

## CHAPTER XVI

### THE MOUNTEBANK AND THE PEOPLE

In the center walked a man, dressed as a mountebank, who bent forward, laden with various properties--a bag that contained a miscellany of spurious medicines and drugs, to be sold from a stand, and various dolls for a small puppet theater he carried on his back. It was not for the Governor's daughter, or the old woman, however, his call had been intended. "Way there!" he repeated to those in front of him.

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Like a person not lightly turned from his purpose, he, strolling-player as well as charlatan, pointed to the Mount, and, unceremoniously thrusting one person to this side and another to that, stubbornly pushed on. As long as they were in sight the girl watched, but when with shouts and laughter they had vanished, swallowed by the shifting host, once more she turned to the crone. That person, however, had walked on toward the shore, and indecisively the Governor's daughter gazed after. The woman's name she had not inquired, but could find out later; that would not be difficult, she felt sure.

Soon, with no definite thought of where she was going, she began to retrace her steps, no longer experiencing that earlier over-sensitive perception for details, but seeing the picture as a whole--a vague

impression of faces; in the background, the Mount--its golden saint ever threatening to strike!--until she drew closer; when abruptly the uplifted blade, a dominant note, above color and movement, vanished, and she looked about to find herself in the shadow of one of the rock's bulwarks. Near by, a scattering approach of pilgrims from the sands narrowed into a compact stream directed toward a lower gate, and, remembering her experience above, she would have avoided the general current; but no choice remained. At the portals she was jostled sharply; no respecters of persons, these men made her once more feel what it was to be one of the great commonalty; an atom in the rank and file! At length reaching the tower's little square, many of them stopped, and she was suffered to escape--to the stone steps swinging sharply upward. She had not gone far, however, when looking down, she was held by a spectacle not without novelty to her.

In the shadow of the Tower of the King stood the mountebank she had seen but a short time before on the sands. Now facing the people before his little show-house, which he had set up in a convenient corner, he was calling attention to the entertainment he proposed giving, by a loud beating on a drum.

Rub-a-dub-dub! "Don't crowd too close!" Rub-a-dub-dub! "Keep order and you will see--"

"Some trumpery miracle mystery!" called out a jeering voice.

"Or the martyrdom of some saint!" cried another.

"I don't know anything about any saint," answered the man,  
"unless,"--rub-a-dub-dub!--"you mean my lord's lady!"

And truly the piece, as they were to discover, was quite barren of that antique religious flavor to which they objected and which still pervaded many of the puppet plays of the day. The Petit Masque of the Wicked Peasant and the Good Noble, it was called; an odd designation that at once interested the Lady Elise, bending over the stone balustrade the better to see. It interested, also, those official

guardians of the peace, a number of soldiers and a few officers from the garrison standing near, who, unmindful of the girl, divided their attention between the pasteboard center of interest and the people gathered around it.

Circumspectly the little play opened; a scene in which my lord, in a waistcoat somewhat frayed for one of his station, commands the lazy peasant to beat the marsh with a stick that the croaking of the frogs may not disturb at night the rest of his noble spouse, seemed designed principally to show that obedience, submission and unquestioning fealty were the great lord's due. On the one hand, was the patrician born to rule; on the other, the peasant, to serve; and no task, however onerous, but should be gladly welcomed in behalf of the master, or his equally illustrious lady. The dialogue, showing the disinclination of

the bad peasant for this simple employment and the good lord's noble solicitude for the nerves of his high-born spouse, was both nimble and witty; especially those bits punctuated by a cane, and the sentiment: "Thus all bad peasants deserve to fare!" and culminating in an excellent climax to the lesson--a tattoo on the peasant's head that sent him simultaneously, and felicitously, down with the curtain.

"What think you of it?" At my lady's elbow one of the officers turned to a companion.

"Amusing, but--" And his glance turned dubiously toward the people. Certainly they did not now show proper appreciation either for the literary merits of the little piece or the precepts it promulgated in fairly sounding verse.

"The mountebank!" From the crowd a number of discontented voices rose.

"Come out, Monsieur Mountebank!"

"Yes, Monsieur Mountebank, come out; come out!"

With fast-beating heart the Lady Elise gazed; as in a dream had she listened--not to the lines of the puppet play; but to a voice--strangely familiar, yet different--ironical; scoffing; laughing! She drew her breath quickly; once more studied the head, in its white, close-fitting clown's covering; the heavy, painted face, with red, gaping mouth. Then, the next moment, as he bowed himself

back--apparently unmindful of a missile some one threw and which struck his little theater--the half-closed, dull eyes met hers; passed, without sign or expression!--and she gave a nervous little laugh. What a fancy!

"Act second!" the tinkling of a bell prefaced the announcement, and once more was the curtain drawn, this time revealing a marsh and the bad peasant at work, reluctantly beating the water to the Song of the Stick.

"Beat! beat!

At his lordship's command;

For if there's a croak,

For you'll be the stroke,

From no gentle hand."

A merry little tune, it threaded the act; it was soon interrupted, however, during a scene where a comical-looking devil on a broomstick, useful both for transportation and persuasion, came for something which he called the peasant's soul. Again the bad peasant protested; would cheat even the devil of his due, but his satanic Majesty would not be set aside.

"You may rob your master," he said, in effect; "defraud him of banalite, bardage and those other few taxes necessary to his

dignity and position; but you can't defraud Me!" Whereupon he proceeded to wrest what he wanted from the bad peasant by force--and the aid of the broomstick!--accompanying the rat-a-tat with a well-rhymed homily on what would certainly happen to every peasant who sought to deprive his lord of feudal rights. At this point a growing restiveness on the part of the audience found resentful expression.

"That for your devil's stick!"

"To the devil with the devil!"

"Down with the devil!"

The cry, once started, was not easy to stop; men in liquor and ripe for mischief repeated it; in vain the mountebank pleaded: "My poor dolls! My poor theater!" Unceremoniously they tumbled it and him over; a few, who had seen nothing out of the ordinary in the little play took his part; words were exchanged for blows, with many fighting for the sake of fighting, when into the center of this, the real stage, appeared soldiers.

"What does it mean?" Impressive in gold adornment and conscious authority, the commandant himself came down the steps. "Who dares make riot on a day consecrated to the holy relics? But you shall pay!" as the soldiers separated the belligerents. "Take those men into custody and--who is this fellow?" turning to the mountebank, a mournful figure

above the wreckage of his theater and poor puppets scattered, haphazard, like victims of some untoward disaster.

"It was his play that started the trouble," said one of the officers.

"Diable!" the commandant frowned. "What have you to say for yourself?"

"I," began the mountebank, "I--" he repeated, when courage and words alike seemed to fail him.

The commandant made a gesture. "Up with him! To the top of the Mount!"

"No, no!" At once the fellow's voice came back to him. "Don't take me there, into the terrible Mount! Don't lock me up!"

"Don't lock him up!" repeated some one in the crowd, moved apparently by the sight of his distress. "It wasn't his fault!"

"No; it wasn't his fault!" said others.

"Eh?" Wheeling sharply, the commandant gazed; at the lowering faces that dared question his authority; then at his own soldiers. On the beach he might not have felt so secure, but here, where twenty, well-armed, could defend a pass and a mob batter their heads in vain against walls, he could well afford a confident front. "Up with you!"



he cried sternly and gave the mountebank a contemptuous thrust.

For the first time the man's apathy seemed to desert him; his arm shot back like lightning, but almost at once fell to his side, while an expression, apologetically abject, as if to atone for that momentary fierce impulse, overspread his dull visage. "Oh, I'll go," he said in accents servile. And proceeded hurriedly to gather up the remains of his theater and dolls. "I'm willing to go."