

CHAPTER XXIX

THE MARQUIS INTERVENES

The evening of the same day, his Excellency, in the seclusion of a small private chamber adjoining the *salle du gouvernement*, stood looking down at his desk on which were strewn papers and messages containing the latest news from Paris and received at the Mount but a few hours before. That the character of this information, political and social, was little to his liking, seemed manifest from his manner; he stared at the missives resentfully; then frowned and threw down the pen he had been using to mark, or make note of, their contents.

"Versailles--a mob! Sugar-plums to placate them! Sugar-plums!" he repeated; and, impatiently turning away, walked to the window. There for some time he stood peering out, when, the current of his thoughts slowly changing, he took from his pocket a watch, and examined the jeweled face. "Time they were back!" About to return to his table and task, a loud knocking arrested the impulse, and testily the Governor called out; glanced toward the threshold and surveyed the intruder.

"A message from the commandant, your Excellency!" said the man, a trooper of the Mount, with a respectful, though nervous salute.

"Why," returned the Governor in a dry tone, "didn't he bring it himself?"

"Because," the trooper shifted; looked away; "because Monsieur le Commandant is engaged in scouring the country for miscreants, your Excellency."

"Miscreants!" sharply. "What miscreants?"

"Monsieur le Commandant hopes to overtake those who have carried off the Lady Elise," said the messenger hurriedly, in the tone of one anxious to be done with his task.

"Carried off!" The thin figure wavered as if struck by a cold breath.

"Carried off!" he repeated, laying his hand on the back of the chair.

"By a band of the Black Seigneur's men! His lordship, the Marquis, they left behind bound and secured, but the Lady Elise they took with them."

For some time his Excellency said nothing; like a ghost of himself, leaned hard against his support and looked at the trooper.

"But how could it have happened?" at length in a voice, low, intense, he inquired. "Monsieur le Commandant! The guard--you--all are alive?"

Stumblingly, as best he could, the soldier explained, and when he had done, his Excellency made no sign that he had heard.

"Monsieur le Commandant further ordered me to say he had no doubt he would return with the Lady Elise," added the messenger hastily.

"Monsieur le Commandant!" The Governor's eyes suddenly blazed; swiftly he put question after question, and, having probed to the core the consistency of the tale, with a gesture, brusque and contemptuous, dismissed the bearer.

But whatever feeling the lord of the Mount might entertain toward his chief officer, no course at the moment seemed open save to await the return of that person and the Marquis. So, curbing his impatience as best he might, his Excellency kept vigil; and not alone! Tidings of what had happened spread at the top of the rock; sifted through closed gates and thick walls into the town. The late arrival at the Mount of the lords and ladies, companions of the Governor's daughter for the day, but added to the questionings of the multitude. All night life and expectancy reigned; lights gleamed from high places; responded in low ones.

"Is it true, my dear, what we hear about the Lady Elise?" the landlady of the inn on the Mount near the strand called out to a stalwart, dark young woman, hurrying down the narrow way shortly after the Paris contingent had gone up.

"I've heard no more than you have," came the curt answer of this

person--none other than Nanette--who carried a small bundle and seemed anxious to move on.

"Oh, I didn't know but you came from the palace!" observed the mistress of the inn, and returned to her customers, drinking and nodding with heads close together.

On the morrow, however, all doubts were removed and speculations put at rest; for hardly had the sun set its seal in the sky than from the forests the appearance of a body of troops rewarded the watchers. From hovel to hut the word went, and men, women and children, unkempt and curious, ran down to the beach to await the approach of the guard. Proudly had it departed, with waving of plumes; slowly it returned, a bedraggled procession of staggering horses and heavy-eyed men. Had it come back a little earlier, the dark might have kept the truth from the people; now the pitiless red glare revealed to the full the plight of the troopers. It told, too, the disappointment of Monsieur le Commandant, who looked neither to the right nor to the left; and the despair of my lord, the Marquis, pale counterfeit of his debonair self.

"Her ladyship!" "They haven't brought her back!" Low murmurs arose; grew louder; some one laughed. But sullenly, without answer, the soldiers dragged by, into the town, and laboriously up to the top of the Mount.

At the gate his Excellency waited; cast one glance at the

company--their leader--and silently turned. Later, however, was he closeted with both the commandant and the Marquis--a brief period with the former who departed, carrying a look eloquent of the unpleasantness of the interview.

"And now," said the Governor in tones somewhat strained, as the officer's dejected footfall died in the distance, "we've got rid of that dolt, let us consider, my Lord, the purport of this outrage."

"Purport?" repeated the Marquis petulantly, stretching his stiff legs. "Did they not tell me that if anything happened to the Black Seigneur, they would hold her, Elise, answerable for it? You see they had learned," bitterly, "of your intention to hang him after the wedding!"

"From which you infer?"

"They will keep her as hostage! Indeed, they said as much, when--"

"They bound you, my Lord?"

The color came to the young man's face. "It was a trap," he said, his voice pitched higher; "and they came prepared, not for one man, but the guard!"

"Still was it very ill-advised--a great mistake--to have taken the shorter way through the forest alone."

"The proposal did not originate with me! Elise suggested it. She seemed in a wild, headstrong mood; nothing would stop her. Now," moodily he rose, "mon dieu! What has she brought upon herself? Where is she now?"

His Excellency did not stir; his face, like a pale mask, was turned aside. "I do not think," he said slowly, as arguing to convince himself, "she is in any immediate danger."

But my lord caught irritably at the word. "No danger! She is surrounded by it. And we? what are we to do? Sit idly here? Give me a ship, your Excellency, and I will follow the boat of this Black Seigneur, and, when I find it, force them to--"

"What?" The Governor's eyes swerved dully. "Have you forgotten their threat? Their last words to you that if we attempted to follow, to rescue--that, rather than give her up--"

"They would not dare!" cried my lord with sparkling glance.

But his Excellency shook his head. "No; no; it won't do! And now," again looking away, "leave me, my Lord, to consider." With which, the interview, as unsatisfactory to the one as the other, terminated.

Several days that passed were not calculated either to alleviate his

Excellency's anxiety, or the Marquis' impatience; for during that period of waiting came no word of my lady, or news of her captors. Mysteriously as a phantom ship had the boat that had carried the Governor's daughter away appeared on the coast and vanished, and from none of the Governor's vessels, or any of the fishing craft could be gleaned information of its whereabouts. My lord, the Marquis, annoyed at what seemed but fruitless delay, was still for setting forth and inviting battle; but of this his Excellency would not hear, arguing, no doubt, to himself that in temporizing lay greater assurance of safety to his daughter than in precipitate action. So the situation grew hourly more trying, until--as if it already were not intolerable enough!--a new concern added ironical weight to present perplexities.

My young lord, between whom and the master of the Mount had been growing a more strained relationship, sought the Governor one day, and, in excited tones, announced he had just learned that the prisoner, the Black Seigneur, was ill and probably would survive but a short time longer in the dungeon where he was confined. As his Excellency knew, the fellow had been wounded, and now with scanty nourishment, want of air, and close quarters, was generally in a bad way.

His Excellency heard; moistened his lips and seemed about to speak, but was silent, while more anxiously the young man went on. Of course under different conditions, with care and attention--a well-lighted room and excellent food--they might hope to restore their prisoner's strength; at least, preserve for a time one so precious to themselves,

upon the thread of whose life hung my lady's!

His Excellency still answered no word; only looked down, and, knitting his brows, the young nobleman restlessly waited. At length, with an expression on his face the Marquis had never before seen there, his Excellency rose, moved like an automaton to the bell, and called for the jailer.

"Monsieur le Marquis has a few instructions to give you." The Governor's voice, but a breath, told what the words cost him.

The man responded gravely, looking from one to the other.

"Use your own judgment in the matter, my Lord," went on his Excellency, and left them together.

After that, a change, subtle but deep-rooted, came over the Governor; a silent man always, now his taciturnity became most marked. Under stress of untoward circumstances, all the guests at the Mount, save the young noble, departed; but his Excellency appeared hardly to notice their going; drawing his cloak of reserve closer about him, seemed only to ask for that solitude, not difficult to find in his aerial kingdom.

Sometimes for a long while he would stand in the cloister, gazing seaward; again wander in the church, look at the monuments, always to pass one of them quickly. Only on a single occasion, when the Marquis, who was daily becoming more nervous, sought him, with a favorable

report of his prisoner-patient, did the Governor give sign that beneath this apparent apathy yet stirred malevolence and rancor.

"Yes, yes," he returned, a spark of ill-concealed venom in his glance; "he is doing well, no doubt! I am sure he will do well. But well or ill, I wish to hear no more of him! No more, Monsieur le Marquis!" His voice vibrated; surprised, the kinsman of the King stared, then stiffly turned away.

So matters stood, when one day, alone in the cloister, his Excellency was disturbed by a rough-looking fellow who brought a letter and said he would await the reply at the tavern in the town.

Deliberately the Governor took the missive, tore open the envelope, and surveyed the small bit of paper it contained. Whatever the brief message told him, his Excellency's face did not change, and he was still coldly, carefully studying sentences and words, after his fashion, when through the door my lord, the Marquis, stepped in some haste. Lifting his eyes, the Governor had no difficulty in reading the question on the young man's countenance. For a moment they looked at each other, and then the long, white fingers of his Excellency again sought the letter.

"They," his voice seemed to clip the words, "propose an exchange of prisoners, and give me three days to consent to it!"