

CHAPTER XXVI

A NEW ARRIVAL

Thrice had the old nurse, Marie, assisting her mistress that night for the banquet, sighed; a number of times striven to hold my lady's eye and attention, but in vain. Only when the adorning process was nearly completed and the nurse knelt with a white slipper, did she, by a distinctly detaining pressure, succeed in arresting, momentarily, the other's bright strained glance.

"Is anything the matter?" My lady's absent tone did not invite confidences.

"My Lady--" the woman hesitated; yet seemed anxious to speak. "I--my Lady," she began again; with sign of encouragement from the Governor's daughter, would have gone on; but the latter, after waiting a moment, abruptly withdrew the silken-shod foot.

"The banquet! It is past the hour!"

An instant she stood, not seeing the other or the expression of disappointment on the woman's countenance; then quickly walked to the door. Nor, as the Governor's daughter moved down the long corridor, with crimson lips set hard, was she cognizant of another face that looked out from one of the many passages of the palace after her--the

face of a younger woman whose dark, spying eyes glowed and whose hands closed at sight of the vanishing figure!

The sound of gay voices, however, as she neared the banqueting hall, perforce recalled my lady to a sense of her surroundings; at the same time a figure in full court dress stepped from the widely opened doors. An adequate degree of expectancy on his handsome countenance, my lord, the Marquis, who had been waiting, lover-fashion, for the first glimpse of his mistress that evening, now gallantly tendered his greetings.

Seldom, perhaps, had the ancient banqueting hall presented a more festive appearance. Fruits and flowers made bright the tables; banners medieval, trophies of many victories, trailed from the ceiling; a hundred lights were reflected from ornaments of crystal and dishes of gold. On every hand an almost barbaric profusion impressed the guests with the opulence of the Mount; that few could sit in more state than this pale lord of the North, or few queens preside over a scene of greater splendor than their fair hostess, his daughter!

With feverish semblance of spirit, she took her place; beneath the keen eyes of his Excellency responded to sallies of wit, and only when between courses the music played, did her manner relax. Then, leaning on her elbow, with cheeks aflame and downcast eyes, she professed to listen to dainty strains--the sighing of the old troubadours, as imitated by a group of performers in costume on a balcony at one end of the hall.

"Charming!" The voice was the Marquis'; she looked at him, though her eyes conveyed but a shadowy impression. "You have quite recovered from your trip to the dungeons?"

"Quite!" With a sudden lift of the head.

"The dungeons?" His Excellency's gaze was on them. "I understand," looking at Elise, "you had a slight adventure?"

The glow on her cheek faded. "Yes." She seemed to speak with difficulty. "It--was too stupid!"

"To get lost? Say, rather, it was venturesome to have attempted to return alone."

"Just what I said to the Lady Elise!" broke in the Marquis. "And to have left us at a most interesting moment!"

"Interesting?" The Governor's steel-gray eyes regarded the speaker inquiringly.

"We were about to visit the Black Seigneur!"

"Ah!" A look flashed from his Excellency to his daughter; her glance failed to meet it.

Yet paler, she turned over-hurriedly to the Marquis. "What is that air they are playing now?" His response she heard not, was only conscious that, across the board, the eyes of her father still scrutinized; studied!

At length, however, the evening wore away; a signal from his Excellency, and of one accord they rose and crossed to the star-illuminated cloister adjoining. There at the entrance, my lady, who toward the last had listened with an air of distraction, hardly concealed, to her noble suitor's graceful speeches, held back, and, as the others went in, quickly effected her escape and hastened to her own apartments.

"At last!" She threw back her arms; breathed deeper. "Ah, mon pere, you are hard--unyielding as the iron doors and bars of your dungeons!" She pressed her hand to her forehead. "And I can do nothing--nothing!" she repeated; stood for a moment motionless and then mechanically moved toward the bell-rope at the other end of the chamber. But the hand she started to raise was arrested; through the slightly opened door to the adjoining apartment, she heard voices; words that caused her involuntarily to listen.

"I have made up my mind to tell her ladyship, Nanette!" The old nurse was speaking, in tones that betrayed excitement and anxiety. "It is, to say the least, embarrassing for me--your coming here! You, the

daughter of Pierre Laroche, who emigrated to the English Isles! Who has always shown disloyalty for the monarchy at home!"

My lady, surprised, drew nearer; caught the answer, which came in tones, deep and strong.

"At least, aunt, you are frank!"

"I must be! Under ordinary circumstances, I should be glad; of course, the child of my dead sister ought to be welcome."

"So I thought," dryly, "when I stopped off a few days ago to see you, on my way to Paris."

"If you had let me know, it is I who would have gone somewhere, near by, to have seen you!" was the troubled reply. "His Excellency--what would he say if he knew? Pierre Laroche, who has been called friend of privateersmen, perhaps even of the Black Seigneur, himself! I should have gone to his Excellency at once and asked if he objected, only you begged me not, and--"

"Were you so anxious to be rid of me?" quickly.

"I shouldn't speak as I do now, perhaps, only--"

"Only?"

"Your conduct, since you have been here--"

"What do you mean?" The other's tone had a sudden defiant ring.

"It is not seemly for a girl of your age and condition to be out alone so late, nights!"

"I just went down into the town to get something," was the careless response, "and the sands looked so attractive--"

"That's no excuse! And now," the old nurse's voice showed a trace of embarrassment, "we've had our visit, and you had better carry out your plan of going to Paris."

"You want me to leave here--at once?" The girl drew her breath sharply.

"Perhaps it would be as well."

"You treat me as if--I were a spy!" angrily.

"I don't wish to do that," returned the woman in a constrained tone.

"But now, after so many years of service with her ladyship! And her mother, the former lady of the Mount! If I should incur the Governor's displeasure--" the words died away. "If I can be of any help to you, if you need assistance--money--"

"Money!" Nanette's derisive laugh rang out; was suddenly hushed by the tinkling of a bell!

"Her ladyship!"

For a few moments the Governor's daughter, now standing in the center of her apartment, heard no sound from the other room; then a timid footstep approaching the door was followed by an indecisive rap.

"Your Ladyship rang?" inquired Marie, turning a half-guilty glance on her mistress.

"Yes! Did I hear voices, as I came in?"

"Did your Ladyship? I mean, I was going to speak to your Ladyship. It's my niece!" suddenly. "On her way to Paris!"

"Your niece!" The Governor's daughter looked at the other. "And you--are pleased?"

"Your Ladyship--" The woman flushed.

"Of course, though, you must be! She is out there? Show her in!" quickly.

"But--"

"At once!"

"Very well, my Lady!" Marie's manner, however, was depressed, as, stepping to the threshold, reluctantly she beckoned.

Erect, with mien almost antagonistic, Nanette entered and stood before the Lady Elise. The latter did not at once speak; for a few moments the observant brown eyes passed in quick scrutiny over her visitor; noting the aggressive brows; the broad, strong face; the self-assertive pose of the well-developed figure. A woman to do--to dare!--What?

"You wished to see me?" Nanette first spoke.

Marie lifted an expostulatory hand. What bad manners, thus to dare! But my lady did not seem to notice. "You are from one of the islands?" she began.

"Yes."

"Say 'my Lady!'" broke in the old nurse. "I trust your Ladyship will pardon--"

"Never mind, Marie!" with a quick gesture. "Your aunt tells me you are on your way to Paris?"

"Yes--my Lady!" with the slightest hesitation before the last two words. "To seek a situation as lady's maid!"

"When are you leaving?"

"To-morrow morning, your Ladyship!" interposed Marie quickly.

"So soon?" My lady continued to address the girl. "You have had experience?"

"No, my Lady!"

"Then how can you secure what you wish?"

"How? At least, I can try!"

"To be sure! You can try." My lady's eyes fell; she seemed to be thinking. "Still, it may be difficult; Paris is far away. And if you should fail," her fingers tapped nervously on the chair, "we are very busy at the Mount just now," she added suddenly, directing her glance full upon the other, "and there may be something here--"

"Here! Your Ladyship will keep me here!"

Marie made a movement as if to speak, but her niece intercepted her.

"I will do my best, my Lady!"

"Very well! Then shall you have a trial!"

"Your Ladyship!" interposed Marie.

The Governor's daughter got up quickly. "I am very tired, Marie, and wish now to be alone! You need not remain--I shall not want you again to-night."

The old nurse murmured a dejected response; turned away.

"I thank your Ladyship!" The girl's last look was one of indubitable satisfaction ere she followed her aunt from the room.

My lady stared after them. "'Daughter of Pierre Laroche! Friend of the Black Seigneur!'" Marie's words continued to ring in her ears. She threw herself into a chair; sat long very still, her eyes bent straight before her, on either cheek now a bright spot of color.