side of the Mount, followed by a desultory volley, interrupted her. The laughter died on her lips; the color left her cheek.

"What--" The startled look in her eyes completed the sentence.

Beppo rubbed his hands softly. "His Excellency takes no chances!" he murmured.