

CHAPTER XVII

THE MOUNTEBANK AND THE HUNCHBACK

Up the Mount with shambling step, head down-bent and the same stupid expression on his face, the mountebank went docilely, though not silently. To one of the soldiers at his side he spoke often, voicing that dull apprehension he had manifested when first ordered into custody.

"Do you think they'll put me in a dungeon?"

"Dungeon, indeed!" the man answered not ill-naturedly. "For such as you! No, no! They'll keep the oubliettes, calottes, and all the dark holes for people of consequence--traitors, or your fine gentry consigned by lettres de cachet."

"Then what do you think they will do with me?"

"Wait, and find out!" returned the soldier roughly, and the mountebank spoke no more for some time; held his head lower, until, regarding him, his guardian must needs laugh. "Here's a craven-hearted fellow! Well, if you really want to know, they'll probably lock you up for the night with the rest of rag-tag," indicating the other prisoners, a short distance ahead, "in the cellar, or almonry, or auberge des voleurs; and in the morning, if you're lucky and the Governor has time to attend

to such as you, it may be you'll escape with a few stripes and a warning."

"The auberge des voleurs!--the thieves' inn!" said the man. "What is that?"

"Bah! You want to know too much! If now your legs only moved as fast as your tongue--" And the speaker completed the sentence with a significant jog on the other's shoulder. Whereupon the mountebank quickened his footsteps, once more ceased his questioning. It was the soldier who had not yet spoken, but who had been pondering a good deal on the way up, who next broke the silence.

"How did it end, Monsieur Mountebank?--the scene with the devil, I mean."

The man who had begun to breathe hard, as one not accustomed to climbing, or wearied by a long pilgrimage to the Mount, at the question ventured to stop and rest, with a hand on the granite balustrade of the little platform they had just reached. "In the death of the peasant, and a comic chorus of frogs," he answered.

"A comic chorus!" said the soldier. "That must be very amusing."

"It is," the mountebank said, at the same time studying, from where he stood, different parts of the Mount with cautious, sidelong looks; "but

my poor frogs!--all torn! trampled!"

"Well, well!" said the other not unkindly. "You can mend them when you get out."

"When! If I only knew when that would be! What if I should have to stay here like some of the others?--pour etre oublie!--to be forgotten?"

"If you don't get on faster," said the soldier who had first spoken, "you won't be buried alive for some time to come, at least!"

"Pardon!" muttered the mountebank. "The hill--it is very steep."

"You look strong enough to climb a dozen hills, and if you're holding back for a chance to escape--"

"No, no!" protested the man. "I had no thought--do I not know that if I tried, your sword--"

"Quite right. I'd--"

"There, there!" said the other soldier, a big, good-natured appearing fellow. "He's harmless enough, and," as once more they moved on, "that tune of yours, Monsieur Mountebank," abruptly; "it runs in my head. Let me see--how does it go? The second verse, I mean--"

"Beat! beat!

Mid marsh-muck and mire,

For if any note

Escapes a frog's throat,

Beware my lord's ire!"

"Yes; that's the one. Not bad!" humming--

"For if any note

Escapes a frog's throat

Beware my lord's ire!"

"Are the verses your own?"

"Oh, no! I'm only a poor player," said the mountebank humbly. "But an honest one," he added after a pause, "and this thieves' inn, Monsieur?" returning to the subject of his possible fate, "this auberge des voleurs--that sounds like a bad place for an honest lodging."

"It was once under the old monks, who were very merry fellows; but since the Governor had it restored, it has become a sober and quiet place. It is true there are iron bars instead of blinds, and you can't come and go, as they used to, but--"

"Is that it--up there?" And the mountebank pointed toward a ledge of rock, with strong flanking buttresses, out jutting beneath a mysterious-looking wall and poised over a sparsely-wooded bit of the lower Mount. "The gray stone building you can just see above the ramparts, and that opening in the cliff to the right, with something running down--that looks like planking--"

"Oh, that is for the wheel--"

"The wheel?"

"The great wheel of the Mount! It was built in the time of the monks, and was used for--"

"Hold your tongue!" said the other soldier, and the trio entered the great gate, which had opened at their approach, and now closed quickly behind them.

For the first time in that isolated domain of the dreaded Governor, the mountebank appeared momentarily to forget his fears and gazed with interest around him. On every side new and varying details unfolded to the eye; structures that from below were etched against the sky in filmy lines, here resolved themselves into vast, solid, but harmonious masses.

Those ribbons of color that had seemed to fall from the wooing sky, to adorn these heights, proved, indeed, fallacious; more somber effects, the black touches of age, confronted the eye everywhere, save on one favored front--that of a newer period, an architectural addition whose intricate carvings and beautiful roses of stone invited and caught the warmer rays; whose little balcony held real buds and flowers, bright spots of pink dangling from, or nestling at, the window's edge.

"Yonder looks like some grand lady's bower," as he followed his captors past this more attractive edifice, the mountebank ventured to observe.

"Now, perhaps, lives there--"

"Hark you, my friend," one of the soldiers brusquely interrupted; "a piece of advice! His Excellency likes not babblers, neither does he countenance gossip; and if you'd fare well, keep your tongue to yourself!"

"I'll--I'll try to remember," said the mountebank docilely, but as he spoke, looked back toward the balcony; at the gleaming reflection full on its windows; then a turn in the way cut off the pleasing prospect, and only the grim foundations of the lofty, heavier structure on one hand and the massive masonry of the ramparts on the other greeted the eye.

For some distance they continued along the narrow way, the mountebank bending lower under his load and observing the injunction put upon him,

until the path, broadening, led them abruptly on to a platform where a stone house of ancient construction barred their further progress. But two stories in height, this building, an alien edifice amid loftier piles, stood sturdily perched on a precipitous cliff. The rough stonework of its front, darkened by time, made it seem almost a part of the granite itself, although the roof, partly demolished and restored, imparted to it an anomalous distinctness, the bright new tile prominent as patches on some dilapidated garment. In its doorway, beneath a monkish inscription, well-nigh obliterated, stood a dwarf, or hunchback, who, jingling a bunch of great keys, ill-humoredly regarded the approaching trio.

"What now?" The little man's welcome, as mountebank and soldiers came within earshot, was not reassuring. "Isn't it enough to make prisoners of all the scamps in Christendom without taking vagabond players into custody?"

"Orders, good Jacques!" said one of the soldiers in a conciliatory tone. "The commandant's!"

"The commandant!" grumbled the grotesque fellow. "It is all very well," mimicking: "'Turn them over to Jacques. He'll find room.' If this keeps on, we'll soon have to make cages of confessionals, or turn the wine-butts in the old cellar into oubliettes."

"If any of the ancient flavor lingers in the casks, your guests would

have little reason to complain!" returned the other soldier. "But this fellow, he'll make no trouble--"

"Oh, I suppose we'll have to take care of him!" muttered the dwarf.

"In the thieves' inn there's always room for one more!" Obeying the gesture, at once menacing and imperious, that accompanied these words, the mountebank, who had been eyeing his prospective host not without visible signs of misgiving, reluctantly entered.

But as he did so, he looked back; toward the soldier who had displayed half-friendly interest in the play.

"If you care to know more about the piece--" he began, when the maledictions and abuse of the misshapen keeper put a stop to further conversation and sent the mountebank post-haste into the darkness of the cavern-like hall intersecting the ground floor.

On either side closed doors, vaguely discerned, hinted at the secrets of the chambers they guarded; the atmosphere, dark and close, proclaimed the sunlight long a stranger there. At the end of the hall the dwarf, who had walked with the assurance of one well acquainted with that musty interior and all it contained, paused; shot sharply a bolt and threw open a door. The action was the signal for a chorus of hoarse voices from within, and the little man stayed not on the order of his going, but, thrusting the mountebank across the threshold, leaped nimbly back, slammed hard the door, and locked it.

Cries of disappointment and rage followed, and, facing the company that crowded the dingy little room almost to suffocation, the latest comer found himself confronted by unkempt people who shook their fists threateningly and execrated in no uncertain manner. A few, formerly spectators of his little play, inclined again to vent their humor on him, but he regarded them as if unaware of their feeling; pushed none too gently to a tiny window, and, depositing his burden on the stone floor, seated himself on a stool with his back to the wall.

As a squally gust soon blows itself out, so their temper, mercurial, did not long endure; from a ragged coat one produced dice, another cards, and, although there were few sous to exchange hands, the hazard of tossing and shuffling exercised its usual charm and held them. The minutes wore away; motionless in his corner, the mountebank now watched; then with his head on his elbow, seemed sunk in thought. Once he rose; stood on his stool and looked out between the heavy bars of the narrow window.

"Not much chance to get out that way," observed a fellow prisoner.

"What did you see?"

"Only a chasm and the sands."

"The sands!" said the man. "Cursed the day I set foot on them!"

To this malediction the other did not answer; stepped down and, again seated in his corner, waited, while the light that had grudgingly entered the narrow aperture grew fainter. With the growing darkness the atmosphere seemed to become closer, more foul; but although he breathed with difficulty, the mountebank suffered no sign of impatience or concern to escape him; only more alertly looked, and listened--to a night bird cleaving the air without; to muttered sounds, thieves' patois, or snatches of ribald mirth within; and, ere long, to new complainings.

"Our supper! What of our supper?"

"The foul fiend take the auberge des voleurs and its landlord?"

"Vrai dieu! Here he comes!" as footsteps were heard without.

And the door, opening, revealed, indeed, in the rushlight, now dimly illuminating the hall, the hunchback; not laden, however, with the longed-for creature comforts, but empty-handed; at his back the commandant and a number of soldiers.

"You fellow with the dolls!" Blinking in the glare of the torches, the dwarf peered in. "Where are you? Come along!" as the mountebank rose, "you are wanted."

"Wanted?" repeated the player, stepping forward. "Where?"

"At the palace," said the commandant.

"The palace!" stopping short. "Who can want me there?"

"Who?" The dwarf made a grimace. "Who?" he repeated mockingly.

"Her ladyship," said the commandant, with a reproving glance at the jailer.

"Her ladyship!"

"Haven't you ears, my man?" The commandant frowned and made an impatient gesture. "Come, bestir yourself! The Governor's daughter has commanded your presence."