

## CHAPTER XXV

### THE UNDER WORLD

A coterie of brilliant folk soon followed in the wake of my lord, the Marquis' retinue; holy-day banners were succeeded by holiday ribbons; the miserere of the multitude by paeans of merriment. Hymen, Io Hymen! In assuming the leading role to which circumstances now assigned her, the Governor's daughter brought to the task less energy than she had displayed on that other occasion when visitors had sojourned at the rock. Her manner was changed--first, lukewarm; then, almost indifferent; until, at length, one day she fairly waived the responsibility of planning amusements; laid before them the question: What, now, would they like to do?

"Devise a play," said one.

"With shepherds and shepherdesses!"

The Marquis, however, qualified the suggestion. "A masque! that is very good; but, for this morning--I have been talking with the commandant--and have another proposal--"

"Which is?"

"To visit the dungeons."

"The dungeons?" My lady's face changed.

"And incidentally inspect their latest guest! Some of you heard of him when we were here before--Le Seigneur Noir--the Black Seigneur!"

"Le Seigneur Noir!" They clapped their hands. "Yes, let us see him! Nothing could be better. What do you say, Elise?"

She started to speak, but for the instant her lips could frame no answer; with a faint, strained smile, confronted them, when some one anticipated her reply--

"Did she not leave it to us? It is we who decide."

And a merry party, they swept along, bearing her with them; up the broad stairway, cold, gray in the morn; beneath the abbot's bridge--black, spying span!--to the church, and thence to the isolated space before the guard-house to the dungeons. Here, at the sound of their voices, a man, carrying a bunch of keys--but outwardly the antithesis to the hunchback--peered from the entrance.

"Unless I am mistaken, the new jailer!" With a wave of his hand, the Marquis indicated this person. "The commandant was telling me his Excellency had engaged one--from Bicetre, or Fort l'Eveque, I believe?"

"Bicetre, my Lord!" said the man gravely. "And before that, the Bastille."

"Ah!" laughed the nobleman. "That pretty place some of the foolish people are grumbling about! As if we could do without prisons any more than without palaces! But we have come, my good fellow, to inspect this lower world of yours!"

The man's glance passed over the paper the Marquis handed him; then silently he moved aside, and unlocked the iron doors.

"Are you not coming?" At the threshold the Marquis looked back. When first they had approached the guard-house, involuntarily had the Governor's daughter drawn aside to the ramparts; now, with face half-averted, stood gazing off.

"Coming?" Surprised, the Marquis noted her expression; the fixed brightness of her eyes and her parted lips. "Oh, yes!" And turning abruptly, she hastened past him.

Would they have to be locked in?--the half-apprehensive query of one of the ladies caused the jailer at first to hesitate and then to answer in the negative. He would leave the doors from the outer room open, and himself await there the visitors' return. With which reassuring promise, he distributed lights; called a guardsman, familiar with the intricate underground passages, and consigned them to his care.

One of the gay procession, the Lady Elise stepped slowly forward; the guide proved a talkative fellow, and seemed anxious to answer their many inquiries concerning the place. The *salle de la question*? Yes, it existed; but the ancient torture devices for the "interrogatory ordinary" and the "interrogatory extraordinary" were no longer pressed into service; the King had ordered them relegated to the shelves of the museum. The *cabanons*, or black holes? Louis XI built them; the *carceres duri* and *vade in pace*, however, dated from Saint Mauritius, fourth abbot of the Mount.

"And the Black Seigneur? How have you accommodated him?"

"In the *petit exil*; just to the left! We are going there now."

"I--am going back!" A hand touched the arm of the Marquis, last of the file of visitors, and, lifting his candle, he held it so that the yellow glimmer played on the face of the Governor's daughter. Her eyes looked deeper; full of dread, as if the very spirit of the subterranean abode had seized her. He started.

"Surely you, Elise, are not afraid?"

"I prefer the sunlight," she said hurriedly in a low tone. "It--it is not cheerful down here! No; do not call to the guide--or let the others know. I'll return alone, and--wait for you at the guard-house."

He, nevertheless, insisted upon accompanying her; but, indicating the not distant door through which they had come, she professed to make light of objections, and when he still clung to the point, replied with a flash of spirit, sudden and passionate. It compelled his acquiescence; left him surprised for a second time that day; a little hurt, too, perhaps, for heretofore had their intimacy been maintained on a strictly ethical and charming plane. But he had no time for analysis; the others were drawing away to the left, into a side passage; and, with a last backward glance toward the retreating figure, the Marquis reluctantly followed the majority.

Despite, however, her avowed repugnance for that under-world, my lady showed now no haste to quit it; for scarcely had the others vanished than she stopped; began slowly to retrace her way in the direction they had taken. When the narrow route to the petit exil connected with the main aisle, a sudden draft of air extinguished her light; yet still she went on, led by the voices, and a glimmer afar, until reaching a room, low, massive, as if hewn from the solid rock, again she paused. Drawing behind a heavy square pillar, she gazed at the lords and ladies assembled in the forbidding place; listened to a voice that ran on, as if discoursing about some anomalous thing. Again was she cognizant of their questions; a jest from my lord, the Marquis; she saw that several stole forward; peered, and started back, half afraid.

But, at length, they asked about the oubliettes, and, chatting gaily,

left. Their garments almost touched the Governor's daughter; lights played about the gigantic pillars, and like will-o'-the-wisps whisked away. Now, staring straight ahead toward the chamber they had vacated, my lady's attention became fixed by a single dot of yellow--a candle placed in a niche by the jailer's assistant. It seemed to fascinate; to draw her forward; across the portals--into the room itself!

How long she stood there in the faint suggestion of light, she did not realize; nor when she approached the iron-barred aperture, and what she first said! Something eager, solicitous, with odd silences between her words, until the impression of a motionless form, and two steady, cynical eyes fastened on her, brought her to an abrupt pause. It was some time before she continued, more coherently, an explanation about her apprehension on account of her father, which had entirely left her when she had peered through the window of the guard-house.

"You thought me, then, but a common assassin?" a satirical voice interposed.

"My father hates you, and you--"

"My Lady has, perhaps, a standard of her own for judging!"

Unmindful of ironical incredulity, she related how she had been forced to take refuge in the wheel-house; how, when Sanchez had seen her, alarmed she had fled blindly down the passage; waited, then hearing

them all coming, at a loss what else to do, had opened the wheel-house door; run into the store-room! What she had seen from there, disconnectedly, also she referred to; his rescue of the others; his remaining behind to bear the brunt--as brave an act as she knew of! Her tone became tremulous.

"Who betrayed me?" His voice, bold and scoffing, interrupted.

She answered. It was like speaking to some one in a tomb. "The soldier you bound gave the alarm."

From behind the bars came a mocking laugh.

"You don't believe me?" She caught her breath.

"Believe? Of course."

"You don't!" she said, and clung tighter to the iron grating. "And I can't make you!"

"Why should your Ladyship want to? What does it matter?"

"But it does matter!" wildly. "When your servant accused me that day in the cloister I did not answer nor deny; but now--"

"Your Ladyship would deny?"

"That I betrayed you at Casque? Here? Yes, yes!"

"Or at the wheel-house when you called to warn the soldiers?"

"You were about to--to throw yourself over!" she faltered.

"And your Ladyship was apprehensive lest the Black Seigneur should escape?"

"Escape?" she cried. "It was death!"

"And the alternative? My Lady preferred to see the outlaw taken--die like a felon on the gallows!"

"No; no! It was not that."

"What then?" His eyes gleamed bright; her own turned; shrank from them. A moment she strove to answer; could not. Within the black recess a faint light from the flickering candle played up and down. So complete the stillness, so dead the very air, the throbbings of her pulses filled the girl with a suffocating sense of her own vitality.

"I spoke to my father to try to get your cell changed," she at last found herself irrelevantly saying; "but could do nothing."



"I thank your Ladyship! But your Ladyship's friends will be far away. Your Ladyship may miss something amusing!"

"I did not bring them--did not want them to come!"

"No?"

Her figure straightened.

"Perhaps, even, they are not aware you are here?"

"They are not, unless--"

"Elise!" From afar a loud call interrupted; reverberating down the main passage, was caught up here and there. "Elise! Elise!" The whole under-world echoed to the name.

"I promised to meet them at the guard-house," she explained hurriedly. And hardly knowing what she did, put out her hand, through the bars, toward him. In the darkness a hand seized hers; she felt herself drawn; held against the bars. They bruised her shoulder; hurt her face. The chill of the iron sent a shudder through her; though the pain she did not feel; she was cognizant only of a closer view of a figure; the chains from him to the wall; the bare, damp floor--then, of a voice low, tense, that now was speaking:

"Your Ladyship, indeed, found means to punish a presumptuous fellow, who dared displease her. But ma foi! she should have confined her punishment to the offender. Those stripes inflicted on him, my old servant! Think you I knew not it was my Lady's answer to the outlaw, who had the temerity to speak words that offended--"

"You dream that! You imagine that!"

The warmth of his hand seemed to burn hers; her fingers, so closely imprisoned, to throb with the fierce beating of his pulses.

"I do not want you to think--I can't let you think," she began.

"Elise!" The searchers were drawing nearer.

She would have stepped back, but the fingers tightened on her hand.

"They will be here in a moment--"

Still he did not relinquish his hold; the dark face was next hers; the piercing, relentless eyes studied the agitated brown ones. The latter cleared; met his fully an instant. "Believe!" that imploring wild glance seemed to say. Did his waver for a moment; the harshness and mockery soften on his face?

"Elise!" From but a short distance came the voice of the Marquis.

A moment the Black Seigneur's hand gripped my lady's harder with a strength he was unaware of. A slight cry fell from her lips, and at once, almost roughly, he threw her hand from him.

"Bah!" again he laughed mockingly. "Go to your lover."

Released thus abruptly she wavered, straightened, but continued to stand before the dungeon as if incapable of further motion.

"Elise! Are you there?"

"There!" Caverns and caves called out.

"There!" gibed voices amid a labyrinth of pillars, and mechanically she caught up the candle; fled.

"Here she is!" Coming toward her quickly out of the darkness, the Marquis uttered a glad exclamation. "We have been looking for you everywhere. Did I not say you should not have attempted to return alone? Mon dieu! you must have been lost!"