

CHAPTER XXVIII

THE HESITATION OF THE MARQUIS

The day of my lady's riding party dawned; in the east a tender flame burned, and, vanishing, left the heavens an unbroken blue. Shoreward the mists rolled up, until only in the neighborhood of the forest did the white, soft vapor linger. On the Mount itself sunshine held sway; it radiated from the fortifications, "cuirass of the rock," and gleamed on the church, "tiara of its majesty." It warmed a cold palace of marble; looked in at its windows, and threw bold shafts to lighten dark nooks and corners.

But my lady, mistress of the Mount, seemed not to feel its beneficent touch; standing in the full glow and looking from her casement she shivered a little. Already was she dressed, and her habit of dark green, fitting close, served to accentuate the whiteness of her cheek which general absence of color, in turn, made the more manifest certain dark lines beneath the restless, bright eyes.

"Your Ladyship!" After knocking in vain, Marie had entered the room and set down the small tray she carried. "There is something your Ladyship ought to know!" with an air of excitement. The Governor's daughter half turned. "What now, Marie?" she said sharply.

"It's about Nanette!" My lady made a quick movement of annoyance,

impatience. "I did not tell your Ladyship, but I was averse to having her remain here. Your Ladyship does not understand, of course, and--"

"I do understand," said my lady unexpectedly. "And--you need not explain. I overheard you talking with her that night of the banquet!"

"Your Ladyship!" startled.

"And I heard you speak of her father, Pierre Laroche, friend of the Black Seigneur."

"And engaged her--after that!"

"Why not? I could watch--and I have! But you were wrong, Marie." My lady's manner was feverish. "Your suspicions were ridiculous. There has been nothing--nothing! And day after to-morrow is the wedding celebration, and the next day, he, the Black Seigneur--" She broke off abruptly.

Had Marie been less wrought up, less excited, less concerned with the information she had to impart, she could not have failed to notice the odd break in her young mistress' voice; something unusual, almost akin to despair, in her manner. As it was, that which weighed on the old nurse's mind precluded close observation of the other.

"But something has happened, my Lady!" the woman half stammered.

"Comment!" The girl turned to her sharply. "What? Explain, Marie!"

Disconnectedly, the woman launched into a narration of the events of the night before; my lady listened closely, with an interest and excitement she strove to conceal, half turning so that the other saw no longer her face.

"And here," ended Marie, extending a crumpled fragment of paper, "is a piece of the note she dropped on the beach. The man tore it up, but in thrusting the bits of paper into his pocket this fell out, and, after he walked away, I picked it up myself from the sand. I can't read, as your Ladyship knows, and there isn't much on it--only a word or two! But it may tell something."

My lady's face was now composed; the hand she extended, steady; for several moments she regarded the fragment.

"What does it say?" asked the woman anxiously. "Is it--is it important?"

Her mistress did not at once answer; twisting the bit of paper in her fingers, stood as if in thought, and the old nurse repeated her question.

"This note might have been intended for some admirer!" said, at length,

the Governor's daughter slowly.

"He looked more like an old privateersman!" murmured the woman. "And there may be some plot--some plan!"

"Privateersman!" The girl's manner underwent a change; she shrugged her shoulders. "What could they hope to do at the Mount! You are imaginative, Marie!" lightly. "Nanette is good-looking, and what little is here would seem to signify a rendezvous. There may be no great harm in that."

"I am sorry, my Lady, to seem to think ill of my own kin," muttered the woman dejectedly, "but--"

"Think no more of it! You have done your duty. Now leave the matter to me, and--thank you, Marie!"

When, however, the old nurse had gone, all pretense of lightness faded from the face of the Governor's daughter, and, opening the bit of paper, once more she scrutinized it swiftly, intently.

"To-morrow--Monastery St. Ranu--" she read. "Yes; it must mean St. Ranulphe--where we are going. And where Beppo knew we were going! Beppo, she went down on the beach with!" Again she studied the fragment, striving to make out a word that had been blotted and was almost illegible. She frowned as she endeavored to decipher it. "Lady

E." She gave an exclamation. "That refers, of course, to-- But why?" She kept asking herself the question. "Why?" she repeated, when suddenly the brown eyes widened--changed; a new light shone in their depths. "It must be they intend to--what else?"

The sound of horns--signal for the party to gather--broke upon the air, and, nervously crushing in her palm the piece of the message, she stepped to the table, to the untasted breakfast. Like one in a dream, who yet feels the need for haste, she poured out the coffee; with unsteady hand raised the cup and drank; started to serve herself again; as if forgetful of the impulse, paused.

"And I?" she said with deeper breath. "To ride to the ambush they have so cleverly planned? Allow myself to be taken prisoner by these desperate men? No; no; I could not! And yet--" A trampling of horses' hoofs in the court below interrupted. "They are ready to start!" Uncertainly she lifted her head; looked around her; then mechanically stepped forward and left the room.

A scene of animation greeted her in the court, alive with lords and ladies, for the most part already in the saddle and waiting.

"Hail to Diana, who will lead us in the forests!"

"Fair nymph, let us away!" and the Marquis extended his hand.

With a seemingly merry nod she acknowledged their greetings; put out a foot, and lightly sprang to her place on the back of the nervous thoroughbred. But ere giving the signal to start, the girl's glance swung around to a window opposite, where stood an austere figure, imperturbably looking down to watch them ride off.

"Au revoir, mon pere!" Her voice rose with an odd, unusual thrill.

"Au revoir!" she repeated, when a mistiness in her eyes suddenly blurred sight of him, and she tightened the reins. Yet hesitating to go, her gaze cleared, and swerving, was abruptly arrested by another and more interested spectator, who, partly concealed by flowers and plants, peered with anxious expectancy from her own balcony. As Nanette's eyes met those of the Governor's daughter, they wavered half guiltily; suddenly became steady, held by something--a flash of impelling intelligence in the other's gaze. A moment or two, my lady continued to regard the girl; then touching her horse, wheeled sharply, and set a pace downward not easy to follow.

At the base of the Mount they were met by a numerous guard bright in holiday trappings, and, under the care of the commandant, with flourish of horse, the party swept gaily from sands to shore.

"A gallant company, Monsieur le Commandant!" observed the Marquis to the officer in charge, as they reached the green line at the yellow basin's edge. "Now if we were to meet an enemy--"

"He would find us prepared, my Lord!" the officer declared.

"True!" And the nobleman complacently touched the jeweled hilt of his own blade, accompanying the action with a tender glance at the Lady Elise.

She, however, a little ahead, appeared not to hear; spoke suddenly to her horse, and, as they swung from the sward, started at a brisk gallop down the road. Laughing, the others came after, lords and ladies first; behind, with tumult and clatter, the commandant and his men. As they advanced, on either side the way thick trunks of moss-grown monarchs uplifted their gnarled and hoary branches, to meet overhead; through leafy interstices bright flashes of sunlight shot downward, danced on fine garments and accoutrements, and then whisked elfishly away. In dim recesses finches and sparrows sang; beyond, murmured streams and rivulets, while at the feet of the riders, gay restless flowers nodded, as if in accompaniment to the glad music of the morn.

"Small wonder his Excellency should have desired to add this fair principality to his own!" muttered the Marquis, looking around. "Of the seven forests of Brittany, none will compare with this, the Desaurac woods. What think you, Elise?" spurring his horse near his betrothed's. "Are you not taken by its beauties?"

She looked at him with a start; since leaving the sands she had not spoken, and now, tugging at the reins, only said abruptly: "My saddle!

I believe it is loose."

"Loose!" repeated the nobleman. "Careless lackeys! Let us see!" And grasping the bridle of her horse, pulled in his own, and drew both animals to a standstill at the side of the road.

As he dismounted to examine straps and fastenings, the others dashed up; my lady lightly motioned them on. "We'll soon overtake you! Don't wait!" Unquestioning, they obeyed; though the commandant, to whom a few moments later she delivered a similar injunction, brought his men to a halt and proffered his services. Whereupon the Marquis repeated the girl's words more sharply; reddening, the officer wheeled and started to ride on.

"I can't find anything wrong here!" Puzzled, the Marquis straightened.

But her eyes were directed ahead and she pointed with her whip to a break in the woody barrier to the right--a path that, springing from the roadside, seemed to plunge into the very heart of the labyrinth.

"Look! the short cut!--that would bring us half an hour before them to the ruins! Let us take it!"

A light seemed suddenly to break on her companion, and he sprang airily to his saddle. "As my Lady wills!" gallantly.

"Then call to the commandant, and tell him we'll meet them there!"

The Marquis obeyed, and, without awaiting answer, or demur from the officer in charge of the guard, the girl flicked her horse and sent him over a low bush into the narrow way.

Fairly in the path, she rode fast, and pressing hard behind, my lord soon found reason for doubt as to the advisability of that route, and a suspicion of regret at his own hasty assent to the departure from the main thoroughfare. As their surroundings grew wilder and the slender green figure flitted more and more recklessly before him, he even ventured to voice his misgivings--advise greater care. A shake of the fair head was all he received for answer and, regardless of the increasing roughness of the way, she continued to sweep on, now uphill, then down, avoiding by a quick turn one obstacle here, leaping another there! From a black ambush, a branch like the arm of a Titan reached out to seize, but adroitly she swayed from its grasp and only the twigs and leaves touched lightly the bent figure.

My lord, however, they struck sharply, and at the sudden smart and a quick realization of falling behind, frowningly he drove his horse harder. The *tete-a-tete* he had naturally expected from her request to pursue the lonelier way promised now not to materialize; the idea that she was fleeing, he pursuing, possessed him. The forest, a tangle of shrubs and strange creepers, was the scene of the idyl; she, a sprite of the greenwood, danced illusively through the maze. At length when

my lord had begun to grow weary of vainly endeavoring to overtake her, fate favored his efforts; brought to a standstill, at the edge of a torrent, the object of his pursuit.

"Are you mad, Elise?" A shadow on his brow, the Marquis rode down.

She made no reply; regarded only the water.

"I hope it is not in your mind to attempt to cross," he went on, a shade of petulance in his accents.

She urged her horse forward; it stopped.

"Elise! I beg of you! It is dangerous; better go back, and around!"

But the girl set her red lips, raised her whip, and brought it down hard. The animal sprang into the foam; breasting the current, it slipped once or twice, recovered, and, after an effort, managed to reach the bank opposite. My lord--less blithely than he had first embarked on the adventure--followed; the cold waters surged around, and he almost expected to be swept away. At length, however, chilled by the icy touch of the torrent and somewhat more out of humor, he found himself on the other side. Near the top of the bank, where the Governor's daughter had now the grace to await him, he rejoined her, disapproval on his face, reproach in his eyes. Yet still did the girl remain unconscious of her lover's wounded sensibilities; her own eyes,

like stars beneath the flurry of hair, were turned, not to the young man, but away, toward a gaunt-looking ruin that had suddenly uplifted itself, as if by magic, through a rift in the forest. But a few hundred yards distant, the black crumbling walls bristled with rough, jagged edges--big, broken teeth that snarled at the rim of the ever-young wood. The very brightness of the day seemed only to emphasize the ominous aspect of the place; to reveal more plainly the solitary character of its wildness.

"The monastery, I suppose?" following the direction of her gaze, the Marquis, after a pause, grudgingly vouchsafed.

"Yes," said the girl in a low tone; "yes!"

"Shall we go on?"

Her eyes, passing over a tangle of shrubs, bushes and thick, natural screens, slowly settled on a spot, not far away, where a wild bird, about to alight, fled off with a scream.

"Shall we go on?"

With a start the girl turned; the clear-cut features were very grave; in her gaze shone sudden compunction. She raised her hand. "My veil!" she said quickly. "I--dropped it. Do you mind? You--you will find it on this side of the stream--a little way down."

"Mind?" He regarded her doubtfully a moment; then moved by the irresistible appeal in her eyes, rather abruptly he wheeled, and as he did so, she gathered up the reins. Ere proceeding farther upon this errand of gallantry, my lord looked around.

"You seem to set great store on this veil," he, observed suspiciously. "And I believe you were about to ride off!" he added, noting her expression, when, before she had time for pretext or answer, a heavy body stirred in the bushes, near at hand, and a gruff voice called out.

"Stand where you are!"

The nobleman's face changed; his gaze, as if fascinated, now rested on a score of rough figures who, following the order, so unexpected and startling, sprang simultaneously from neighboring thicket or covert, and advanced to surround them. Held by their grim aspect--the desperate determined visages; the black, threatening looks--in the surprise of the moment, too late my lord's hand sought the sword at his side. Roughly plucked from his horse, he found himself flung to the sward; unceremoniously pinioned, and heard the voice of my lady raised in his behalf.