

## CHAPTER XXIV

### THE HALL OF THE CHEVALIERS

The report of the capture of the Black Seigneur spread from Mount to town; from rock to shore. Pilgrims repeated, peasants circulated it; many credited; a few disbelieved. Like shadows had his comrades and the escaped prisoners vanished, leaving no trace, save one--an over-turned car and severed rope at the foot of the poulain, without the fortifications. And flocking to that point, of greater interest now than shrine or sanctuary, the pilgrims gazed around; down the rocks; up the almost perpendicular planking to what looked like a mere pigeon-hole in the side of the cliff. Then ominous grumblings escaped them; some shook their fists at the black wall; others scoffed at distant sounds of priestly hallelujahs. Had the soldiers that day appeared in the town or on the beach, serious trouble would have ensued. For the time, however, they remained discreetly housed, while supplies for pilgrims' needs were, by the commandant's orders, so curtailed, many of the indigent multitude, urged by pinched stomachs, began, ere night, to wend their way from strand to shore. But as they left the vicinity of the Mount, they turned last looks of hatred toward the rock.

His Excellency, the Governor, wasted no time considering the humor of the masses; their resentment, or displeasure, signified nothing; his own complacency left little room for speculation on that score. He was

undeniably satisfied; even the escape of the prisoners and the loss of the soldiers at the guard-house, or in the wheel-room, was overshadowed by the single capture. This contentment, however, he kept to himself; instigated a rigorous inquiry, and prepared to punish certain offenders. But the principal of these he could not reach; when released from the iron cage, the hunchback, knowing he would be called upon to answer for his part in the night's work, had made the best use of his short legs to place a long distance between himself and the Mount.

The sentinel that allowed the Black Seigneur to pass through the entrance near the barracks; the watchman encountered on the stairway, and the soldier that had been overpowered in the stable, his Excellency could, however, lay hands on, and promptly ordered into custody to await his official attention. For this last culprit, the commandant--mindful, perhaps, of bolstering his own position--interceded; pointing out that the man had to get the gag from his mouth and give the alarm; also, that the mountebank's appearance and acting had been calculated to deceive even one of the Governor's discernment. Which remark his Excellency had received with sphinx-like, and not altogether reassuring, gravity; had reserved his verdict, and continued, after his own fashion, to collect the details of the affair.

This searching process should have led him almost at once to his daughter--a puzzling figure in the maze of events; but the Governor

exhibited no haste in approaching that important witness. Only when he had marshaled his other testimony and put it in order did the scope of his sifting extend to the girl. And then had his manner been strictly judicial: maintaining an imperturbable mask, he professed not to notice the pallor of her face, the unnatural brightness of her glance.

"When you sent for the mountebank to come to your apartments, did you know who he was?" the Governor had asked.

"No."

"When did you find out?"

"When you entered the room."

"Why did you not give the alarm then?"

"Because," she hesitated; her face changed, "he would have killed you, I think--if I had!"

"Was that solicitude for me the only reason?"

"Why, what other could there be?"

"What other truly? And after he left with the commandant--why did you not, then, inform me?"

"You remember you had something important, from the King, to consider!"  
hastily.

"More important than this?"

"He was going to be locked up," was the best reply she could make.

"And in the morning set free!"

She did not answer.

"And yet, you gave the word that enabled us to capture him at the  
wheel-house! How, by the way, came you there--in the wheel-house?"

"I saw him from the abbot's bridge; heard him tell the watchman he had  
a message to deliver at your palace, and followed."

"Again feeling solicitude for me?"

"I did not know--he would dare much; and what does it matter now?"  
almost wildly. "You have captured him, shut him up somewhere in some  
terrible, deep dungeon, where--"

"He is safe? True; that is the main consideration."

Thereafter had the subject of the Black Seigneur been dropped between them; the pilgrimage over, the Mount resumed its normal aspect, but only for a little while! One day about a week later, a bright cortege whose appearance was in marked contrast to that of the beggarly multitude, late visitors to the rock, came riding down the road through the forest to the sea; at the verge of the sands, stopped for a first distant impression of the rock.

"Noble monument, I salute you!" Smiling, debonair, the Marquis de Beauvillers removed his hat.

"And the noble mistress thereof?" suggested one of his train.

"She, of course!" he said, still surveying a scene different from that final memory he had carried away with him. Then had the rock reared itself in all the glamour of a sunny day; now was the sky overcast, while through a sullen mist the Mount loomed like a shadow itself.

"A cold place for our gay Elise!" One or two who viewed the sight for the first time looked disappointed; even the Marquis appeared for the instant more sober; but immediately regained his lively demeanor.

"Wait until you have seen it at its best," he retorted carelessly, and set the pace across the sands.

Midway, where once on the sands the men of Brittany had engaged in

fierce conflict the ancient abbot's forces, were the new-comers met by an imposing guard; escorted with due honor through the gates, and up the narrow street of the town.

As he climbed the winding highway, my lord, the Marquis, bestowed approving nod and smile this way and that; it may be that he already felt a nearer affiliation with these people; for his glance, gracious, condescending in passing, was that of a man armed with the knowledge that he, kinsman of the King, might some day be called upon to govern here. But to these advances, the townspeople responded ill, and the young noble's brow went delicately up, as if a little amused! Mon dieu! did not unfriendly eyes peer from every lurking place around the royal palaces and pleasure grounds near Paris; and had they not encountered them all the way to the sea? People were the same everywhere; must be treated like bad children, and, with relays of troops from the capital to the sea, from the strand to the Mount's high top, one could afford to smile at their petty humors. Above all, when one had more momentous matter for consideration! And my lord lifted his head higher, toward a rampart, where some one had once bid him au revoir, and where he might yet in fancy see a fluttering ribbon wave a bright adieu!

But to-day my lady, the Princess of the Rock, was not there; waited above, with her father, to receive him--then--in the great Hall of the Chevaliers. Until that morning she had not known of the coming of the Marquis, an impatient suitor, following the courier and the perfumed

missive acquainting her with the noble's near approach. Certainly had she shown surprise; but whether she was pleased or not, his Excellency could not tell.

He was still uncertain; standing, near the raised gallery, in the ancient *salle des chevaliers*, from time to time regarded her furtively! Often had she looked from one of the round windows, commanding a view of the shore and the sands; many times turned away. At first sight of the company on the beach, the Governor had seen the girl's face alter and noted the involuntary start she had given. Whereupon, moving toward one of the giant fireplaces, had he sought for the sake of diplomacy and the end in view, to turn their conversation into a channel that should have interested her; spoke of plans to be made; preparations for festivities and merrymaking commensurate with the circumstances. But to these suggestions of gaieties, the prelude to a stately ceremony, had she hardly listened; paused absently before the blazing logs; once or twice seemed about to say something and stopped.

She was silent now, a slender figure beneath that great canopy of stone designed for the shelter of a score of knights; nervously twining and intertwining her fingers, she looked out at the shadows moving between the columns, playing around the bases, or melting in the vaulting.

"They should be almost here now," observed his Excellency, again seeking to break that spell of constraint, when suddenly she stepped to

him.

"Mon pere," her voice sounded strained, unnatural, "it was you who wanted this marriage?"

"Yes," he had answered in some surprise; "yes."

"And I have not opposed you--the King--"

"Opposed? No! Of course not!"

"Then," more hurriedly, "must you do something in return for me! I do not want my--the wedding festivities--marred by anything unpleasant! Promise that nothing will happen to him, the Black Seigneur, until after--"

"Impossible!" The sudden virulence her unexpected request awoke could not be concealed.

"Very well!" Before the anger in his gaze, her own eyes flashed like steel. "In that case, you can send the Marquis back! For I will not see him--to-day, to-morrow or any time again!"

Long he looked at her; the white face; the tightly compressed lips; the eyes that would not flinch! They reminded him of another's--were of the same hue--so like, and yet so different! Unlike, in bespeaking a



will he could not break! What he said, matters not; his face wore an ashy shade. She did not answer in words; but he felt, with strange bitterness, a revulsion; she seemed almost suddenly to have become hostile to him.

Gay voices sounded without; nearer; she walked to a door opposite the entrance their visitors were approaching. An instant, and she would have passed out, when the Governor spoke.

But the Marquis, stepping quickly in a few moments later, noted nothing amiss between them. "Your Excellency!" With filial respect he greeted the Governor. "My Lady!" Gaily, approvingly, his eye passed over her; then in that hall dedicated to chivalry, a graceful figure, he sank to his knee; raised a small cold hand, and pressed it to his lips.