

CHAPTER XXII

THE WHIRLING OF THE WHEEL

As old as church or cloister, the massive wheel of the Mount had, in the past, played prominent part in the affairs of succeeding communities on the rock. It, or the hempen strand it controlled, had primarily served as a link between the sequestered dwellers, and the flesh-pots and material comforts of the lower world. Through its use had my lord, the abbot, been ever enabled to keep full the mighty wine-butts of his cellars; to provide good cheer for the tables of the brethren, and to brighten his cold stone interiors with the fresh greens of Flemish tapestry, or the sensuous hues of rugs and fabrics from seraglio or mosque. Times less ancient had likewise claimed its services, and even in recent years, by direction of his Excellency, the Governor, had it occasionally been used for the hoisting of goods, wares, or giant casks, overcumbersome for men or mules.

Toward this simple monkish contrivance, the summit's rough lift, or elevator, wherein serfs or henchmen had walked like squirrels in a cage to bring solace to generations of isolated dwellers, the Black Seigneur had at first stepped impetuously; then stopped, hardly breathing, to look over his shoulder at the door that had been left unfastened. An involuntary question flashing through his brain--the cause of this seeming carelessness--found almost immediate answer in his mind, and the certainty that he stood not there alone--a consciousness of some

one else, near, became abruptly confirmed.

"What are you doing, soldier?" A voice, rough, snarling, drew swiftly his glance toward a presence, intuitively divined; an undersized, grotesque figure that had entered the place but a few moments before and now appeared from behind boxes and casks where he had been about to retire to his mattress in a corner.

"What do you want?" repeated this person, the anger and viciousness on his distorted features, revealed in the moonlight from the large opening, like that of some animal unwarrantedly disturbed.

"You, landlord of the thieves' inn!" And inaction giving way to movement on the intruder's part, a knife that had flashed back in the hand of the hunchback, with his query, was swiftly twisted from him and kicked aside, while a scream of mingled pain and rage became abruptly suppressed. Struggling and writhing like a wildcat, Jacques proved no mean antagonist; with a strength incredible for one of his size, supplemented by the well-known agility of his kind, he scratched, kicked, and had managed to get the other's hand in his mouth, when, making an effort to throw off that clinging burden, the Black Seigneur dashed the dwarf's head violently against the wooden support of the place. At once all belligerency left the hunchback, and, releasing his hold, he sank to the ground.

An instant the intruder regarded the inert form; then, going to the

door, latched and locked it with a key he found inside. Having thus in a measure secured himself from immediate interruption without--for any one trying the door would conclude the wheel-room vacant, or that the dwarf slept there or in the store-house beyond--the Black Seigneur walked to the aperture, and reaching up, began to pay out the rope from a pulley above. As he did so, with feet braced, he leaned over to follow in its descent a small car along the almost perpendicular planking from the mouth of the wheel-room to the rocks, several hundred feet below.

A sudden slackening of the rope--assurance that the car, at the end of the line, had reached the loading-spot below without the fortifications--and the young man straightened; in an attitude of attention, stood listening. But the stillness, impregnated only with a faint underbreath, the far-away murmur of water, or the just audible droning of insects near the fig-trees on the rocks, continued unbroken. An impatient frown gathered on his brow; more eagerly he bent forward to gaze down, when through the air a distant sound--the low, melancholy hoot of an owl--was wafted upward.

Upon him at the aperture, this night-call, common to the Mount and its environs, acted in magical manner, and swiftly had he stepped toward the wheel, when an object, intervening, stirred; started to stagger to its feet. At once was the young man's first impelling movement arrested; but, thus forcibly drawn from his purpose, he did not long pause to contemplate; his hand, drawing the soldier's sword, held it

quickly at the hunchback's throat.

"A sound, and you know what to expect!"

With the bare point at his flesh, Jacques, dully hearing, vaguely comprehending, could, indeed, guess and the fingers he had involuntarily raised to push the bright blade aside, fell, while at the same time any desire to attempt to call out, or arouse the guard, was replaced by an entirely different emotion in his aching brain. Never before had he actually felt that sharp touch--the prelude to the final thrust. At the sting of it, a tremor ran through him, while cowardice, his besetting quality, long covered by growl and egotism in his strength and hideousness to terrify, alone shone from his unprepossessing yellow features.

"You were brave enough with the soldiers at your beck!" went on a determined voice whose ironical accents in no wise served to alleviate his panic. "When you had only a mountebank to deal with! But get up!" contemptuously. "And," as the hunchback obeyed, his crooked legs shaking in the support of his misshapen frame, "into the wheel with you!"

"The wheel!" stammered the dwarf. "Why--what--"

"To take a little of your own medicine! Pardi! What a voluble fellow! In with you, or--"

With no more words the hunchback, staggering, hardly knowing what he did, entered the ancient abbot's machine for hoisting. But as he started to walk in the great wheel at the side of his captor, a picture of the past--the times he, himself, had forced prisoners to the wheel, stimulating with jeer and whip--arose mockingly before him, and the incongruous present seemed, in contrast, like a black waking dream.

That it was no dream, however, and that the awakening would never occur, he well knew, and malevolently though fearfully he eyed the rope, coming in over the pulley at the aperture; to be wound around and around by a smaller wheel, attached to the larger, and--drawing up what?

An inkling of the sort of merchandise to be expected, under the circumstances, could but flash through his mind, together with a more vivid consciousness of the only course open for him--to cry out, regardless of consequences! Perhaps he might even have done so, but at that instant--as if the other had read the thought--came the cold touch of a bare blade on his neck; and with a sudden chill, the brief heroic impulse passed.

More stealthily now he began to study his companion in the wheel, while a question, suddenly occurring, reiterated itself in his brain. This man--who was he? And what did he know of the mountebank, or his, Jacques', dealings with the clown? That his captor was no soldier of the rock, or belonged there, the hunchback felt by this time assured,

and a growing suspicion of the other's identity brought home with new force to the dwarf the thankless part chance, perhaps, had assigned to him in that night's work. And at the full realization of the consequences, should his surmise prove correct--what must ultimately happen to himself in that event, when unwilling cooperation at the wheel should become known--almost had he again reached the desperate point of calling out; but at that moment a turn in the wheel brought to the level of the aperture, the car. In it, or clinging thereto, were a number of figures who, as soon as the rope stopped, sprang noiselessly to the platform.

"Seigneur, we hardly dared hope--"

"We obeyed orders, but--"

Gazing through the spokes of the wheel, and listening to their whispered exclamations, any lingering doubt as to who his captor was could no longer be entertained by the hunchback. These new-comers took no pains to conceal it; even when the dwarf's presence became known to them and unceremoniously was he dragged forth--they displayed a contemptuous disregard of him as a factor to interfere, not calculated to dull the edge of his apprehension! Too late now might he regret that pusillanimity that had caused him to draw back from an immortal role; already was the car again descending!

It came up loaded; went down once more, reappeared. On the little

platform now were more than a dozen men assembled, but to Jacques this force looked multiplied. Amid the confusion of his thoughts, vaguely could he hear orders given; caught something about the need for quiet, haste, overpowering the guard; then saw the door open, and the men, like shadows, go out; leaving him alone. No; with two black figures; ominous; armed. He could see the glitter of their weapons, and ventured to move his thick tongue, when, fiercely silenced, he crouched down; waited, with hands clenched, an interminable period; until faintly from afar sounded the note of a night-bird.

Roughly jerked to his feet, between them he walked to the door; heard it close; stepped out into the night. Many times had he made his way between wheel-room and guard-house, but now the route seemed strange, and, looking around near the structures at the entrance to his dungeons Jacques shook his head as if to rid his brain of some fantasy. But the scene did not change; the guard-house remained--familiar; unlike, with unknown faces peering from it, and an imperious voice issuing commands to him, once unquestioned commander here!

And comprehending what was being said, he struck his breast violently; with curses would have answered that the keys were his own; the dungeons, too, and what they held, and that he would never lead them there; never open those doors! But this grim, savage, determined band beat down his arms, and his courage; and, with the shadow of the grave again before him, the dwarf walked on; past the stable into the guard-house, where familiar forms once had been seated, and into the

passage leading to the dungeons beyond.