

CHAPTER VII

A DISTANT MENACE

But guests come and guests go; pastimes draw to a close, and the hour arrives when the curtain falls on the masque. The friends of my lady, however reluctantly, were obliged at last to forgo further holiday-making, depart from the Mount, and return to the court. An imposing cavalcade, gleaming in crimson and gold, they wended down the dark rock; laughing ladies, pranked-out cavaliers who waved their perfumed hands with farewell kisses to the grim stronghold in the desert, late their palace of pleasure, and to the young mistress thereof.

"Good-by, Elise!" The Marquis was last to go.

"Good-by."

He took her hand; held it to his lips. On the whole, he was not ill-pleased. His wooing had apparently prospered; for, although the marriage had been long arranged, my lady's beauty and capriciousness had fanned in him the desire to appear a successful suitor for her heart as well as her hand. If sometimes she laughed and thus failed to receive his delicate gallantries in the mood in which they were tendered, the Marquis' vanity only allowed him to conclude that a woman does not laugh if she is displeased. It was enough that she found him

diverting; he served her; they were friends and had danced and ridden through the spring days in amicable fashion.

"Good-by," he repeated. "When are you coming to court again? The Queen is sure to ask. I understand her Majesty is planning all manner of brilliant entertainments, yet Versailles--without you, Elise!"

"Me?" arching her finely penciled brows. "Oh, I'm thinking of staying here, becoming a nun, and restoring the Mount to its old religious prestige."

"Then I'll come back a monk," he returned in the same tone.

"If you come back at all!" provokingly. "There, go! The others will soon be out of sight!"

"I, too--alas, Elise!"

He touched his horse; rode on, but soon looked back to where, against a great, grim wall, stood a figure all in white gleaming in the sunshine. The Marquis stopped; drew from his breast a deep red rose, and, gazing upward, gracefully kissed the glowing token. Beneath the aureole of golden hair my lady's proud face rewarded him with a faint smile, and something--a tiny handkerchief--fluttered like a dove above the frowning, time-worn rock. At that, with the eloquent gesture of a troubadour, he threw his arm backward, as if to launch the impress on

the rose to the crimson lips of the girl, and then, plying his spurs, galloped off.

And as he went at a pace, headlong if not dangerous and fitting the exigencies of the moment, my lord smiled. Truly had he presented a perfect, dainty and gallant figure for any woman's eyes, and the Lady Elise, he fancied, was not the least discerning of her sex. And had he seen the girl, when an unkind angle of the wall hid him from sight, his own nice estimate of the situation would have suffered no change. The Mount, which formerly had resounded to the life and merriment of the people from the court, on a sudden to her looked cold, barren, empty.

"Heigh-ho!" she murmured, stretching her arms toward that point where he--they--had vanished. "I shall die of ennui, I am sure!" And thoughtfully retraced her steps to her own room.

But she did not long stay there; by way of makeshift for gaiety, substituted activity. The Mount, full of early recollections and treasure-house mystery, furnished an incentive for exploration, and for several days she devoted herself to its study; now pausing for an instant's contemplation of a sculptured thing of beauty, then before some closed door that held her, as at the threshold of a Bluebeard's forbidden chamber.

One day, such a door stood open and her curiosity became cured. She had passed beneath a machicolated gateway, and climbing a stairway that

began in a watch-tower, found herself unexpectedly on a great platform. Here several men, unkempt, pale, like creatures from another world, were walking to and fro; but at sight of her, an order was issued and they vanished through a trap--all save one, a misshapen dwarf who remained to shut the iron door, adjust the fastening and turn a ponderous key. For a moment she stood staring.

"Why did you do that?" she asked angrily.

"The Governor's orders," said the man, bowing hideously. "They are to see no one."

"Then let them up at once! Do you hear? At once!"

And as he began to unlock the door, walked off. After that, her interest in the rock waned; the Mount seemed but a prison; she, herself, desired only to escape from it.

"Have my saddle put on Saladin," she said to Beppo the next day, toward the end of a long afternoon.

"Very well, my Lady. Who accompanies your Ladyship?"

"No one!" With slight emphasis. "I ride alone."

Beppo discretely suppressed his surprise. "Is your Ladyship going far?"

If so, I beg to remind that to-night is the change of the moon, and the 'grand,' not the 'little' tide may be coming in."

"I was already aware of it, and shall keep between the Mount and the shore. Have my horse sent to the upper gate," she added, and soon afterward rode down.

The town was astir, and many looked after her as she passed; not kindly, but with the varying expressions she had of late begun to notice. Again was she cognizant of that feeling of secret antagonism, even from these people whose houses clung to the very foundations of her own abode, and her lips set tightly. Why did they hate her? What right had they to hate her? A sensation, almost of relief, came over her, when passing through the massive, feudal gate, she found herself on the beach.

Still and languorous was the day; not a breath stirred above the tiny ripples of the sand; a calm, almost unnatural, seemed to wrap the world in its embrace. The girl breathed deeper, feeling the closeness of the air; her impatient eyes looked around; scanned the shore; to the left, low and flat--to the right, marked by the dark fringe of a forest. Which way should she go? Irresolutely she turned in the direction of the wood.

Saladin, her horse, seemed in unusually fine fettle, and the distance separating her from the land was soon covered; but still she continued

to follow the shore, swinging around and out toward a point some distance seaward. Not until she had reached that extreme projection of land, where the wooing green crept out from the forest as far as it might, did she draw rein. Saladin stopped, albeit with protest, tossing his great head.

"You might as well make an end of that, sir!" said the girl, and, springing from the saddle, deftly secured him. Then turning her back toward the Mount, a shadowy pyramid in the distance, she seated herself in the grass with her eyes to the woods.

Not long, however, did my lady remain thus; soon rising, she walked toward the shadowy depths. At the verge she paused; her brows grew thoughtful; what was it the woods recalled? Suddenly, she remembered--a boy she had met the night she left for school so long ago, had told her he lived in them. She recalled, too, as a child, how the woman, Marie, who had been maid to her mother, had tried to frighten her about that sequestered domain, with tales of fierce wild animals and unearthly creatures, visible and invisible, that roamed within.

She had no fear now, though faint rustlings and a pulsation of sound held her listening. Then, through the leafy interstice, a gleaming and flashing, as if some one were throwing jewels to the earth, lured her on to the cause of the seeming enchantment--a tiny waterfall!

The moment passed; still she lingered. Around the Mount's high top, her own home, only transcendent silence reigned; here was she surrounded by babbling voices and all manner of merry creatures--lively little squirrels; winged insects, romping in the twilight shade; a portly and well-satisfied appearing green monster who regarded her amicably from a niche of green. A butterfly, poised and waving its wings, held her a long time--until she was suddenly aroused by the wood growing darker. Raising her eyes, she saw through the green foliage overhead that the bright sky had become sunless. At the same time a rumbling detonation, faint, far-off, broke in upon the whisperings and tinklings of that wood nook. Getting up, she stood for a moment listening; then walked away.

Near the verge of the sand, Saladin greeted her with impatience, tossing his head toward the darkening heavens. Nor did he wait until she was fairly seated before starting back at a rapid gait along the shore. But the girl offered no protest; her face showed only enjoyment. A little wild he might be at times, as became one of rugged ancestry, but never vicious, only headstrong! And she didn't mind that--

Already had he begun to slack that first thundering pace when something white--a veil, perhaps, dropped from the cavalcade of lords and ladies some days before on the land and wafted to the beach--fluttered like a live thing suddenly before him. In his tense mood, Saladin, affrighted, sprang to one side; then wheeling outright, madly took the

bit in his teeth. Perforce his mistress resigned herself, sitting straight and sure, with little hands hard and firm at the reins. Saladin was behaving very badly, but--at least he was superb, worth conquering, if--

A brief thrill of apprehension seized her as, again drawing near the point of land, he showed no signs of yielding; resisted all her attempts to turn, to direct him to it. With nostrils thrust forward and breathing strong, he continued to choose his own course; to whirl her on; past the promontory; around into the great bay beyond--now a vast expanse, or desert of sand, broken only, about half-way across, by the small isle of Casque. Toward this rocky formation, a pygmy to the great Mount from which it lay concealed by the intervening projection of land, the horse rushed.

On, on! In vain she still endeavored to stop him; thinking uneasily of stories the fishermen told of this neighboring coast; of the sands that often shifted here, setting pitfalls for the unwary. She saw the sky grow yet darker, noted the nearer flashings of light, and heard the louder rumblings that followed. Then presently another danger she had long been conscious of, on a sudden became real.

She saw, or thought she saw, a faint streak, like a silver line drawn across the sky where the yellow sands touched the sombrous horizon. And Saladin seemed to observe it, too; to detect in it cause for wonder; reason for hesitation. At any rate, that headlong speed now

showed signs of diminishing; he clipped and tossed the sand less vigorously, and looked around at his mistress with wild, uneasy eyes. Again she spoke to him; pulled with all her strength at the reins, and, at once, he stopped.

None too soon! Great drops of rain had begun to fall, but the girl did not notice them. The white line alone riveted her attention! It seemed to grow broader; to acquire an intangible movement of its own; at the same time to give out a sound--a strange, low droning that filled the air. Heard for the first time, a stranger at the Mount would have found it inexplicable; to the Governor's daughter, the menacing cadence left no room for doubt as to its origin.

The girl's cheek paled; her gaze swung in the opposite direction, toward the point of land, now so distant. Could they reach it? She did not believe they could; indeed, the "grand" tide coming up behind on the verge of the storm, faster than any horse could gallop, would overtake them midway. And Saladin seemed to know it also; beneath her, he trembled. Yet must they try, she thought, and had tightened the reins to turn, when looking ahead once more, she discerned a break in the forbidding cliffs of the little island of Casque, and, back of the fissure, a shining spot which marked a tiny cove.

A moment she hesitated; what should she do? Ride toward the isle and the white danger, or toward the point of mainland and from it? Either alternative was a desperate one, but the isle lay much nearer; and

quickly, the brown eyes gleaming with sudden courage, she decided; touched her horse and pressed him forward.

But fast as she went the "grand" tide came faster; struck with a loud, menacing sound the seaward side of the isle and swung hungrily around. My lady cast over her shoulder a quick glance; the cove, however, was near; only a line of small rocks, jutting from the sand, separated her from it. If they could but pass, she thought; they had passed, she told herself joyfully, when of a sudden the horse stumbled; fell. Thrown violently from his back, a moment was she cognizant of a deafening roar; a riotous advance of foam; above, a hundred birds that screamed distractedly; then all these sounds mingled; darkness succeeded, and she remembered no more.