

## CHAPTER XXI

### THE STAIRWAY OF SILVER

The stillness of the moment that followed was tense; then thickly the young man answered something irrelevant about a clown, a bottle and a loaf; with cap drawn down and half-averted face, he lurched a little forward in the darkness, and the sentinel's weapon fell. "Oh, that's you, is it, Henri?" he said in a different tone, stepping back. "How did you leave the fellow?"

"Eating the bread and calling for more!" As he spoke, the other stopped, swaying uncertainly; above the arch, the wick, ill-trimmed, brightened and darkened to the drafts of air through break and slit of the old lamp; and briefly he awaited a favorable moment, when the flame blew out until almost extinguished; then with hand near sword-hilt, somewhat over-briskly, but in keeping with the part, he stepped toward the arch; through it, and quickly past the sentinel.

"You seem to have been feasting and drinking a little yourself, to-night, comrade?" called out the latter after him. "I noticed it when you went in, and-- But aren't you taking the wrong way?" As the other, after starting toward the barracks, straightened, and then abruptly wheeled into the road, running up the Mount.

"Bah!" A moment the young man paused. "Can't a soldier," articulating

with difficulty, "go to see his sweetheart without--"

"Eh bien!" The sentinel shrugged his shoulders. "It isn't my business. I think, though, I know where they'll put you to-morrow, when they find out through the guard at the barracks."

To this ominous threat the other deigned no response, only, after the fashion of a man headstrong in insobriety, as well as in affairs of gallantry, continued his upward way; at first, speedily; afterward, when beyond hearing of the man below, with more stealth and as little noise as possible, until the road, taking a sudden angle, brought him abruptly to an open space at the foot of a great flight of stone stairs.

Broad, wide, broken by occasional platforms, these steps, reaching upward in gradual ascent, had designedly, in days gone by, been made easy for broken-down monarchs or corpulent abbots. Also they had been planned to satisfy the discerning eye, jealous of every addition or alteration at the Mount. My lord, the ancient potentate, leisurely ascending in ecclesiastical gown, while conscious of an earthly power reaching even into England, could still fancy he was going up a Jacob's ladder into realms supernal. Saint Louis, with gaze benignly bent toward the aerial escalier de dentelle of the chapel to the left, might well exclaim no royal road could compare with this inspiring and holy way; nor is it difficult to understand a sudden enchantment here, or beyond, that drew to the rock on three pilgrimages that other Louis, more sinner than saint, the eleventh of his name to mount the throne of

France.

But those stones, worn in the past by the footsteps of the illustrious and the lowly, were deserted now, and, for the moment, only the moon, which had escaped from the cloud, exercised there the right of way; looking squarely down to efface time's marks and pave with silver from top to bottom the flight of stairs. It played, too, on facades, towers and battlements on either side, and, at the spectacle--the disk directly before him--the Black Seigneur, about to leave the dark and sheltering byway, involuntarily paused. Angels might walk unseen up and down in that effulgence, as, indeed, the old monks stoutly averred was their habit; but a mortal intrusion on the argent way could be fraught only with visibility.

To reach the point he had in mind, however, no choice remained; the steps had to be mounted, and, lowering his head and looking down, deliberately he started. As he proceeded his solitary figure seemed to become more distinct; his presence more obtrusive and his echoing footsteps to resound louder. No indication he had been seen or heard, however, reached him; to all appearances espionage of his movements was wanting, and only the saint with the sword at the top of the steeple--guardian spirit of the rock--looked down, as if holding high a gleaming warning of that unwonted intrusion.

Yet, though he knew it not, mortal eye had long been on him, peering from a window of the abbot's bridge spanning the way and joining

certain long unused chambers, next to the Governor's palace, with my lady's abode. Against the somber background of that covered passage of granite, the face looking out would still have remained unseen, even had the young man, drawing near, lifted his glance. This, however, he did not do; his eyes, with the pale reflections dancing in them, had suddenly fastened themselves lower; toward another person, not far beyond the bridge; some one who had turned in from a passage on the other side of the overhead architectural link, and had just begun to come down. An old man, with flowing beard, from afar the new-comer looked not unlike one of the ancient Druids that, in days gone by, had lighted and watched the sacred fires of sacrifice on the rock. He, too, guarded his light; but one set in the tall, pewter lamp of the medieval watchman.

"Twelve o'clock and all's--" he began when his glance, sweeping down, caught sight of the ascending figure, and, pausing, he leaned on his staff with one hand and shaded his eyes with the other.

A half-savage exclamation of disappointment was suppressed on the young man's lips; had he only been able to attain that parallelogram of darkness, beneath the abbot's passage, he would have been better satisfied, his own eyes, looking ahead, seemed to say; then gleamed with a bolder light.

"A sword and blade

A drab and a jade;

All's one to the King's men of the army!"

he began to hum softly, as with a more reckless swing, quickly he went up in the manner of a man assigned some easy errand. At the same time the patriarch slowly and rather laboriously resumed his descent, and just below the bridge, without the bar of shadow, the two came together.

"Think you it is too late for his Excellency, the Governor, to receive a message?" at once spoke up the younger, breaking off in that dashing, but low-murmured, song of the barracks.

"That you may learn from the guard at the palace," was the deliberate answer, as, raising his lamp, the watchman held it full in his questioner's face.

"Thanks! I was going to inquire." As he answered, at the old abbot's window in the bridge above, the face, looking out, bent forward more intently; then quickly drew back. "Good night!"

But the venerable guardian of the inner precinct was not disposed thus lightly to part company. "I don't seem to know you, young man," he observed, the watery, but keen and critical eyes passing deliberately over the other's features.

"No?" Unflinching in the bright glare of the lamp, the seeming soldier smiled. "Do you, then, know all at the Mount--even the soldiers?"

"I should remember even them," was the quiet reply.

"Those, too, but lately brought from St. Dalard?"

"True, true! There may be some of those--" uncertainly.

"No doubt! So if you will lower your lamp, which smells rather vilely--"

"From the miscreants it has smelled out," answered the old man grimly, but obeyed; stood as if engrossed in the recollections his own response evoked; then turned; walked on, and, a few moments later, his call, suddenly remembered, rang, belated, in the drowsy air: "Twelve o'clock and all's well! A new day, and St. Aubert guard us all!"

"A sword and a blade;  
A drab and a jade--"

The words, scarcely begun, above his breath, died away on the seeming soldier's lips, as the watcher on the bridge, looking down to follow first the departing figure of the old custodian, crossed quickly to the opposite window, and, from this point of vantage, gazed up after the young man rapidly vanishing in the track of the moonlight. A moment the onlooker stood motionless; then, ere the figure, so vividly defined in shine and shimmer, had reached the top of the stairway, made an

abrupt movement and swiftly left the window and the passage.

At the head of the steps, which without further incident or interruption, he reached, the Black Seigneur, stepping to the shadow of a small bush against the wall, glanced about him; with knit brows and the resolute manner of one who has come to some definite conclusion, he left the spot for observation, almost the apex of the Mount, and plunged diverging to the right. From glint and shimmer to darkness unfathomable! For some time he could only grope and feel his way, after the fashion of the blind; fortunately, however, was the path narrow; although tortuous, fairly well paved, and no serious mishap befell him, even when he walked forward regardlessly, in feverish haste, beset with the conviction that time meant all in all, and delay the closing of the toils and the failure of a desperate adventure. Several times he struck against the stones; once fell hard, but picked himself up; went on the faster, only, after what seemed an interminable period, to stop.

"Am I, can I be mistaken?"

But the single star he could see plainest from the bottom of the deep alley, and to which he looked up, answered not the fierce, half-muttered question; coldly, enigmatically it twinkled, and, half running, he continued his way, to emerge over-suddenly into a cooler well of air, and--what was more to be welcomed!--an outlook whereof the details were in a measure dimly shadowed forth.

On one side the low wall obscured not the panorama below--a ghost-like earth fading into the mist, and nearer, the roof of the auberge des voleurs, a darkened patch on the slope of the rock; but in this direction the man hardly cast a glance. Certain buildings ahead, austere, Norman in outline, absorbed his attention to the exclusion of all else, and toward them, with steps now alert and noiseless, he stole; past a structure that seemed a small salle des gardes whose window afforded a view of four men nodding at a table within; across a space to another passage, and thence to a low door at the far corner of a little triangular spot, alongside the walk and near a great wall. At once the young man put out his hand to the door; tried it; pushed it back and entered. Before him a wide opening looked out at the sky, framing a multitude of stars, and from the bottom of this aperture ran a strand, or rope, connecting with an indistinct object--a great wheel, which stood at one side!