

CHAPTER XX

THE MOUNTEBANK AND THE SOLDIER

As the mountebank walked out of the apartment of the Governor's daughter, he drew himself up with an air of expectancy, like a man preparing for some sudden climax. Once beyond the threshold, his eyes glanced furtively back at the closed door, and, descending the stairs to the floor below, he carried his head a little forward, as if intent to catch unwonted sound or outcry. But no raised voice or unusual noise reached his ear, and his footsteps, as the party issued forth into the street, responded briskly to the soldiers' pace. Still with the same air of strained attention, now mingled with a trace of perplexity, he followed his guard until called upon to stop.

"You are to sleep here!" As he spoke, the commandant opened the door of what seemed a low out-building, not very far from the general barracks, and motioned the mountebank to enter. The latter, after glancing quickly at the speaker and the soldiers behind, bent to step across the dark threshold, and, still stooping, on account of the low roof, looked around him. By the faint glimmer of light from a lantern one of the soldiers held, the few details of that squalid place were indistinctly revealed: A single stall whose long-eared occupant turned its head inquiringly at the abrupt appearance of a companion lodger; bits of harness and a number of traps hanging from pegs on the wall, and, near the door, on the ground, a bundle of grass, rough fodder from

the marshes close by the shore. This last salt-smelling heap, the officer, peering in with a fastidious sniff, indicated.

"That's your bed! A softer one than you would have had but for the Lady Elise!"

The prisoner returned no answer, and in the voice of a man whose humor was not of the best, the commandant uttered a brief command. A moment or two the light continued to pass fitfully about the stable; then it and the moving shadows vanished; a key grated in the door, and the sound of the officer's receding footsteps was followed by the diminishing clatter of men's heels on the flagging stone. Not until both had fairly died away in the distance and the silence was broken only by certain indications of restiveness from the stall, did the prisoner move.

First, to the door, which he tried and shook; then, avoiding the pile of fodder, to the wall, where, feeling about the rough masonry with the energy of one who knew he had no time to spare, his hands, ere long, encountered the frame of a small window. Any gratification, however, he might have experienced thereat found its offset in the subsequent discovery that the window had heavy iron blinds, closed and fastened, and was further guarded by a single strong bar set in the middle, dividing the one inconsiderable aperture into two spaces of impassable dimensions. But as if spurred by obstacles to greater exertions, fiercely the man grasped the metallic barrier, braced himself, and put

forth his strength. In its setting of old masonry, the rod moved slightly; then more and more, and the prisoner, breathing a moment hard, girded himself anew. A wrench, a tug, and the bar, partly disintegrated, snapped in the middle, and holding the pieces, the prisoner fell somewhat violently back. Armed now with an implement that well might serve as a lever, he, nevertheless, paused before endeavoring to force the formidable fastenings of the blinds; paused to tear off the tight-fitting clown's cap; to doff the costume of the mountebank covering the rough, dark garments beneath, and vigorously to rub his face with some mixture he took from his pocket. He had made but a few passes to remove the distinguishing marks of paint and pigment, when a sound without, in the distance, caused him to desist.

Footsteps, that grew louder, were coming his way, and, gripping his bar tighter the prisoner grimly waited; but soon his grasp relaxed. The sound was that of a single person, who now paused before the entrance; fumbled at the lock, and, with an impatient exclamation, set something down. At the same time the prisoner dropped his weapon and stooped for the discarded garments; in the dark, they escaped him and he was still searching, when the bolt, springing sharply back, caused him to straighten.

"Are you there, Monsieur Mountebank?" The door swung open; an uncertain light cast sickly rays once more within, and beneath the lantern, raised above his head, innocent of the danger he had just escaped, the round visage of the good-natured soldier who had escorted

the mountebank to the auberge des voleurs looked amicably and inquiringly into the darksome hovel.

"Yes; what do you want?" the answer came more curt than courteous.

"What do I want?" the fellow repeated with a broad smile. "Now that's good! Perhaps it would be more to the point to ask what do you want? And here," indicating a loaf and jug in his hand, "I've got them, though why the commandant should have cared, and ordered them brought--"

"He did?" said the prisoner, with a flash of quick surprise. "Well, I'm not hungry, but you can leave them."

"Not hungry?" And the soldier, who seemed a little the worse for liquor, but more friendly in consequence, walked in. "I don't wonder, though," he went on, closing the door, hanging his lantern above and placing the jug on the ground; "in such a foul hole! What you need, comrade, is company, and," touching significantly his breast, "something warmer than flows from the spring of St. Aubert."

"I tell you," began the mountebank, when the soldier, staring, got a fair look at the other for the first time and started back.

"Eh? What's this?"

"Oh, I took them off! You don't suppose I'd sleep in my white clothes

in such a dirty--"

"Right you are, comrade!" returned the other, seating himself before the door on a three-legged stool he found in a corner. "But for the moment you gave me a start. I thought you some other person."

"What--person?"

"No one in particular. You might," unbuttoning his coat to draw forth a bottle, "have been any one! But I dare say you have had them off in worse places than this--which, after all, is not bad, compared to some of the rooms for guests at the Mount!"

"You mean?" The mountebank looked first at the closed blinds; then at the door, and a sudden determination came to his eyes.

"Those especially prepared for the followers of the Black Seigneur, taken prisoners near Casque, for example!"

"They are dungeons?"

"With Jacques for keeper! The little sexton, we call him, because the prisoners go generally from the cells to the pit, and the quicklime is the hunchback's graveyard!"

"This Jacques--" A growing impatience shone ominously from the

prisoner's glance; his attention, that of a man straining to catch some expected sound without, focused itself on the speaker. "This Jacques--what sort of quarters has he?"

"Oh, he lives anywhere; everywhere! Sometimes at the thieves' inn; again in one of the storehouses near the wheel. They say, though, he is not a great hand to sleep, but passes most of his time like a cat, prowling in and out the black passages and tunnels of the Mount. But," abruptly breaking off, "the play--that's what I want to know about! The end! How did it end?"

"I'm in no mood for talking."

"Take the bottle, an' it'll loosen your tongue!"

"No."

"What! you refuse?"

"Yes."

"Then," philosophically, "must I drink alone."

"Not here!"

"Eh?"

"Will you get out, or--" and the mountebank stepped toward the other with apparently undisguised intention.

"So that's your game?" Quickly the soldier sprang to his feet. "I must teach you a little politeness, my friend--how we deal with uncivil people in the army!" And throwing off his coat, as ready for a bout at fisticuffs as for an encounter of words, the soldier confronted the clown. "When I'm done, you'll sing that song of the stick out of the other side of the mouth, and think your wicked peasant received a coddling from his master in comparison!"

But the mountebank did not answer--with words--and the soldier was still threatening, and painting dire prophetic pictures of what he intended doing, when a strong arm closed about him; fingers like iron gripped his throat, and, for some moments thereafter, although of unusual size and vigor, the man was more concerned in keeping his feet than in searching his vocabulary for picturesque imagery. Then, in spite of his struggles and best endeavors to free himself, he felt his head forced backwards; the grasp on his neck tightened. Still he could not shake off that deadly hold, and, aware that consciousness was gradually leaving him, his efforts relaxed. After that, for an interval, he remembered nothing; but with returning realization and a vague sense of stiffness in his throat, in a rough sort of way was prepared to accept defeat; acknowledge the other's supremacy, and seal that acknowledgment over the bottle.

Only the mountebank afforded him no opportunity thus to toast the "best man"; with a long strap of leather snatched from one of the pegs, he had already bound the hands and feet of his bulky antagonist, and was just rising to survey his handiwork, when the other opened his eyes.

"Here! What do you mean?" exclaimed the soldier, when even the power vocally to express further surprise or indignation was denied him, in consequence of something soft being thrust between his teeth; and mute, helpless, he could but express in looks the disgusted inquiry his lips refused to frame.

"No! it's no joke," answered the mountebank, rapidly passing an end of the strap, binding the soldier, about a post of the stall and securing it, sailor-wise. "A poor return for hospitality, yet needs must, when the devil drives!" quickly seizing a handful of marsh grass from the ground and rubbing it over his face. "Anyhow, you'll be none the worse on the morrow," stepping toward the lantern, "while I--who can say? He laughs best--" About to blow out the flame, he stopped, attracted by something his foot had thrust aside; a garment; the soldier's! A moment he surveyed it; stooped; picked it up. "Unless I am mistaken," casting aside his own coat, slipping on that of the soldier, and then donning the latter's cap, which had fallen in the struggle, "we are about of a size. And this sword," unfastening the belt from the prostrate jailer, "should go with the coat." A moment his words, tense, reckless, continued to vibrate in the soldier's ears, then:

"I'll leave you the lantern!" And darkness fell over the place.

Boldly, a little uncertainly, as the soldier had walked, the mountebank, now, to all appearance, a man of the ranks in the service of his Excellency, the Governor, strode down the wide, stone-paved way separating the outhouses and a number of desultory ancient structures from the officers' quarters, hard against the ramparts. In the sky's dome the stars still shone, although a small mottled patch of cloud obscured the moon; on either side no lights appeared in windows, and friendly shadows favored him, until he approached at the end of the way the broad, open entrance between the soldiers' barracks and the officers' row. There, set in the stone above the key of the time-worn arch, flared a smoky lamp, dimly revealing the surrounding details; but the young man did not stop; had drawn quite close to the medieval structure, when unexpectedly another tread, on the soldiers' side of the entrance, mingled with his own; rang for a moment in unison; then jingled out of time. He who approached came to a sudden standstill; cast a quick glance over his shoulder, only to be brought to an abrupt realization that it was now too late to retreat. A black silhouette, suddenly precipitated across the pavement, preceded a dark figure that stepped quickly out and barred the way, while at the same time, a voice, loud and incisive, challenged.