

CHAPTER XII

AT THE COCKLES

A rugged mass of granite, rent by giant fissures, and surrounded by rocks and whirlpools, the Norman English isle, so-called "Key to the Channel," one hundred miles, or more, northwest of the Mount, had from time immemorial offered haven to ships out of the pale of French ports. Not only a haven, but a home, or that next-best accommodation, an excellent inn. Perched in the hollow of the mighty cliff and reached by a flight of somewhat perilous stone stairs, the Cockles, for so the ancient tavern was called, set squarely toward the sea, and opened wide its shell, as it were, to all waifs or stormy petrels blown in from the foamy deep.

Good men, bad men; Republicans, royalists; French-English, English-French, the landlord--old Pierre Laroche, retired sea-captain and owner of a number of craft employed in a dangerous, but profitable, occupation--received them willingly, and in his solicitude for their creature comforts and the subsequent reckoning, cared not a jot for their politics, morals, or social views. It was enough if the visitor had no luten capacity; looked the fleshpots in the face and drank of his bottle freely.

The past few days the character of old Pierre's guests had left some room for complaint on that score. But a small number of the crew of

the swift-looking vessel, well-known to the islanders, and now tossing in the sea-nook below, had, shortly after their arrival toward dusk of a stormy day, repaired to the inn, and then they had not called for their brandy or wine in the smart manner of seamen prepared for unstinted sacrifice to Bacchus. On the contrary, they drank quietly, talked soberly, and soon prepared to leave.

"Something has surely gone wrong," thought their host. "Why did not your captain come ashore?" he asked. "Not see his old friend, Pierre Laroche, at once! It is most unlike him."

And on the morrow, the islanders, or English-French, more or less privateersmen themselves, were equally curious. Where had the ship come from? Where was it going? And how many tons of wine, bales of silk and packages of tobacco, or "ptum," as the weed was called, had it captured? Old Pierre would soon find out, for early that day, despite the inclemency of the weather, he came down to the beach, and, followed by a servitor, got into a small boat moored close to the shore.

"He is going aboard!"

"Who has a better right? His own vessel!"

"No; Andre Desaurac--the Black Seigneur's! They say he long ago paid for it from prizes wrested from the Governor of the Mount."

"At any rate, old Pierre entered into a bargain to build the boat for him--"

"And added to his wealth by the transaction."

Later that morning the old man came ashore, but, according to habit, preserved a shrewd silence; in the afternoon a small number of the crew landed to take on stores and ammunition--of which there was ever a plentiful supply at this base; that night, however, all, including their master, betook themselves to the Cockles.

"Glad to see you ashore, mon capitaine!" Pierre Laroche, standing at the door, just beyond reach of the fierce driving rain, welcomed the Black Seigneur warmly; but the young man, one of whose arms seemed bound and useless, cut short his greetings; tossed bruskiy aside his dark heavy cloak, and called for a room where he might sit in private with a companion. This person the landlord eyed askance; nevertheless, with a show of bluff heartiness, he led the way to a small chamber, somewhat apart, but overlooking the long low apartment, the general eating and drinking place of the establishment, now filled by the crew and a number of the islanders.

"Your capitaine has been hurt? How?" A strapping, handsome girl, clad in red and of assured mien, passing across the room, paused to address a man of prodigious girth, who drank with much gusto from a huge vessel at his elbow.

"Did not your father, Pierre Laroche, tell you?"

"He? No; all he thinks of is the money."

"Then must le capitaine speak for himself, Mistress Nanette."

"You are not very polite, Monsieur Gabarie," she returned, tossing her head; "but I suppose there is a reason; you have been beaten. In an encounter with the Governor's ships? Did you sink any of them? It would be good news for us islanders."

"You islanders!" derisively.

"Yes, islanders!" she answered defiantly. "But tell me; a number of you wear patches, which make you look very ugly. They were acquired--how?"

"In a little clerical argument!" growled the poet.

She glanced toward the secluded apartment; its occupants--the subject of their conversation, and a priest, a feeble-looking man of about seventy, whose delicate, sad face shone white and out-of-keeping in that adventuresome company. "At any rate, the Black Seigneur hasn't lost his good looks!"

"Take care you don't lose your heart!"

"Bah!" Her strong bold eyes swept back. "Much good it would do me!"

"And for that reason--"

"Messieurs!" the landlord's voice broke in upon them; "behold!" it seemed to say, as pushing through the company, he preceded a lanky lad who bore by their legs many plucked fowls and birds--woodcock, wild duck, cliff pigeons--and made his way to the great open fireplace at one end of the room. There, bending over the glowing embers, the landlord deliberately stirred and spread them; then, reaching for a bar of steel, he selected a poulet from the hand of the lanky attendant and prepared to adjust it; but before doing so, prodded it with his finger, surveyed it critically, and held it up for admiring attention.

"Who says old Pierre Laroche doesn't know how to care for his friends? What think you of it, my masters?"

"Plump as the King's confessor," muttered the poet.

"Or your King himself!" said one of the islanders.

"On with the King! Skewer the King!" exclaimed a fierce voice.

"And then we'll eat him!" laughed the girl, showing her white teeth.

"Thoughtless children!" From his place at the table in the small room adjoining, the priest, attracted by the grim merriment of the islanders, looked down to regard them; the red fire; the red gown.

"Here, at least, will you find a safe asylum, Father," said his companion, the Black Seigneur, in an absent tone; "a little rough, perhaps, to suit your calling--"

"The rougher, the more suitable--as I've often had occasion to learn since leaving Verranch."

"Since being driven from it, you mean!" shortly.

"Ah, those revolutionary documents--placed in my garden!"

"To make you appear--you, Father!--a sanguinary character!" But the other's laugh rang false.

"Alas, such wickedness! But I was too content; the rose-covered cottage too comfortable; its garden, an Eden! It was more meet I should be driven forth; go out into the highways, where I found--such misery! I reproached myself I had not sought it sooner--voluntarily. From north to south peasants dying, women and children starving, no one to administer the last rites--on every side, work, work for the outcast priest! For ten years it has occupied him--a blessed privilege--"

"And then," the young man, who had seemed absorbed in other thoughts, hardly listening, looked mechanically up, "you came back?"

"A weakness of age! To see the old place once more! The little church; God's acre at its side; to stand on the hill at Verranch and look out a last time over the beautiful vale toward the Mount!" Briefly he paused. "Yet I am glad I yielded to the temptation; otherwise should I not have met your old servant, Sanchez; who told me all--how you had long been looking for me, and arranged our meeting for that day--on the island of Casque!"

"But not," the young man's demeanor at once became intent; his eyes gleamed with sudden fierce lights, "for what followed!"

The priest sighed. "Shall I ever forget it? The terrible night, the troop-ship, the killed and wounded. And the poor fellows taken prisoners! I can not but think of them and their fate. What will it be?"

The other did not answer; only impatiently moved his injured arm and, regarding him, the down-turned, dark countenance, the knit brows, quickly the priest changed the subject of conversation.

In the large room some one began to play, and before the fire, where now the birds were turning and the serving-lad, with a long spoon was

basting, the dark-browed girl started to dance. At the side of the hearth old Pierre smoked stolidly, gazed at the coals, and dreamed--perhaps of the past, and dangers he had himself encountered, or of the present, and his ships scattered--where?--on profitable, if precarious errands. Somberly, in no freer mood than on the occasion of their first visit to the inn, the crew looked on; but a tall, savage-appearing islander soon matched her step; a second took his place; from one partner to another she passed--wild, reckless men whose touch she did not shun; yet it might have been noticed her eyes turned often, through wreaths of smoke, mist-like in the glare and glimmer of dips and torches, toward the Black Seigneur.

Why--her gaze seemed to say--did he not join them, instead of sitting there with a priest? She whirled to the threshold; her flushed face looked in. "Are you saying a mass for the souls of your men who were captured?"

"I see," he returned quietly, "you have been gossiping."

"A woman's privilege!" she flashed back. "But how did it happen? And not only your arm," more sharply regarding him, "but your head! I fancy if I were to push back a few locks of that thick hair I should discover--it must have been a pretty blow you got, my Seigneur Solitude!" He made no reply and she went on. "You, who I thought were never beaten! By a mere handful of troops, too! Did you have to run away very fast? If I were a man--"

"Your tongue would be less sharp," he answered coolly, the black eyes indifferent.

"Much you care for my tongue!" she retorted.

"No?"

"No!" she returned mockingly, when above the din of voices, the crackling of the fire, and the wild moaning of the wind in the chimney, a low, but distinct and prolonged call was heard,--from somewhere without, below.

"What is that?" Quickly Nanette turned; superstitious, after the fashion of most of her people, a little of the color left her cheek. Again was it wafted to them, nearer, plainer! "The voices of dead men from the sea!"

"More like some one on the steps who would like to get in--some fisherman who has just got to shore!" said old Pierre Laroche, waking up and emptying his pipe. "Throw open the door. The stones are slippery--the night dark--"

One of the crew obeyed, and, as the wind entered sharply, and the lights flickered and grew dim, there half staggered, half rushed from the gloom, the figure of a man, wild, wet, whose clothes were torn and

whose face was freshly cut and marked with many livid signs of violence.

"Sanchez!" From his place the Black Seigneur rose.

The others looked around wonderingly; some with rough pity. "What's the matter, man?" said one. "You look as if you had had a bad fall."

"Fall!" Standing in the center of the room, where he had come to a sudden stop, the man gazed, bewildered, resentful, about him; then above the circle of questioning faces, his uncertain look lifted; caught and remained fixed on that of the Black Seigneur. "Fall?" he repeated, articulating with difficulty. "No; I had--no fall--but I will speak--with my master--alone!"