

CHAPTER X

THE CLOISTER IN THE AIR

Irrespective of environment, the cloister of the Mount would have been a delight to the eye, but, upheld in mid air, with the sky so near and the sands so far below, it seemed more an inspiration of fancy than a work of hand. Dainty, delicate, its rose-colored columns of granite appeared too thin for tangible weight; the tympan's sculptured designs, fanciful as the carvings in some palace of a poet's dreams. Despite, however, this first impression of evanescence, it carried a charm against the ravages of time, and ethereal though it was, had rested like a crown on the grim head of the rock through the ages.

Once a place for quiet meditation, the cloister had, through a whirligig of change, become the favorite resort of the Governor, for dejeuner, or after-dinner dram, and, on occasions, for the transaction of much profane though necessary labor pertaining to his office and private concerns. He busied himself there now; or had been busying himself, but paused to look up from the large book before him, whose pages were inscribed with items and figures. His finger, following the mental computation, remained stationary. Fouage--tax upon fires; banvin--duties on wine; vintain--the lord's right to his share of the produce; minage--his due from each mine or half setier of coin--consideration of these usually all-important matters seemed for the moment to have been forgotten.

He leaned back, and as he sat thus, the light and shadow playing on him, the dark, steely eyes looked the more sunken, the hard, cynical lips beneath the white mustache, the more cruel, the spare figure the more alert and ready, as if to grapple with some hidden danger.

"J'arrive en ce pays
De Basse Normandie--"

At one of the apertures looking out to the barren waste of sand stood the Lady Elise; the words of the old Norman chant she was singing in desultory fashion rang softly, oddly, in that spot, where black-clad brethren for centuries had been wont to tread. Mechanically the Governor listened, but the voice soon ceased abruptly and again, after the manner of one of orderly habits, he bent over the big book; once more the curving finger slid up and down, and parsimony, the vice of the aged, had begun to shine from his pinched features, when a footstep rang on the marble pavement.

"Your Excellency sent for me?" The commandant stood respectfully near.

The Governor closed the book with deliberation; lifted his eyes. "The prisoners that were taken last night are safely housed?"

"Housed? Yes, your Excellency! But we have little room. The upper

cells are all occupied; the dungeons, fairly full! Even the In-pace and Les Deux Jumeaux have been pressed into service."

"Hum!" The long hand tapped restlessly a moment; the cold eyes gleamed, then shot an inquiring look. "There are no new particulars about last night's encounter with this--Black Seigneur?"

"None, your Excellency, except," the commandant drew a paper from his breast pocket, "I have here in writing the detailed account of the officer in charge of your Excellency's boat, who was wounded himself in the encounter."

"Read it."

The commandant obeyed. "Our schooner, belonging to his Excellency, the Governor, was returning last night to the Mount with troops--reinforcements for the garrison from St. Dalard--when it happened quite by accident near a ship, maneuvering at a respectful distance from the island of Casque. The night was dark and cloudy, but our men got a look at her and suspecting who she was and knowing her armament, against our will, we felt obliged to bear away. She, having no reason to think us other than a fishing schooner, or that we were freighted with troops instead of cod, did not follow and we had passed out of sight, and were rounding the island when we ran into two small sail-boats that had just set out from there."

"To join the ship of this outlaw!" interposed the Governor. "Go on!" shortly.

"We hailed; their answer was unsatisfactory; we ordered them to halt, whereupon they tried to sail away. We followed and overtaking them, commanded them to surrender. Their leader, who was the Black Seigneur himself, refused, and we attacked'--"

"Bien! 'We attacked!' But what then? Eh, what then?"

"With fury they responded; in spite of their inferiority of numbers tried to board us. Bravely our men repulsed them; yet still they persisted; led by their captain, the Black Seigneur, had gained the deck when a chance shot struck him. As he fell back, the others tried to escape; one boat was sunk'--"

"And the other, bearing their leader, got away!" interrupted the Governor harshly.

"In the confusion--yes, your Excellency."

The Governor waved his hand impatiently.

"By this time the ship of the Black Seigneur had drawn nearer and our men put about and made for the Mount with a number of prisoners. Several shots were sent after us, but we managed to reach port."

"The officer in charge of the troops thinks this fellow, their leader, was wounded severely--fatally perhaps?"

"He thinks it most probable, your Excellency."

For some time the Governor, with frowning brows, sipped silently from a glass of liquor at his elbow, and, stiff, motionless, the commandant waited; close at hand, a dove plumed itself on the roof of the cloister walk; beyond, the girl again began to sing fitfully.

Out of the corner of his eye the commandant dared look at her, leaning now against the wall, the clear-cut, white features outlined against an illimitable blue background.

"Les amours--"

Involuntarily he started to raise a hand to his warlike mustache, when abruptly was his wandering attention recalled. "The man ashore I spoke to you about, has been taken into custody?"

"Yes, your Excellency; and is now at the barracks."

"Send him here. One moment--" The commandant paused, vaguely conscious the girl had moved away from the wall. "You spoke of there

being a lack of room--these new prisoners must be confined in the dungeons; if necessary, crowd more of the others in the upper cells, and--there is still the Devil's Cage."

"The Devil's Cage?" Through the rose-tinted columns, above the Governor's head, the commandant could discern the figure of the Lady Elise, who had approached and now was gazing inquiringly at them. "Your Excellency would use that? One can neither lie down in it, nor sit in it, upright?"

"Well," the cold eyes flashed, "it is not intended for upright people! But the man you were ordered to arrest!" with sudden sharpness; "the man from the shore! Send him to me!"

"At once, your Excellency!" And responding promptly to his superior's mood, the commandant saluted briskly, and retired.

"What man?" The drapery of her gown drawn back, the Lady Elise stood poised on the court's low coping between the fairy-like pillars.

"No one you know, my dear."

"Which means--it is none of my concern?"

"Not at all." His voice was now perfunctory; and his expression, as he surveyed her, slightly questioning. "You are looking somewhat pale

to-day?"

"Am I?" carelessly. "I--I feel very well." As she spoke, she went to him and leaned over the back of his chair. "Mon pere, won't you do something for me?"

"What?"

"Promise first." With her hand on his shoulder.

He reached up; the long, cold fingers stroked the shapely, warm ones.

"One should never leap into the dark with a promise," he answered.

"Especially to a woman."

"Not even when that woman is one's own daughter?" she asked, sliding to the arm of the chair.

He regarded the bright face now thoughtful; the lips, usually laughing, set sensitively. "Is it another trip to the court, or do you wish to turn this stern old Mount again into a palace of pleasure? To invite once more the Paris lords and ladies--the King, himself, perhaps? It would not be the first time a monarch has been entertained at the Mount--or a Marquis, either, eh? Shall we ask the Marquis?"

She made an impatient movement. "I want you to promise to break up the terrible iron cage, and--"

"Tut!" Jocosely he pinched the fair cheek. "A girl's thoughts should be of the court and the cavaliers."

She turned away her head. "You treat me like a child," she said with a flash in her eyes.

"No, no! Like a woman," he laughed. "But the Marquis--perhaps he could not come here; perhaps he is too much concerned with the gaities of Paris!" Her figure straightened; she was about to walk away, when--

"You ride this afternoon?" he asked.

"I had not thought of it."

"If you do I desire that some one accompany you." Her face changed; she looked at him quickly, and half turned. "Remember Saladin as well, and--keep closer to the Mount in the future."

"Poor Saladin!" she breathed, with averted glance.

"He got his deserts!" answered the Governor harshly. "An ugly trick that of his--to bolt and leave you stranded at the extreme point of the mainland where the bay swings around!"

"The 'grand' tide--it came in so fast--and made so much noise--"

"It frightened him! Well, fortunate it was, indeed, you were not on his back; that you had already reached the point, and had had time to dismount! An unpleasant experience, nevertheless--with the water separating you from the Mount, and a great curve of land to be walked before you could arrive at a human habitation!"

"I--it wasn't a very comfortable feeling," she acknowledged, flushing.

"And if the fisherman hadn't subsequently seen you and taken you across in his little boat, you would have been more uncomfortable later. You rewarded him well, I trust?"

"He--wouldn't take anything."

"And you neglected to inquire his name?"

"I--did not think."

"You were so glad to get back?" remarked the Governor, regarding her closely. "What sort of man was he?" abruptly.

"Old."

"And--"

"That--is all I remember."

"Hum! Not very lucid. No doubt you were too overwrought, my dear, to be in an observant mood." His voice sank absently; his fingers sought among the papers, and, as his glance fell, the girl walked away. Again she leaned on the parapet, and once more regarded the barren waste below--the figures of the cockle-seekers, mere specks, the shadow of the Mount, stamped on the sand, with the saint, a shapeless form, holding up a tapering black line--a sword--at the apex.

"She is keeping back something. What?" Above an official-looking document the Governor watched her, his lips compressed, his eyes keen; then shrugged his shoulders and resumed his occupation. The death-like hush of an aerial region surrounded them; the halcyon peace of a seemingly chimerical cloister; until suddenly broken by an indubitable clangor--harsh, hard!--of a door, opening; shutting. The Governor lifted his head in annoyance; the dove on the roof of the cloister-walk flew away, and a short, fat man, breathing hard, appeared.

"Pardon, your Excellency! But the drafts! They seem sometimes to sweep up from the very dungeons themselves, and--"

"Well?"

Beppo cut short excuse, or explanation. "A prisoner is waiting without. The man, Sanchez, from the shore! Monsieur le Commandant,

who brought him, told me to inform you."

The Governor considered a moment with down-bent brows. "You may show him in, but first," he glanced up with a frown, "I have a question to put to you."

"Your Excellency?"

"This morning you thought fit to apprise me," Beppo looked uncomfortable, "in view of the events of last night--that you saw yesterday this fellow, Sanchez, setting out in a sail-boat, accompanied by a priest--a fact that might have been of great service to me, had I been aware of it in season!" The Governor paused to allow the full weight of his disapproval to be felt. "At what hour did you see them start out?"

"About dusk, the time of the 'grand' tide," was the crestfallen answer. "I was following the shore, feeling anxious on account of the Lady Elise, who, I knew, had gone in the direction of the forest, when I saw them, some distance out, but not too far to recognize this fellow's boat and in it two men, one of them in the black robes of a priest. I attached no importance to the incident until--"

The Governor interrupted. "You may send the prisoner in," he said shortly. "No--wait!" Toward the spot where the girl had been standing the Governor glanced quickly, but that post of observation was now

vacant, and his Excellency more deliberately looked around; caught no sight of her. "You may send him in here," he said, "alone. I will speak with the prisoner in private."