

CHAPTER XVIII

THE MOUNTEBANK AND MY LADY

"The Governor's daughter!" Had the light been stronger they must have seen the start the mountebank gave. "Impossible!"

"Eh? What?" Surprised in turn, the officer gazed at him. "You dare--out with him!" To the soldiers.

But in a moment had the mountebank recovered his old demeanor, and, without waiting for the troopers to obey the commandant's order, walked voluntarily toward the door and into the passage.

"Our supper! Our supper!" A number of the prisoners, crowding forward, began once more to call lustily, when again was the disk-studded woodwork swung unceremoniously to, cutting short the sound of their lamentations.

"Dogs!" Malevolently the dwarf gazed back. "To want to gorge themselves on a holy day!"

"Pious Jacques!" murmured the commandant. "But I always said you made a model landlord!"

"When not interfered with!" grumbled the other.

"At any rate he doesn't seem to appreciate his good fortune," with a glance at the mountebank.

"No," jeering. "A gallant cavalier to step blithely at a great lady's command! 'Your Ladyship overwhelms me!'" bowing grotesquely. "'Your Ladyship's condescension'--"

"Why, then, need you take me?" interposed the mountebank quickly. "Can you not tell her ladyship I am not fit to appear in her presence--an uncouth clown--"

"Bah! I've already done that," answered the commandant.

"But how came her ladyship to know of me--here--?"

"How indeed?"

"And what does she want of me?"

"That," roughly, "you will find out!" and stepped down the hall, followed by the soldiers, mountebank and dwarf, the last of whom took leave of them at the door.

Clear was the night; the stars, like liquid drops about to fall, caressed with silvery rays the granite piles. In contrast to the

noisome atmosphere of the prison, faint perfumes, borne from some flowery slope of the distant shore, swept languorously in and out the open aisles and passages of the Mount. In such an hour that upper region seemed to belong entirely to the sky; to partake of its wondrous stillness; to share its mysteries and its secrets. Like intruders, penetrating an enchanted spot, now they trod soft shadows; then, clangorous, beat beneath foot delicate laceworks of light.

"Here we are!" The officer stopped. At the same time upon a near-by balcony a nightingale began to sing, tentatively, as if trying the scope and quality of its voice. "You are to go in!" he announced abruptly.

"Such a fine palace! I--I would rather not!" muttered the fellow, as they crossed an outer threshold and proceeded to mount some polished stairs.

"Stubborn dolt! Now in you march," pausing before a door. "But, hark you! I and my men remain without. So, mind your behavior, or--"

A look from the commandant completed the sentence.

Alone, in an apartment of the palace, some moments later, the mountebank's demeanor underwent a quick change; he glanced hastily toward the door the commandant had closed in leaving, and then, with sudden brightening gaze, around him, as if making note of every detail

of his surroundings. Set with columns of warm-hued marble, relieved with ornate carvings and designs, the spacious chamber presented an appearance at once graceful and charming. Nor were its furnishings at variance with its architectural elegance; on every hand soft colors met the eye, in rugs of ancient pattern; in tapestries, subdued; in the upholstering of Breton oak. A culminating note was in the center of the room, where a great bunch of roses opened wide their petals.

But briefly, however, the clown permitted himself to survey, or study, these details of refinement and luxury; the swift eager interest that had shone from the dark eyes gave way to an expression, lack-luster and stupid; his countenance once more resumed its blank, stolid aspect. As if unconscious of the anomalous figure he presented, mechanically had he seated himself; was gazing down, when through a doorway, opposite the one by which the commandant had left, a slender form appeared. Under the heavy, whitened lids a slight movement of the clown's eyes alone betrayed he was aware of that new presence. A moment the girl stood there, her glance resting on the grotesque, bent figure before her; then with a quizzical lift of the delicate brows she entered.

"You believe, no doubt, in making yourself at home?"

Crossing to the table, once more she stopped; her figure, sheathed in a gown of brocade of rose, glowed bright and distinct in contrast to the faint, vari-colored tints of ancient embroideries on the wall. Above, the light threw a shimmer on the deep-burnished gold of her hair; the

sweeping lashes veiled the half-disdainful, half-amused look in her brown eyes. "Or, perhaps, you are one of those who think the peasants will some day sit, while the lords and ladies stand?"

"I don't know," he managed to answer, but got up, only to appear more awkward.

"You do not seem to know very much, indeed!" she returned, her tone changing to one of cold severity. "Not enough, perhaps, to perceive the mischief you may cause! That play of yours, which I witnessed to-day--"

"You! To-day? Your Ladyship was--"

"Yes," imperiously, "I was there! And heard and saw the effect it had on the people; how it stirred all their baser passions! But you, of course, could not know--or care, thinking only of the sous!--that, instead of teaching a lesson, the piece would only move them to anger, or resentment."

"I--your Ladyship--great lords have commended the play--"

"Great lords!" she began, but stopped; regarded her listener and shrugged her shoulders.

A few moments silence lasted, the fellow apparently not knowing what to

say, or if he was expected to say anything, while, for her part, the girl no longer looked at him, but at the flowers, taking one, which she turned in her fingers.

"Your Ladyship would command me--"

"To give the play no more!"

"But--" Expostulation shone from his look.

"In which event you shall be suffered to go free to-morrow."

"But my livelihood! What shall I do, if I am forbidden to earn--"

She gave him a colder look. "I have spoken to the commandant; told him what I had seen, and that I did not think you intended to make trouble. Your case will, therefore, not be reported to his Excellency. Only, with a warning flash, "if you are again caught giving the play, you must expect to receive your deserts."

"Of course! If your Ladyship commands!" dejectedly.

"I do! But, as an offset to the coppers you might otherwise receive, I will give you a sum of money sufficient to compensate you."

"Your Ladyship is so generous!" He made an uncouth gesture of

gratitude and covetousness. "May I ask your Ladyship how much--"

"How much?" scornfully. "But I suppose--"

The words died away; her glance fell; lingered on the hand he had extended. Muscular, shapely, it seemed not adapted to the servile gesture; was most unlike the hand of clod or clown. Moreover, it was marked with a number of wounds, half-healed, which caught and held her look.

"Of course, I am so poor, your Ladyship--" he began, in yet more abject tone, but stopped, attracted in turn by the direction of her gaze; then, meeting it, quickly withdrew the hand and thrust it into his pocket. Not in time, however, to prevent a startled light, a swift gleam of recollection from springing into her eyes! The very movement itself--ironically enough!--was not without precedent.

"You!" She recoiled from him. "The Black--"

As a man who realizes he has betrayed himself, he bit his lips; but attempted no further subterfuge. The shambling figure straightened; the dull eyes grew steady; the bold self-possession she remembered well on another occasion again marked his bearing.

"Your Ladyship has discerning eyes," he remarked quietly, but as he spoke glanced and moved a little toward the window.

My lady stood as if dazed. He, the Black Seigneur, there, in the palace! Mechanically she raised her hand to her breast; she was very pale. On the balcony the nightingale, grown confident, burst into a flood of variations; a thousand trills and full-throated notes filled the room.

"I understand now," at length she found voice, "why that fancy came to me below, when I was listening to the play on the platform. But why have you come--to the very Mount itself?" Her voice trembled a little. "You! On the beach the people tried to stop you--"

"You saw that, too?"

"And you knew the play would make trouble! You wanted it to," quickly. "For what purpose? To get into the upper part of the Mount? To have them arrest--bring you here?" She looked at him with sudden terror. "My father! Was it to--"

A low, distinct rapping at the door she had entered, interrupted them. She started and looked fearfully around. At the same time the mountebank stepped back to the side of a great bronze in front of the balcony, where, standing in the shadow, he was screened.

"Elise!" a voice called out.

The flower the girl had been holding, fell to the floor.

"My--" she began, when the door opened and the Governor stood on the threshold.