

CHAPTER VI

A MESSENGER FOR MY LADY

"So you failed to capture him, Monsieur le Commandant?"

The speaker, the Marquis de Beauvillers, leaned more comfortably back in his chair in the small, rather barely furnished barracks' sitting-room in which he found himself later that night and languidly surveyed the florid, irate countenance of the man in uniform before him.

"No, Monsieur le Marquis," said the latter, endeavoring to conceal any evidence of mortification or ill humor in the presence of a visitor so distinguished; "we didn't. But," as if to turn the conversation, with a gesture toward a well-laden table, "I should feel honored if--"

"Thank you, no! After our repast on the beach--however, stand on no ceremony yourself. Nay, I insist--"

"If Monsieur le Marquis insists!--" The commandant drew up his chair; then, reaching for a bottle, poured out a glass of wine, which he offered his guest.

"No, no!" said the Marquis. "But as I remarked before, stand on no ceremony!" And daintily opening a snuff-box, he watched his host with an expression half-amused, half-ironical.

That person ate and drank with little relish; the wine--so he said--had spoiled; and the dishes were without flavor; it was fortunate Monsieur le Marquis had no appetite--

Whereupon the Marquis smiled; but, considering the circumstances, in his own mind excused the commandant, who had only just come from the Governor's palace, and who, after the interview that undoubtedly had ensued, could hardly be expected to find the pate palatable, or the wine to his liking. This, despite the complaisance of the young nobleman whom the commandant had encountered, while descending from the Governor's abode, and who, adapting his step to the other's had accompanied the officer back to his quarters, and graciously accepted an invitation to enter.

"Well, you know the old saying," the Marquis closed the box with a snap, "'There's many a slip'--but how," airily brushing with his handkerchief imaginary particles from a long lace cuff, "did he get away?"

"He had got away before we were down on the beach. It was a wild-goose chase, at best. And so I told his Excellency, the Governor--"

"A thankless task, no doubt! But the shots we heard--"

"An imbecile soldier saw a shadow; fired at it, and--"

"The others followed suit?" laughed the visitor.

"Exactly!" The commandant's face grew red; fiercely he pulled at his mustache. "What can one expect, when they make soldiers out of every dunderpate that comes along?"

"True!" assented the Marquis. "But this fellow, this Black Seigneur--why is the Governor so anxious to lay hands on him? Who is he, and what has he done? I confess," languidly, "to a mild curiosity."

"He's a privateersman and an outlaw, and has done enough to hang himself a dozen times--"

"When you capture him!" interposed the visitor lightly. A moment he studied the massive oak beams of the ceiling. "Why do they call him the Black Seigneur? An odd sobriquet!"

"His father was a Seigneur--the last of the fief of Desaurac. The Seigneurs have all been fair men for generations, while this fellow--"

"Then he has noble blood in him?" The Marquis showed surprise. "Where is the fief?"

"The woods on the shore mark the beginning of it."

"But--I don't understand. The father was a Seigneur; the son--"

Bluntly the commandant explained; the son was a natural child; the mother, a common peasant woman whom the former Seigneur had taken to his house--

"I see!" The young nobleman tapped his knee. "And that being the case--"

"Under the terms of the ancient grant, there being no legal heir, the lands were confiscated to the crown. His Excellency, however, had already bought many of the incumbrances against the property, and, in view of this, and his services to the King, the fief, declared forfeited by the courts, was subsequently granted and deeded, without condition, to the Governor."

"To the Governor!" repeated the Marquis.

"Who at once began a rare clearing-out; forcing the peasants who for years had not been paying metayage, to meet this just requirement, or--move away!"

"And did not some of them object?"

"They did; but his Excellency found means. The most troublesome were

arrested and taken to the Mount, where they have had time to reflect--his Excellency believes in no half-way measures with peasants."

"A rich principality, no doubt!" half to himself spoke the Marquis.

"I have heard," blurted the commandant, "he's going to give it to the Lady Elise; restore the old castle and turn the grounds surrounding it into a noble park."

The visitor frowned, as if little liking the introduction of the lady's name into the conversation. "And what did the Black Seigneur do then," he asked coldly, "when he found his lands gone?"

"Claimed it was a plot!--that his mother was an honest woman, though neither the priest who performed the ceremony nor the marriage records could be found. He even resisted at first--refused to be turned out--and, skulking about the forest with his gun, kept the deputies at bay. But they surrounded him at last; drove him to the castle, and would have captured him, only he escaped that night, and took to the high seas, where he has been making trouble ever since!"

"Trouble?"

"He has seriously hampered his Excellency's commerce; interfered with his ships, and crippled his trade with the Orient."

"But--the Governor has many boats, many men. Why have they failed to capture him?"

"For a number of reasons. In the first place he is one of the most skilful pilots on the coast; when hard pressed, he does not hesitate to use even the Isles des Rochers as a place of refuge."

"The Isles des Rochers?" queried the nobleman.

"A chevaux-de-frise on the sea, my Lord!" continued the commandant; "where fifty barren isles are fortified by a thousand rocks; frothing fangs when the tide is low; sharp teeth that lie in wait to bite when the smiling lips of the treacherous waters have closed above! There, the Governor's ships have followed him on several occasions, and--few of them have come back!"

"But surely there must be times when he can not depend on that retreat?"

"There are, my Lord. His principal harbor and resort is a little isle farther north--English, they call it--that offers refuge at any time to miscreants from France. There may they lie peacefully, as in a cradle; or go ashore with impunity, as they like. Oh, he is safe enough there. Home for French exiles, they designate the place. Exiles! Bah! It was there he first found means to get his ship--sharing his profits, no doubt, with the islander who built her. There, too, he mustered his crew--savage peasants who had been turned off the lands of the old

Seigneur; fisher-folk who had become outlaws rather than pay to the Governor just dues from the sea; men fled from the banalite of the mill, of the oven, of the wine-press--"

"Still must he be a redoubtable fellow, to have done what he did to-night; to have dared mingle with the people, under the Governor's very guns!"

"The people! He has nothing to fear from them. An ignorant, low, disloyal lot! They look upon this fellow as a hero. He has played his cards well; sends money to the lazy, worthless ones, under pretext that they are poor, over-taxed, over-burdened. In his company is one Gabriel Gabarie, a poet of the people, as he is styled, who keeps in touch with those stirring trouble in Paris. Perhaps they hope for an insurrection there, and then--"

"An insurrection?" The Marquis' delicate features expressed ironical protest; he dismissed the possibility with an airy wave of the hand.

"One should never anticipate trouble, Monsieur le Commandant," he said lightly and rose. "Good night."

"Good night, Monsieur le Marquis," returned the officer with due deference, and accompanied his noble visitor to the door.

At first, without the barracks, the Marquis walked easily on, but soon the steepness of the narrow road, becoming more marked as it approached

the commanding structures at the top of the Mount, caused his gait gradually to slacken; then he paused altogether, at an upper platform.

From where he stood, by day could be seen, almost directly beneath, the tiny habitations of men clinging like limpets to the precipitous sides of the rocks at the base; now was visible only a void, an abyss, out of which swam the sea; so far below, a boat looked no larger than a gull on its silver surface; so immense, the dancing waves seemed receding to a limit beyond the reach of the heavens.

"You found him?" A girl's clear voice broke suddenly upon him. He wheeled.

"Elise! You!"

"Yes! why not? You found him? The commandant?"

"At your command, but--"

"And learned all?"

"All he could tell."

"It is reported at the castle that the man escaped!" quickly.

"It is true. But," in a voice of languid surprise, "I believe you are

glad--"

"No, no!" She shook her head. "Only," a smile curved her lips, "Beppo will be so disappointed! Now," seating herself lightly on the low wall of the giant rampart, "tell me all you have learned about this Black Seigneur."

The Marquis, considered; with certain reservations obeyed. At the conclusion of his narrative, she spoke no word and he turned to her inquiringly. Her brows were knit; her eyes down-bent. A moment he regarded her in silence; then she looked up at him suddenly.

"I wonder," she said, her face bathed in the moonlight, "if--if it was this Black Seigneur I danced with?"

"The Black Seigneur!" My lord started; frowned. "Nonsense! What an absurd fancy! He would not have dared!"

"True," said the girl quickly. "You are right, my Lord. It is absurd. He would not have dared."