

CHAPTER XI

THE GOVERNOR IS SURPRISED

But the Lady Elise had not gone. Passing from the cloister through the great arched doorway leading to the high-roofed refectory, she had stopped at the sight of a number of people gathered near the entrance. At first she had merely glanced at them; then started, as, in the somewhat dim light prevailing there, her eyes became fixed upon one of their number.

Obviously a prisoner, he stood in the center of the group, with head down-bent, a hard, indifferent expression on his countenance. Amazed, the girl was about to step forward to address him--or the commandant--when Beppo appeared from the cloister, walked toward the officer, and, in a low ill-humored tone, said something she could not hear. Whatever it was, the commandant caused him to repeat it; made a gesture to the soldiers, who drew back, and spoke himself to the prisoner.

The latter did not reply nor raise his eyes, and the commandant laid a heavy hand on his shoulder, whereupon the prisoner moved forward mechanically, through the doorway.

"You are sure his Excellency said 'alone'?" asked the commandant.

"As sure as I have ears," answered Beppo. "But her ladyship--see! She is walking after him."

Beppo shrugged his shoulders. "She always does what she pleases; no orders apply to her."

In the shadow of the cloister roof, at a corner where the double row of pillars met, the girl paused; looked out through the columns, her hand at her breast. The Governor was unconcernedly writing; not even when the prisoner stepped forward did he turn from his occupation; at his leisure dotted an "i" and crossed a "t"; sprinkled sand lightly over the paper; waited a moment; then tapped the fine particles from the letter. For his part, the prisoner displayed equal patience, standing in an attitude of stolid endurance.

"Your name is Sanchez?" At length the Governor seemed to notice the other's presence.

"Yes."

"And you formerly served the Seigneur Desaurac? Followed him to America?"

"As your Excellency knows." The servant's tone was veiled defiance.

A trace of pink sprang to the Governor's brow, though the eyes he

lifted were impassive. "You will answer 'yes' or 'no'!" He reached for a stick of wax, held it up to the tiny flame of a lamp; watched the red drops fall. "When you returned, it was to live in the forest with--a nameless brat?"

"My master's son!"

"By a peasant woman, his--"

"Wife!"

The Governor smiled; applying a seal, pressed it hard. "The courts found differently," he observed in a mild, even voice, as speaking to himself and extolling the cause of justice.

"The courts! Because the priest who married them had been driven from Brittany! Because he could not be found then! Because--" The man's indignation had got the better of his taciturnity, but he did not finish the sentence.

"Either," said the Governor quietly, "you are one of those simple-minded people who, misguided by loyalty, cherish illusions, or you are a scheming rogue. No matter which, unfortunately," in crisp tones, "it is necessary to take time to deal with you."

"At your Excellency's service!" And the man folded his arms but, again

turning to his table, the Governor apparently found some detail of employment there of paramount importance; once more kept the prisoner waiting.

The silence lengthened; in the dim light of the walk noiselessly the girl drew nearer; unseen, reached the old abbot's great granite chair with its sheltering back to the court and close to the Governor's table. Into the capacious depths of this chilly throne, where once the high and holy dignitary of the church had been accustomed to recline while brethren laved his feet from the tiny stone lavatorium before it, she half sank, her cheek against one of its cold sides; in an attitude of expectation breathlessly waited. Why was it so still? Why did not her father speak? She could hear his pen scratch, scratch!

They were again speaking; more eagerly she bent forward; listened to the hard, metallic voice of the Governor.

"You left the castle at once when the decree of the court, ordering it vacated, was posted in the forest?"

"My master told me to, pretending he was going, but--"

"Remained to resist; to kill." The Governor's tones, without being raised, were sharper. "And when, after the crime against these instruments of justice, he escaped to the high seas, why did you not go with him?"

"He wouldn't have it."

"Thinking you would be more useful here? A spy?"

"He said he would be held an outlaw; a price put on him, and--he dismissed me from his service."

"Dismissed you? An excellent jest! But," with sudden incisiveness, "what about the priest, eh? What about the priest?"

The man straightened. "What priest?" he said in a dogged tone.

"You are accused of harboring and abetting an unfrocked fellow who has long been wanted by the government, a scamp of revolutionary tendencies; you are accused of having taken him to sea," the prisoner started, "to some rendezvous--a distant isle--to meet some one; to wait for a ship; to be smuggled away--?"

The man did not reply; with head sunk slightly, seemed lost in thought.

"Speak--answer!"

"Who accuses me?"

From the stone chair the girl sprang; looked out. Her face white,

excited, peering beneath the delicate spandrils and stone roses, seemed to come as an answer.

"Have I not told you--" began the Governor sternly, when--

"Bah!" burst from the prisoner violently. "Why should I deny what your Excellency so well knows? I told my master not to trust her; that she would play him false; and that once out of his hands--"

"Her? Whom do you mean?" The Governor's eyes followed the man's; stopped. "Elise!"

"I think," her eyes very bright, the girl walked quickly toward them, "I think this man means me."

"Elise!" the Governor repeated.

"Forgive me, mon pere; I didn't intend to listen, but I couldn't help it--because--"

"How long," said the Governor, "have you been there?"

"Ever since--he came in. I suppose," proudly turning to the man, "it is useless to say that I did not play this double role of which you accuse me, and that I did keep, in every particular, the promise I made--"

"Oh, yes; you could say it, my Lady!" with sneering emphasis.

"But you reserve to yourself the right not to believe me? That is what you mean?" The man's stubborn, vindictive look answered. "Then I will deny nothing to you; nothing! You may think what you will."

His face half-covered by his hand, the Governor gazed at them; the girl, straight, slender, inflexibly poised; the prisoner eying her with dark, unvarying glance.

"Dieu!" he muttered. "What is this?" and concern gave way to a new feeling. Her concern for something--somebody--held him. A promise! "You can step back a few moments, my man!" to Sanchez. "A little farther--to the parapet! I'll let you know when you're wanted." And the prisoner obeyed, moving slowly away to the wall, where he stood out of ear-shot, his back to them. "You spoke of a promise?" the Governor turned to his daughter. "To whom?"

A suggestion of color swept her face, though she answered at once without hesitation: "To the Black Seigneur."

The slight form of the Governor stirred as to the shock of a battery.

"There is no harm in telling now," hurriedly she went on. "He saved me from the 'grand' tide--for I was on Saladin's back when he bolted and

ran. I had not dismounted, though I allowed you to infer so, and he had carried me almost to the island of Casque when we heard and saw the water coming in. The nearest place was the island--not the point of the mainland, as I felt obliged to lead you to think, and we started for it; we might have reached the cove, had not Saladin stumbled and thrown me. The last I remembered the water came rushing around, and when I awoke, I was in a watch-tower, with him--the Black Seigneur!"

The Governor looked at her; did not speak.

"I--I at first did not know who he was--not until this man came--and the priest! And when he, the Black Seigneur, saw I had learned the truth, he asked me to promise--not for himself--but because of this man!--to say nothing of having met him there, or the others! And I did promise, and--he sent me back--and that is all--"

"All!" Did the Governor speak the word? He sat as if he had hardly comprehended; a deeper flush dyed her cheek.

"You--you can not blame me--after what he did. He saved me--saved my life. You are glad of that, mon pere, are you not? And it must have been hard doing it, for his clothes were torn, and his hands were bleeding--he can't be all bad, mon pere! He knew who I was, yet trusted me--trusted!"

The Governor looked at her; touched a bell; the full-toned note

vibrated far and near.

"What are you going to do?" Something in his face held her.

Again the tones startled the stillness. "Remember, it is I who am responsible for--"

"Your Excellency?" Across the court appeared Beppo, moving quickly toward them. "Your Excellency?"

"One moment!" The servant stepped back; the Governor looked first at the girl; then toward the entrance of the cloister.

"You want me to go?" Her voice was low: strained; in it, too, was a hard, rebellious accent. "But I can't--can't--until--"

"What?"

"You promise to set him free! This man who brought me back! Don't you see you must, mon pere? Must!" she repeated.

His thin lips drew back disagreeably; he seemed about to speak; then reached among the papers and, turned them over absently. "Very well!" he said at length without glancing up.

"You promise," her voice expressed relief and a little surprise, "to

set him free?"

"Have I not said so?" His eyelids veiled a peculiar look. "Yes, he shall be liberated--very shortly."

"Thank you, mon pere." A moment she bent over him; the proud, sweet lips brushed his forehead. "I will go, then, at once." And she started toward the door. Near the threshold she paused; looked back to smile gratefully at the Governor, then quickly went out.