

## CHAPTER XXVII

### A STROLL ON THE STRAND

"You are in a hurry, Monsieur Beppo?" arms akimbo, Nanette, standing in an embrasure of the rampart, called out to the Governor's man as he passed by.

"Ah, Mistress Nanette," Beppo stopped readily enough, "I didn't see you at first."

"Because you have more important matters to think of," she laughed, showing her strong white teeth.

The fat old man looked pleased; a few days before, Nanette had flashed a radiant smile at him from her casement, and, ever since, he had been inclined to regard her with favor.

"Not more important, but duties that must be attended to! The wedding hour draws near." The island girl half turned her head; a shadow seemed to pass over the bold, sunburned features. "And her ladyship gives to-morrow a riding party for her guests--a last celebration before she is led to the altar. I am on my way now to arrange about the escort."

"A riding party!" Nanette spoke quickly. "You mean on horseback?"

"How else?" said Beppo. "It is a pastime her ladyship has always been very fond of, even as a child. In those days," not without an accent of self-importance, "it was my privilege--"

"Do they ride far?" interrupted Nanette with ill-suppressed eagerness.

"To the old Monastery St. Ranulphe; an imposing ruin of tenth century architecture, my dear," he added pompously.

"And where is it?"

"Off the Paris highway, some ten miles from the Mount."

"Ten miles? And the country is beautiful? Not open; sandy, like the shore?"

"It partakes of a rugged grandeur."

"With forests around?" quickly.

"Yes," indulgently. "You like forests, Mistress Nanette?"

"When they are thick and wild--"

"Then would you like these!"

The girl asked no further questions; yet still Beppo lingered, his glance seeming loath to withdraw from this exuberant specimen of vigorous young womanhood. "Which way were you going, good Mistress Nanette?" he asked finally. "On second thoughts, I have a little time to spare and will walk along."

Nanette, looking down from the rampart toward the sands and the shore, did not answer, and, more insinuatingly, Beppo repeated his proposal. Nanette started.

"La, Monsieur Beppo! I--I'm afraid it wouldn't do. There's my aunt," tossing her head, "that careful of me! Won't even let me go walking on the beach alone! Do you ever go walking on the beach, Monsieur Beppo?" she inquired suddenly, regarding him with an eloquent look.

"I--it has not been my custom," he murmured. "But," the fishy eyes growing brighter, "with you--if I might accompany you--"

"Oh, I didn't mean that! No; no! Of course not! And I couldn't think of it. My aunt--"

But when a few moments later, she turned, to walk quickly away, the round and shining face of Beppo, watching her disappear, wore not the look of a man who had allowed himself to be rebuffed.

Out of his sight, Nanette's expression changed to one of somber thoughtfulness; it lingered as she entered the palace, with free swing, mounted the steps to her mistress' apartments; was still there, when she took a bit of embroidery from a table, and seating herself at the window of an antechamber, bent over her task. Soon, however, she stopped, to sweep abruptly cloth and colored silks from her lap to the floor, and, leaning forward, her firm, brown hands clasped over her knees, she seemed to be asking herself questions, or weighing some problem.

"Yes; it is our only chance." In her eyes a steady glow replaced the varying lights, and, getting up with a sudden air of determination, Nanette crossed the room to where, near the door, stood a small desk. Glancing quickly around, she seated herself and, reaching for paper and pen, wrote carefully and somewhat laboriously a few words. She had finished and was contemplating the result of her eager efforts when a hand at the door caused her hurriedly to dash down the pen and spring to her feet. As her aunt entered, Nanette took a few steps forward, and, bending to pick up her work from the floor, turned partly away and thrust the paper into the bosom of her gown.

"I came to tell you supper is ready," said Marie quietly.

At the table with her aunt the girl's manner was subdued and deferential; she observed the nicest proprieties, and bestowed on the other's slightest word a meed of attention calculated to soften the old

woman's attitude and suspicions. And possibly succeeded; or, it may be, Marie's own conscience had begun to reproach her; for a number of days had passed and nothing had as yet occurred to justify the early apprehensions she had entertained. Under the circumstances the meal was a little prolonged; the first shafts of twilight had entered the courtyard and had begun to steal into the narrow chamber with darkening effect, ere of an accord the two women pushed back their chairs.

"It gets dark early," said the girl, "or time has passed quicker than I thought. Perhaps it was what you were telling me of the former lady of the Mount. She must have been very beautiful!"

"She was," answered the woman; "and as good as beautiful!"

"Heigh-ho!" Nanette sighed; through the window watched the shadows that like dark, trailing figures seemed creeping up the ancient wall to caress and linger on green leaves of vines, bright flowers and other living things. "But I suppose she had everything she wanted." The girl stirred restlessly. "What sort of a man is Monsieur Beppo, aunt?"

"Beppo?" Recalled as from a long train of recollections, the woman did not seem to notice the abruptness of the inquiry. "Oh, he is an old and faithful servant. For almost as many years as I have been here," with an accent of pride, "has he served at the Mount!"

"And his moral character, aunt?" demurely.

"Monsieur Beppo has a reputation for piety, no doubt deserved!" returned the woman, with an accent of surprise. "At any rate, he seldom misses a mass. But why do you ask?"

"Because I met him to-day and he invited me to walk with him this evening."

"He did?" Marie's mouth grew firmer. "And you?"

"I didn't exactly know how to refuse; he--looked so old and respectable! I thought, too, you wouldn't mind and--I'm glad you think so well of him, aunt."

In the gathering gloom the listener's face seemed suddenly to grow graver; her eyes, which had returned to the girl's, expressed once more doubt and misgiving. With her glance lifted upward, however, Nanette did not seem to notice this quick change. A star--faint forerunner of a multitude of waiting orbs--peeping timorously down from above the gray, gaunt mass of stone, alone absorbed the girl's gaze and attention.

"Where were you thinking of going?" after a silence of some length the older woman asked.

"I don't recall that Monsieur Beppo mentioned," was the low-murmured response. "But, of course, aunt, if you object--"

"I do not know that I do," said the other slowly. "Only," as if the thought had suddenly come to her, "what were you writing at her ladyship's desk when I went to call you?"

"Writing?" Nanette regarded her blankly. "I don't understand you, aunt."

"Weren't you writing something that you hid in your dress when I came?"

"No!" The girl looked full at the other; denied point-blank the accusation. "Now that you speak of it, I believe I did step to the desk," she answered glibly, "to look at some ornament; but as for writing, or daring to, I should not have presumed."

A low discreet rap at the door interrupted, and, with a whispered

"There he is now!" Nanette cut short further argument by rising.

"She is not telling the truth!" For some time the woman stood looking down in gloomy thought after the two had gone. "What does it mean?" Moving to a peg, she took down a shawl. "What can it mean?" she asked herself again, and, wrapping the garment about her head and shoulders, left the room.

Half an hour later, at Beppo's side, on the beach, Nanette measured her steps to his; listened to the old man's platitudes, and even turned a

not unwilling ear to sundry hints and innuendos of a tenderer nature. The girl was in her most complaisant mood, and, in his role of discreet gallant to young and blooming womanhood, the fat factotum strove to make the most of the opportunity. He sighed; bethought him of a sentimental tale, and carped of the beauty of the moon, then gilding the edge of the Mount's high towers! She answered; looked; but soon her eloquent glance swerved to the sands, dotted by desultory seekers of cockles, or belated stragglers from the shore, and fastened itself on a jutting point of the Mount.

Near it, before a large rock of peculiar shape, a man was engaged in that common nocturnal labor of the locality, digging! As the couple drew near, quickly he raised his gaze; almost at once let it fall; engrossed in his work, continued to toss the sand and stoop over it searchingly. But when they had gone by, once more he straightened, and, at the same time, the girl looked back. Stalwart, black-bearded, a sailor by his dress, the fellow made a sign, and, apparently any doubt as to who he was vanished from Nanette's mind; for from the fingers of the free hand she held behind her, something fluttered to the beach.

Leaning to his implement, the man regarded the paper, but not until the girl's low laugh was heard, as she and Master Beppo vanished in the darkness, did he step forward and secure it.

"So! That was it!" Breathless, indignant, Marie, standing in the



black shade of one of the Mount's projections, watched the fellow read and regard carefully the message in his hand; then tearing it, crumple the bits and thrust them toward his pocket as he walked off. "Brazen huzzy! But her ladyship shall know; and if she doesn't pack you off, bag and baggage--Eh? What is that?" And springing forward, the woman pounced upon something that lay on the sand.