

## CHAPTER XV

### THE VOICE FROM THE GROUP

"No one from the household is allowed through without an order!"

"You will, however, let me pass."

"Because you have a pretty face?" The sentinel at the great gate separating the upper part of the Mount from the town, answered roughly.

"Not you, my girl, or--"

But she who importuned raised the sides of the ample linen head-dress and revealed fully her countenance.

"My Lady!" Half convinced, half incredulous, the soldier looked; stared; at features, familiar, yet seeming different, with the rebellious golden hair smoothed down severely above; the figure garbed in a Norman peasant dress, made for a costume dance when the nobles and court ladies had visited the Mount.

"You do not doubt who I am?" Imperiously regarding him.

"No, my Lady; only--"

"Then open the gate!" she commanded.

The man pushed back the ponderous bolts; pressed outward the mass of oak and iron, and, puzzled, surprised, watched the girl slip through. Of course it was none of his affair, my lady's caprice, and if she chose to go masquerading among the people on such a day, when all the idle vagabonds made pretext to visit the Mount, her right to do so remained unquestioned; but, as he closed the heavy door, he shook his head. Think of the risk! Who knew what might happen in the event of her identity being revealed to certain of those in that heterogeneous concourse without? Even at the moment through an aperture for observation in the framework to which he repaired upon adjusting the fastenings, he could see approaching a procession of noisy fanatics.

The apprehension of the soldier was, however, not shared by the girl, who, glad she had found a means to get away from the chilling atmosphere of her own world, experienced now only a sense of freedom and relief. In her tense mood, the din--the shouting and unwonted sounds--were not calculated to alarm; on the contrary, after the oppressive stillness in the great halls and chambers of the summit, they seemed welcome. Her pulses throbbed and her face still burned with the remembrance of the interview with her father, as she eyed unseeingly the approaching band, led by censer- and banner-bearers.

"Vierge notre esperance--" Caught up as they swept along, she found herself without warning suddenly a part of that human stream. A natural desire to get clear from the multitude led her at first to

struggle, but as well contend with the inevitable. Faces fierce, half-crazed, encompassed her; eyes that looked starved, spiritually and physically, gleamed on every side. Held as in a vise, she soon ceased to resist; suddenly deposited on a ledge, like a shell tossed up from the sea, she next became aware she was looking up toward a temporary altar, garish with bright colors.

"Etends sur nous--" Louder rose the voices; more uncontrollable became the demeanor of the people, and quickly, before the unveiling of the sacred relics had completely maddened them, she managed to extricate herself from the kneeling or prostrate throng; breathless, she fled the vicinity.

Down, down! Into the heart of the village; through tortuous footpaths, where the pandering, not pietistic, element held sway; where, instead of shrines and altars, had been erected booths and stands before which vendors of nondescript viands or poor trumpery vented their loquacity on the pilgrims:

"All hot! All hot!"

"A la barque! A l'ecaille!"

"La vie! Two drinks for a liard!"

"Voila le plaisir des dames!"

The Mount, in olden times a glorious and sacred place for royal pilgrimages, where kings came to pray and seek absolution, seemed now more mart than holy spot. But those whom the petty traders sought to entice--sullen-looking peasants, or poorly clad fishermen and their families--for the most part listened indifferently, or with stupid derision.

"Bah!" scoffed one of them, a woman dressed in worn-out costume of inherited holiday finery. "Where think you we can get sous for gew-gaws?"

"Or full stomachs with empty pockets?" said another. "The foul fiend take your Portugals!"

The nomadic merchants replied and a rough altercation seemed impending, when, pushing through the crowd, the girl hurried on.

Down, down, she continued; to the base of the rock where the sand's shining surface had attracted and yet held many of the people. Thither they still continued to come--in bands; processions; little streams that, trickling in, mingled with and augmented the rabble. An encampment for the hour--until the "petite" tide should break it up, and drive it piecemeal to the shore or up the sides of the Mount--it spread out and almost around the foundations of the great rock. Only the shadows it avoided--the chilling outlines of pinnacles and towers;

the cold impress of the saint, holding close to the sunlit strand and basking in its warmth.

Some, following the example of their sea-faring fellows, dug half-heartedly in the sands in the hope of eking out the meager evening meal with a course, salt-flavored; others, abandoning themselves to lighter employment, made merry in heavy or riotous fashion, but the effect of these holiday efforts was only depressing and incongruous.

"Won't you join?" Some one's arm abruptly seized my lady.

"No, no!"

Unceremoniously he still would have drawn her into the ring, but with a sudden swift movement, she escaped from his grasp.

"My child!" The voice was that of a wolfish false friar who, seeing her pass quickly near by, broke off in threat, solicitation and appeal for sous, to intercept her. "Aren't you in a hurry, my child?"

"It may be," she answered steadily, with no effort to conceal her aversion at sight of the gleaming eyes and teeth. "Too much so, to speak with you, who are no friar!"

"What mean you?" His expression, ingratiating before, had darkened, and from his mean eyes shot a malignant look; she met it with fearless

disdain.

"That you make pretext of this holy day to rob the people--as if they are not poor enough!"

"Ban you with bell, book and candle! Your tongue is too sharp, my girl!" he snarled, but did not linger long, finding the flashing glance, the contemptuous mien, or the truth of her words, little to his liking. That he profited not by the last, however, was soon evident, as with amulets and talismans for a bargain, again he moved among the crowd, conjuring by a full calendar of saints, real and imaginary, and professing to excommunicate, in an execrable confusion of monkish gibberish, where the people could not, or would not, comply with his demands.

"So they are--poor enough!" Leaning on a stick, an aged fishwife who had drawn near and overheard part of the dialogue between the thrifty rogue and the girl, now shook her withered head. "Yet still to be cozened! Never too poor to be cozened!" she repeated in shrill falsetto tones.

"And why," sharply my lady turned to the crone, "why are they so poor? The lands are rich--the soil fertile."

"Why?" more shrilly. "You must come from some far-off place not to know. Why? Don't you, also, have to pay metayage to some great

lord? And banalite here, and banalite there, until--"

"But surely, if you applied to your great lord, your Governor; if you told him--"

"If we told him!" Brokenly the woman laughed. "Yes; yes; of course; if--"

"I don't understand," said the Governor's daughter coldly.

Muttering and chuckling, the woman did not seem to hear; had started to hobble on, when abruptly the girl stopped her.

"Where do you live?"

"There!" A claw-like finger pointed. "On the old Seigneur's lands--a little distance from the woods--"

"The old Seigneur? You knew him?"

"Knew him! Who better?" The whitened head wagged. "And the Black Seigneur? Wasn't he left, as a child, with me, when the old Seigneur went to America? And," pursing her thin lips, "didn't I care for him, and bring him up as one of my own?"

"But I thought--I heard that he, the Black Seigneur, when a boy, lived

in the woods."

"That," answered the old creature, "was after. After the years he lived with us and shared our all! Not that we begrudged--no, no! Nor he! For once when I sent word, pleading our need, that we were starving, he forgave--I mean, remembered me--all I had done and," in a wheedling voice, "sent money--money--"

"He did?" Swiftly the girl reached for her own purse, only to discover she had forgotten to bring one. "But of course," in a tone of disappointment at her oversight, "he couldn't very well forget or desert one who had so generously befriended him."

"There are those now among his friends he must needs desert," the crone cackled, wagging her head.

A shadow crossed the girl's brow. "Must needs?" she repeated.

"Aye, forsooth! His comrades--taken prisoners near the island of Casque? His Excellency will hang them till they're dead--dead, like some I've seen dangling from the branches in the wood. He, the Black Seigneur, may wish to save them; but what can he do?"

"What, indeed?" The girl regarded the Mount almost bitterly. "It is impregnable."



"Way there!" At that moment, a deep, strong voice from a little group of people, moving toward them, interrupted.