

CHAPTER XIX

THE MOUNTEBANK AND THE GOVERNOR

In his hand the Governor held a paper; his usually austere face wore a slightly propitiatory expression, while the eyes he turned upon her, as slowly he entered the room, suggested a respite of differences.

Pausing, he toyed with the missive, turning it around and around in his fingers, as if something in his thoughts were revolving with it. Had he been more watchful of her, less bent on some matter uppermost in his mind, he could not have failed to mark the pallor of her face, or the agitation written there. As it was, his glance swept without studying.

"I hoped to find you here," he began complacently; "hoped that you had not yet retired."

She made some faint response, but her voice, despite herself, wavered. Whereupon his look sharpened; then almost immediately relapsed; constraint on her part could easily be accounted for; not many hours had elapsed since their last interview.

"Yes," he continued, "I have here to consider," indicating a paper he held, "a rather important matter." He waited a moment before adding: "A matter that concerns--you!"

"That concerns me?" Her hands tightened.

"Yes."

"Since it is important," she said hastily, "would it not--shall we not leave it until to-morrow? I--I am rather tired to-night, and--"

"What?" he returned in the same unruffled tone. "Would you postpone considering the command of the King!"

"Command!" she repeated nervously. "Of the King?"

"Or request," he said, "which is the same."

"But--" she began, and stopped; held by a sound, as of some one moving, near the window.

"Shall I read it, or--"

She had started to look behind her; but abruptly caught herself, and seemed about to frame some irrelevant response, when his voice went on:

"The King desires to change the date set for your marriage with his kinsman, the Marquis de Beauvillers."

"Change?" she echoed.

"Yes; to hasten it." If the Governor had expected from her hostility,

or perverseness, he was agreeably disappointed; the girl evinced neither pleasure nor disapproval; only stood in the same attitude of expectancy, with head half turned.

"His Majesty's reasons for this step--"

"Can't we--can't we, at least, postpone considering them?"

Again he regarded her more closely. "What better time than the present?"

"But I don't want--"

"Elise!" A slight frown appeared on his brow. "His Majesty," once more looking at the paper, "hints at an important political appointment he desires to confer on the Marquis de Beauvillers which would take him abroad; but whether as ambassador, or as governor in the colonies, his Majesty does not disclose. Obviously, however, the bestowing of the honor--a high one, no doubt!--depends on his early marriage, and a wife to grace the position. The letter," weighing it, "is a tentative one; the courteous precursor of a fuller communication when he has learned our--your--pleasure."

She did not at once express it; indeed, at the moment, seemed scarcely to have comprehended; her glance, which had swept furtively behind when he was studying the document, returned more uneasily to his, but not

before he had caught the backward look.

"Well?" he said with a touch of asperity. "Well?" he repeated, when his gaze, following the direction hers had taken, paused.

Although well lighted in the center by a great Venetian candelabrum, the far ends of the spacious hall lay somewhat in obscurity; notably the space adorned with tropical plants and a life-size bronze before the entrance to the balcony. It was on this dim recess the Governor permitted his eye to rest; at first casually; then with a sudden appearance of interest.

"Eh?" he muttered, and before my lady could prevent him, if she had been mindful so to do, walked quickly forward; but as he advanced, a white figure stepped boldly out from behind that partial screen. With a sharp exclamation, which found a startled echo from the girl, the Governor stopped; stepped back as far as the table.

"What mummery is this?" His lips shaped the words uncertainly; his hand, reaching out with that first startled instinct of danger, touched the bell.

"Your Ladyship rang?" On the opposite side of the room was the door thrown suddenly open. The look of expectancy on the face of the commandant, who had so promptly appeared, gave way to one of surprise; consternation. "His Excellency!" he muttered, and mechanically saluted.

Over the Governor's visage a faint trace of relief flitted; dryly he looked from the mountebank, now erect and motionless, to the girl; but the face was averted and his Excellency could not see the sudden whiteness of her cheek; again he regarded the officer.

"You answer our summons with alacrity," he observed to this last subject of his scrutiny.

The commandant reddened. "I--your Excellency--the truth is, I was waiting without, at the door."

"What you have just stated," returned the Governor, "is patent; what I should like to know, however," with subtle change of tone, "is why you were stationed there."

"To take this mountebank player away, when it pleased her Ladyship to--"

"Yes; to take him away!" interrupted the lady in hurried tones, the agitation of which she strove to conceal. "And I was about to call him, when--"

The Governor continued to address the commandant. "You brought him here?" incisively.

"Yes; your Excellency; a stupid fellow we arrested below for making

trouble with his dolls, and--but with her ladyship's permission--"
awkwardly turning to the Governor's daughter, "I will explain."

To this appeal the girl, however, made no answer; as if fascinated,
watched them, the commandant, her father, the still, white figure at
one side--not far away!

"I think," the Governor spoke softly, "you will do that, anyway!"

"Exactly, your Excellency! It happened in this wise," and not without
evidence of constraint and hesitation, the officer slowly related the
story of the disturbance on the platform; the taking into custody of
the rogues and knaves, and my lady's interest in the vagabond clown
whose play had occasioned the riot.

"Because it was seditious, designed to set authority at naught?"
interrupted the listener, grimly eyeing for an instant the motionless
form of the mountebank.

"On the contrary, your Excellency!" quickly. "Her ladyship assured me
it was the loyal and faithful sentiments of the play that caused the
unruly rascallions to make trouble, and that the clown deserved no
punishment, because he had intended no mischief."

"Her ladyship?" The Governor's brows went suddenly up. "How," he
asked at length in a voice yet softer, "should her ladyship have known

about the 'loyal and faithful sentiments' of a piece, given in the town, before a crowd of brawlers?"

"Because I was a spectator!" said his daughter, a red spot now on her cheek; changing lights in her eyes.

"A spectator?" repeated, in mild surprise, the Governor.

"I will explain--after!" she added in tones, low, constrained.

"Hum!" His Excellency's glance swept to the commandant.

"Her ladyship was so good," murmured the latter in some embarrassment and yet feeling obliged to speak, with that bright insistent gaze of the high official of the Mount fastened upon him, "as to inform me that, desiring to mingle with the people, and, knowing it might not be expedient to do so--in her own proper character--her ladyship saw fit to assume a humbler costume--that of a Norman peasant maid--"

From the Governor's lips fell an ejaculation; he seemed about to speak sternly, but the words failed on his lips; instead, "Continue!" he said curtly.

"That, I believe, is all, your Excellency, except that her ladyship expressed the desire the stupid fellow be set at liberty on the morrow, as not worth the keeping--and--"

The mountebank started, as expecting now the Lady Elise to speak; to denounce him, perhaps; but it was his Excellency who interrupted.

"You were going to do so? To set him at liberty?"

"I, your Excellency? The auberge des voleurs is so full of the scum of the sands, there is hardly room for them to squirm; but if your Excellency wishes all these paltry ragamuffins and beggars brought before you--"

"Well, well!" The Governor looked down; his hand crushed impatiently the paper he held. "Here is much ado about nothing! Have you," to his daughter, "ought to add?"

She lifted her head. Standing in a careless pose, apparently regardless of what was taking place, the mountebank, at the Governor's question, shot a quick glance from him to her. Although but an instant his look met my lady's, in that brief interval she read all that was lost on the other two; the sudden, desperate purpose, the indubitable intention, his warning glance conveyed. At the same time she noticed, or fancied she did, the hand thrust into his breast, as if grasping some weapon concealed there, draw out a little, while simultaneously, lending emphasis to the fact, he moved a shade nearer the Governor, her father!

"Nothing," said the girl hastily; "nothing!"

"Then," his Excellency waved a thin, aristocratic hand, "take him away!"

"And your--her ladyship's instructions?" murmured the commandant.

"Are to be obeyed, of course!" answered the Governor, complacently regarding his letter.

"You hear, fool?" said in a low voice the commandant, as he approached the clown. "Thank his Excellency! Don't you know enough? Clod! Dolt!"

But the man made at first no effort to obey; immovable as a statue, seemed not to see the speaker, and once more, the officer half whispered his injunction.

"Eh?" The Governor turned.

"I thank your Excellency! Your Excellency is most kind!" said the mountebank in a loud, emphatic tone.

"And her ladyship?" prompted the officer.

The clown looked at the girl; her breath came fast through her parted lips.

"Speak, fool! To her ladyship you also owe much."

"Much!" repeated the clown, a spark in the dull gaze still fastened upon her.

"Is that all you can say?"

"Take him away!" My lady spoke almost wildly.

"Yes; take him away!" With a querulous gesture his Excellency put an end to the matter. "Am I to be interrupted in important affairs by every miserable farceur, or buffoon, you pick up on the beach? To the devil with the fellow!"

When the door had closed on the mountebank and the commandant, he turned to his daughter. "A madcap trick!" Frowningly his Excellency regarded her. "To have gone into the town and mingled with the rabble! But," shaking his head and then suffering that expression of disapproval to relax into severity, "say no more about it! Here," indicating the letter, "is something of greater moment, to be attended to and answered!"