

CHAPTER XXIII

AT THE VERGE OF THE APERTURE

The footfall of the Black Seigneur, near the guard-house of the dungeons, was measured, yet noiseless, as he stepped on the soft earth, alongside the stone walk, now toward the passage in the direction of the wheel-room, then back into the little square. That his thoughts, however, moved not in accord with that deliberate stride, the brows impatiently knit, and the quick glances he continued to cast over his shoulder, bore testimony.

Stopping at length near the Tour Bernard, he looked fixedly down at the town, wrapped in a stillness that should have reassured him.

Nevertheless he appeared not satisfied; and had stepped out into the court again, when some sound he heard, or fancied, sent him quickly to an embrasure in the wall. From this opening--formerly for cannon in defense of the fenils, and the poulain, or planking for the hoisting of goods--he leaned far out, his glance instinctively turning toward the barracks, some distance to the right and far below. As he stood thus, that which had first attracted his attention--the sound of a voice giving orders--was repeated; at the same time where had been only darkness now shone many windows, while to the left, near the entrance he had passed after leaving the stable, lights began to dance like fireflies.

At these signs of activity and the sounds breaking the general quietude, an exclamation fell from his lips; then, pausing only a moment to listen and observe, he sprang toward the guard-house. Crossing the threshold, defined by a faint glimmer from a distant corner, he made his way past several motionless forms, into a low passage beyond. Here he called out impatiently; but from those depths, leading down into the dungeons where his comrades had gone, no answer was returned. His voice, hollow, mocking, seemed stifled in a tomb; more loudly he shouted; walked farther in, when an indistinct response was followed by a pin-point of light, and, ere long, by the bearer of a little lamp, Sanchez.

"The others?" At the head of a dark stairway into which he would inadvertently have plunged, had he gone farther, the Black Seigneur confronted the man, as he approached.

"They will soon be here," said the old servant, springing up the steps and walking after his master, who had already turned back toward the guard-room. "Jacques--curse him!"--putting out his light in obedience to a gesture from the other--"fumbled with the keys; pretended he couldn't find the right ones! So it took longer to open the doors."

"The prisoners?"

"I left our men working at the last dungeon to come on ahead--to let you know you might soon expect them."

"Soon," ironically, "may be too late."

"You mean--?"

"The hue and cry is out! I have long been expecting it; I do not understand why it didn't come before; unless a mountebank, locked up, was considered safe enough for the night--"

"Then some one knew--?"

"Some one?" A bitter laugh was quickly suppressed on the young man's lips. "Hark! Listen!"

"Sounds below! the soldiers!" exclaimed Sanchez, and started toward the window to look out, only to fall quickly back.

"What is it?" With his hand on the other's shoulder, the Black Seigneur whispered the question.

"A face! At the window!"

"So soon? The hounds are quicker than I thought! Or," drawing his sword, "it may be only one or two in advance. In that case--"

But no enemy, single or plural, met their view, either in front, or at

the side of the guard-house; only the darkness, void, empty, and the bare rampart wall winding around the head of the Mount like a monster guardian dragon, asleep at his post.

"Here is no one!"

"No one! Yet am I sure I saw--"

"A shadow!" answered the other. "And we have nothing worse to fight!"

"Some one was there, Seigneur," stubbornly, "and fled!"

"Eh bien! He's gone!"

"He? It looked like a--"

"Back with you, quick! Is this a time for talk? Call those who can come--if they would save their necks!"

"Here they are now," exclaimed the servant, and, as he spoke, the first of their men, blowing out the light he carried, ran quickly across the guard-chamber and into the open air. Others hastily followed, until the gathering, swelled by those brought with them from the dungeons, stood expectantly before the little stone structure.

"All the prisoners are here?"

"All!"

"To the wheel-house, then!"

But as they hastened across the square and into the narrow way, the Black Seigneur again spoke to the man just ahead:

"The hunchback?"

"We left him below, locked up in the Devil's Cage!"

"The Devil's Cage! Quelle bonne plaisanterie! Although," looking back, "it may cost us dear!"

And indeed, behind the sound of pursuit came nearer; the clatter of soldiers' feet grew louder, until, reaching the little square and the guard-house, all tumult suddenly ceased. A momentary silence, strange, ominous, was broken by a din of voices, as the flaring here and there of torches threw grotesque reflections high against the grim background of black masonry.

To those now within the wheel-room, the cause of that abrupt clamor was not difficult to divine; his Excellency's soldiers had found the sentinels overpowered in the guard-house! Would the former stop to investigate; search first those subterranean passages? Already had the

prisoners, the weaker of the Black Seigneur's men, filled the car, or hung clinging to the rope above; already was the wheel turning--almost before the key had turned in the lock at the entrance.

"Seigneur!"

"Sanchez?"

"When we left the wheel-room, we closed the door."

"When we got back, it--"

A footfall without interrupted, followed by the sound of a hand at the door, and other steps drawing near.

"Jacques!" An expectant voice spoke; waited; called louder. Then those outside listened; some one exclaimed, and hurried footsteps retreated toward the guard-house.

As they died away, in the wheel-room the car came up for the second time empty, and inquiringly the men there looked from one to the other; but, even in that moment of danger, not one of them moved, or made sign of impatience. Some must go; others remain, and stoically they awaited the word of their leader.

"Down with all of you! I'll let you out the line," taking a turn with

the rope around a stanchion near the wall, "and then come down myself."

The command was unexpected; for the first time those that had never questioned their leader's authority, hesitated, and more sharply was the order repeated; whereupon they obeyed; all save one.

"I'll let it out myself," said Sanchez.

"Get in!"

"No!" was the obdurate reply, when the Black Seigneur made a sign; hands reached up, seized Sanchez, and a moment later the car started down. The line strained; as it played out, now running free about the stanchion, then stopping with jerks, the man in the wheel-house almost looked to see it part. The hempen strand, however, proved sound; held its human freight; but another danger pressed near.

Scarcely had the car begun its downward journey than an attack, indications of whose approach had not been wanting, manifested itself without. Beneath a sudden, savage assault, the door shook; yet engrossed at the line, every muscle strained, the man at the stanchion heeded not. Swiftly, mechanically he worked, apparently as unconscious of the clamorous soldiers without as of a silent presence within--some one that had been concealed in the little store-room adjoining, opening into the wheel-house, and now peered out; but at once drew back, as, with a crash, the door fell in.

At first, in the comparative darkness, with only the sky at the aperture staring them in the face, the in-rushing black figures paused, uncertain; lights soon were pushed forward, however, and then could they see the great wheel going round, unwinding the rope; the man at the stanchion.

"The prisoners! He's letting them down."

"Cut the line!"

Some one with a knife rushed forward, severed the strand; but at that moment the car touched the bottom. Then did the solitary man at the rope for the first time awaken to his own situation; with a backward sweep of the arm he struck so fiercely the foremost of those to rush at him that the fellow fell, hitting hard the stone floor. Those nearest stumbled, and drawing his sword, with a thrust of point or blow of hilt, the Black Seigneur, for a moment withstood the first confused on-coming; then extricated himself and leaped to the narrow space behind the wheel. Here was he protected behind by the wall; at one end, by the masonry jutting out, while, at the other, only one or two could attack at the same time. But in front, through the spokes of the broad wheel, they might well hope to reach him.

At once the soldiers sprang forward, when, seizing the wheel, the man behind, with a savage jerk, set it in motion. The swords thrust at him

were turned aside, one or two of his assailants were caught in the ponderous mechanism, and, before those attacking him had recovered from their surprise, the blade of the Black Seigneur shot in and out; to the right, to the left. Those ahead fell back upon their comrades; two, however, were unable to withdraw, and sank to the ground before the wheel. A third, with his hand to his throat and making strange sounds, staggered back to the wall.

Momentarily disconcerted, the others hesitated. "In the fiend's name, fear ye one man?" shouted an authoritative voice.

"A devil!"

"'Tis the Black Seigneur! I had a good sight of him."

"Beat! beat!

'Mid marsh-muck and mire--"

came in mocking tones from behind the wheel.

"The mountebank!"

"Sacre tonnerre! But mountebank, or outlaw, you shall pay! This way!" And at the unprotected side of the wheel the commandant sought to bring the issue to a conclusion. One blade the Black Seigneur struck down, while his own weapon retorted with more effect, though as

it did so, another soldier made a lunge, and his sword entered the shoulder of the man behind the wheel. A shout of triumph that fell from the lips of the Governor's trooper was, however, abruptly checked; lurching forward with the stroke, ere he could recover, something heavy--a brass hilt--beat like a hammer on his head and he dropped to his knees. The others pressed closer; but with the desperation of a man resolved to sell his life dearly, the Black Seigneur fought on; regardless of cut and thrust, was holding the narrow entrance, when from the rear, somewhere, came the report of a firearm.

"Back! Stand back!"

Those nearest the wheel, not unwilling, perhaps, to desist, drew away; other detonations followed and smoke filled the place, obscuring the gaze. In the yellow fog they waited; until first it was swept aside close to the opposite wall by a draft of air from the aperture of the adjoining store-room, and the commandant, in an effort to see, moved impatiently forward. Ere, however, he could reach the wheel, near the threshold of the store-room, he felt his arm suddenly seized.

"Look, listen!"

The warning cry--a girl's voice--rang through the wheel-room; but the commandant did not at once heed it; at that abrupt touch he had involuntarily wrested his arm away; he stared, not in the direction she who had called out pointed, but at her! The white, drawn face, the

eyes dilated--

"You, my Lady! Here?" he stammered. But she only made a wild movement; again grasped, drew him forward.

"Quick, or--" And suddenly was he brought to a realization of what she wished him to see: a figure drawing itself along, slowly, painfully, toward the verge--

"Don't you see? Rather than be taken, he's going to throw himself over!"

The excited, admonishing sound of her voice aroused the commandant. He gave a sharp order and the soldiers sprang forward; laid roughly hold of the prostrate form; drew it back. The Black Seigneur yet struggled, but not for long! A moment, and his eyes turned to the Governor's daughter.

"Ma foi! I must needs yield--to your Ladyship! Yet, what matter, since I have done what I came to do!"

His gaze, darkly glowing, seemed to envelope the shrinking figure whose cloak only partly concealed the gay, rich gown beneath; lifted to the brilliant affrighted brown eyes. "Your Ladyship has bright eyes, forsooth!" An ironical laugh burst from his lips. "But sharper than their swords!" He strove to speak further, when a hand holding a

weapon fell heavily. At that a cry escaped the girl's lips.

"No, no; you shall not!"

The Black Seigneur lay still.

"Ciel! It's fortunate we got him," ruefully the commandant gazed around. "It would have made a pretty tale, if--" he turned to the Governor's daughter, "I have your Ladyship to thank--" he began, and stopped.

My lady's figure had at that moment relaxed and fallen to the ground!