

CHAPTER XXX

A SOUND AFAR

About midway in the curve of one of the numerous bays, marking the coast-line, and several hours distant from the Mount, stands a stone cross erected by an English marauder to indicate the place of his landing. The symbol is visible on all sides from afar, for before it are the sands and the sea, and behind stretches the land barren of wood--low, level, covered only with marsh grass. Toward this monument of man's conquest--most prominent object in a prospect, dreary and monotonous--rode, late one afternoon, a band of horsemen. At their head galloped my lord, the Marquis; in the center could be seen a man with bound arms whose horse was led by one of the others. This person--a prisoner, thin, haggard, yet still muscular of frame--from time to time gazed about; a look of inquiry or calculation in the black undaunted eyes.

"What prison are you taking me to now?" once he asked the trooper who held the reins of his horse. "And why do you go in this direction? Is it you dare not ride along main highways on account of the people?"

"Never you mind!" came the gruff answer. "And as for the people, they'd better look out!"

"Bah!" laughed the prisoner. "You can put some of them in cells, but

not all!"

"There may be something worse than a cell waiting for you!" was the malicious retort.

"No doubt!" said the other stoically.

But as his eyes again swept the horizon, from the opposite direction appeared another band of riders. At first the prisoner, regarding them, looked puzzled; then as the new-comers rode straight and rapidly on toward the cross, his countenance expressed a faint understanding. A fresh relay of men, he concluded; one his present guard would consign him to, and then themselves return to the Mount. Still was the meeting-place an odd one, and the demeanor of the two bodies of men not entirely consistent with his conclusions; for, as they drew nearer, both parties slackened their pace, suspiciously to scrutinize each other.

"Twenty--the number agreed upon!" muttered the Marquis, and spurring on fast, led his troops nearer the cross.

Not many paces distant the word was given to halt, and, as they obeyed, on the other side of the monument the strange men likewise drew rein. At the same moment, there flashed on the captive's mind a discovery. These faces, looking so grimly out over the marshy field at them, were not the wooden visages of paid soldiers, but of men he knew--his men!

Across the space separating the two parties he could read their quick looks-their satisfaction--their complacency! He watched them with eyes in which pride and tenderness mingled. And then, for the first time, did he observe they had brought some one with them--a woman, or a girl--the Governor's daughter!

The bold black eyes of the prisoner regarded her fixedly. What did it mean? said his keen gaze. Colorless as marble, my lady held herself very erect on her horse; then while his glance yet probed her, the proud face slowly changed; on the cold cheek youth's bright banner flared high. The young man turned; following the direction of her gaze, looked at the Marquis; my lord's features radiated felicitations; his eyes shone with welcome. And a fuller understanding came over the prisoner; in some mysterious manner had the Lady Elise been made captive, and now had the nobleman come to escort his betrothed back to the palace.

Even as the Black Seigneur reached this conclusion, he become cognizant his bonds had been loosened; the reins placed in his hands. "You are free," said a voice and mechanically he rode toward his comrades.

Thus, near the crumbling and time-worn cross, was the exchange of prisoners effected; the girl whirled away by my lord, who seemed fearful of treachery, and the Black Seigneur left to the greetings of his men.

"Now, by the tuneful Nine,"--the poet, Gabriel Gabarie, pushing his burly form to the front, was the first to extend a hand--"but, from your looks, the Governor looks ill to the welfare of his lodgers!"

"And had we not captured my lady," spoke up another, gazing after the party of the Marquis, "he would have looked yet worse to the welfare of one of them, no doubt!"

"Drink this, Seigneur!" cried a third; "you must drink this--a special bottle we brought for the occasion!"

"Sent by old Pierre when he heard we were coming for you!" added the poet. "Your drinking-cups, lads! Unfasten the skin for yourselves! To mon capitaine!"--

Once, twice, deeply they drank--toast and vintage alike to their taste; then straightening, looked at the Black Seigneur whose eyes yet burned in the direction my lady had gone. With a start he seemed to recall himself to the demands of the moment; his first questions they expected; the ship--where did she lie? Snug and trim in a neighboring cove, ready to slip out, if occasion required and danger pressed--which contingency they did not just then expect, since at the moment was his Excellency more concerned with affairs on the land than matters pertaining to the sea. What these paramount interests were, the young man, on whose thin cheek now burned a little color, did not at once ask; only gazed inquiringly over the group, where one, whom he might

have expected, was absent.

"Sanchez--he is not with you?"

A look of constraint appeared for an instant on the poet's face.

"No, he's with the people, I expect. You see," he went on, "things have been happening since you elected to enact the mountebank. The bees have been busy, and this little hive they call France is now full of bother and bustle. The bees that work have been buzzing about those that don't; they made a great noise at Versailles, but the King Drone only listened; did not try to stop it, fearing their sting. They hummed at the door of the Bastille, until the parasite bees, not liking the music, opened the doors, let them all in--"

"The Bastille has fallen?" The listener's voice rang out; his eyes, searching sharply the features of the bard, seemed to demand only the truth, plain, unadorned.

"It has," answered the other gravely. "And the tune sung in and around Paris has kept on spreading until now it is everywhere! You may hear it in the woods; along the marshes; out over the strand! The very Mount, immovable, seems to listen. When will the storm break? To-day? To-morrow? It needs but a word from Paris, and then--"

The poet broke off, and silently the Black Seigneur seemed to be

weighing the purport of the news; for some moments stood as a man deep in thought; then, arousing himself, spoke a few words, and gave a brief order. Swiftly the riders swept away in the direction from which they had come, and only when they had gone some distance did the young man once more turn to the poet with a question. Whereupon the latter, spurring his horse nearer his chief, launched into eloquent explanation.

"And then," ended the bard, "the Governor's daughter walked into our ambush as unsuspectingly as a mouse into a trap!"

"The Governor's daughter cozened by Nanette!"

"That she was! A clever wench and a brave one, Nanette! Although," the poet's jovial eyes studied the dark face, "unless I am mistaken, she found the task to her liking!"

"You treated her, the Governor's daughter, well?" said the other abruptly.

"Gave her your cabin, mon capitaine, where," chuckling, "she ruled like a despot. Not once did she whimper, or beg favor--for herself! For the Marquis, it is true, she did plead--that day we took them!"

"He's her betrothed!" said the young man shortly.

"A marionette!" gibed the poet. "Some of the men were for making short

shrift of him, and they might have--only for her!"

"They will soon be safe enough together now!" remarked the Black Seigneur.

Again a peculiar, half-questioning expression shaded the poet's eyes, while furtively he regarded the young man. "Yes, they ought to be!"

"The terms of exchange--what were they?"

"You for her! That was our demand. After the place had been agreed upon, his Excellency asked to name the hour, and further interjected a condition, binding both parties to secrecy in the matter, that the people might not know. They acted badly when the soldiers returned to the Mount without his daughter; they might behave worse, no doubt he thinks, when they come back with her."

"So will she be safely returned in the darkness! A wise provision!"

"That," murmured the poet, studying the horizon, "was evidently his thought. But," as the Black Seigneur, relaxing his pace, drew rein at a fork in the pathway, "yonder lies our cove, mon capitaine, and--"

"Do you and the men go there!" commanded the other, and gave a few further instructions.

"See that the ship is kept in readiness!" he ended. "As for me--" He made a vague gesture.

That evening found the Black Seigneur in the Desaurac forest; where, as a boy, he had fled for shelter, now some instinct, or desire he did not strive to analyze, drew him. As slowly he made his way through the wood, on every hand familiar outlines and details, seen vaguely in the last light of day, invited him to pause; but without stopping he moved on to the castle, and up to the chamber, where Sanchez, returning from America, had found him, a vagabond lad. Through the window the same unobstructed view of the Mount dimly unfolded itself in the dusk, and for some moments he regarded it--august, majestic; glossing its heart's black secrets with specious and well-composed bearing! As he looked, there suddenly came to him the remembrance of another impression; the same picture, seen through the eyes of a boy--standing where he was now! Then had the Mount seemed a marvelous series of structures, air-drawn, magical--home of a small and fairy-like creature, with hair of shining gold. Dusk turned to night; in the distance the Mount vanished, and through the break in the forest only the stars twinkled.

Then lighting his fire, the young man sat down at the side; with faculties alert, listened to the wind; looked at the flames.

Demon-like they leaped before his eyes, as when he had waited and watched for the emissaries of his Excellency; and mechanically he placed his weapons on the same spot he had been wont to lay them in those days. There was little likelihood they would seek him now,

however; the Governor was fully occupied elsewhere, looking to interests more important to himself and to--

Her ladyship! the fire leaped wildly, as laughing at fate's foolish prank. Her life for his! What irony! If she had betrayed him? "If?" His laugh crushed possibility for supposition; but almost at once itself died away! Indissolubly associated with the thought, a scene in a dungeon must needs recur; her denials; the touch of a hand; the appeal of light fingers thrust through the bars! Why? The questions he had asked then, were reiterated now; the hand that had gripped hers opened, closed; once more he seemed to see the steadfast, unswerving eyes; once more seemed to read in their depths, "Believe!"

The pine branches continued to crackle as with merriment; but his gaze was somber. How glad she must have been to see the end of her captivity! The sudden leaping of yonder flame was like the quick, bright flush that had mantled her cheek at sight of her liege lord to be! They should have arrived at the Mount ere now; about this time were entering the gates! He could see her, the Marquis at her side--

A sudden sharp detonation afar dissipated the picture. Other explosions followed, like volley of muskets; and, springing to the window, the Black Seigneur looked toward the Mount; from it, flashes of light gleamed and glimmered. Then the loud report of a cannon reverberated in the distance.