

## CHAPTER XXXII

### NEAR THE ALTAR

"Morbleu! Here's a madman!" Ere the Black Seigneur could unsheathe his sword, that of the Marquis had pierced slightly his shoulder. "Put up your blade, my Lord!" As quickly springing back and drawing his own, he held himself in an attitude of defense. "In this matter are we, or should we be--of a mind!"

"We!" My lord's weapon played in fierce curves and flashes; he laughed derisively.

"I am here to serve her ladyship--if I can!"

"You!" A rapid coup de tierce was the Marquis' reply. "You! Whose outlaws carried her off before! You are pleased to jest, Monsieur Bandit!"

"No jest, my Lord!" coolly. "Moreover, it is you who serve her ladyship ill at such a moment in--"

"Mon dieu! You instruct!"

"I have no wish for this combat, Monsieur le Marquis!" As he spoke, the Black Seigneur retreated slowly toward the door. "But if you press

too close--"

"Ma foi! You talk very brave, but I notice your legs take you backward. However, it will not serve; you shall not escape."

"No?" His back now against the door, the Black Seigneur defended himself with his right hand, the while his left felt behind for a bolt which it found; shot into place. "Then let us remove temptation by locking the door!"

"What! You did not, then, intend--"

A sudden fierce pounding from without on the door, interrupted.

"It was necessary to keep them out--but it will be only for the moment. So put up your blade!" peremptorily. "There is no time to lose."

"You are right!" The Marquis' face expressed scorn and unreasoning anger; his sword leaped to an accelerated tempo. "There is no time to lose. I shall honor you! The Marquis de Beauvillers will stoop to cheat the fourches patibulaires!" And my lord lunged, a dangerous and clever thrust that was met; answered. From the Marquis' hand the blade flew; struck the pavement; at the same time, a rending and tearing of wood came from the door.

The Black Seigneur leaped forward; but the stroke his adversary, now disarmed, expected, fell not on him; directed toward a lamp overhead, sole source of illumination of the corridor, the weapon struck hard. Shattered by the blow, the ornamental contrivance crashed to the floor; the place was plunged in darkness.

"Save yourself, my Lord!" said a calm voice, and my lady, standing now as it were, in the center of a vortex of wildly rushing figures, felt her waist suddenly clasped; herself swept on! Once or twice she struggled; resisted, hardly knowing what she did; but the sound of a low, determined voice, not unfamiliar to her, and the consciousness of a physical force--or was it all physical?--that seemed to beat down her will, left no choice but to obey.

Darkness gave way to waves of light; reflections of flame surrounded them; black trails of smoke coiled around. The girl's strength went; her breath came faster. A thick cloud choked her; she wished only to stop, when arms closed about her.

Upward! Still upward! By winding stairs, through passages and doorways, vaguely she felt herself borne, until a cold breath of air, blowing suddenly in her face, revived her; awoke her to a confused realization of the place they had at last reached--the upper platform at the head of the long, open stairway of granite. And with that consciousness, she again sought to free herself; but, for an instant the arms held her tighter, while a dark face bent close, scanning her

features, then abruptly he released her.

"Your Ladyship is uninjured?"

"Yes: yes!"

"One moment!" Turning, he left her, and walking to the verge of that open space, searched quickly the waste of darkness below, far out to sea. The girl's glance followed him; wavered; her first apprehension awoke anew. Her father! Where was he? She clasped her hands despairingly as she gazed down the Mount; then around her. Suddenly, a bright patch of light--open doorway to the church--caught her eye and she started. At the picture, framed by the masonry, which the glow revealed, a low exclamation fell from her lips, and crossing the platform, and descending a few steps, she ran to the entrance of the sacred edifice.

"Eh, your Excellency; has your Excellency any orders?" sounded a voice.

There, before an altar, in the dim flicker of candles and the variegated gleaming from the ancient stained-glass windows, she saw at last him she sought; in one of the chapels, near the white marble monument to her mother, was his Excellency; but, not alone! Before him stood, or half crouched, the man Sanchez, who now was speaking.

"Shall I ring for your Excellency's servants and have the noise

stopped?" Grotesquely he bowed, the while watching like an animal studying its prey. "Beppo! Where are you--fat rascal? Consign these swine to the gibbets! What! You can't obey because your ears have been cut off and your throat slit? That's too bad!" Fiercely the man laughed; then waved his arm toward the window, as if calling the Governor's attention to the sounds of demolition; the abrupt breaking of glass! "Patter! Patter! Merry little bullets, presents from the people, your Excellency! Metayage, your Highness!"

Still the other said no word; a figure, so motionless and white, it seemed but a wraith pausing at the side of its own "narrow house." A louder clamor without; a more vivid brightness of the red, yellow and purple hues, like a sudden wealth of strange flowers strewn on the marble floor, and again Sanchez laughed.

"Too bad! But 'tis I who must pay first! Who owe so much! Has your Excellency his strong box with him? Ah, he leans on it! Such a fine one, all of marble! Not easily broken into--or out of! Eh, your Excellency?" Swinging back something bright. "Full payment, this time! Not coppers, or round bits of lead, but steel, beautiful steel!"

Held to the spot by the abrupt terror and fascination of the scene, the Governor's daughter had made no sound, fearful of hastening the inevitable; but at the moment the man, with a last taunting word, launched forward, a cry, half articulate, burst from her lips. It was drowned by another voice, loud and commanding, which rang out from the

entrance to the church.

"Sanchez!"

Perhaps the call disconcerted him; robbed the old servant's eye of its certitude; his arm of its sureness, for the blow aimed at his Excellency the latter was enabled to evade. At the same time, as with singular agility he moved aside to save himself, the hand the Governor had been holding to his breast, shot out like an adder. It struck viciously; stung deep--full in the side of his tormentor.

"That for your metayage!"

But a momentary expression of satisfaction was, however, permitted his Excellency; the petty tragedy became overshadowed by the greater!

"The Bastille! Our Bastille!"

And again a shower of bullets, directed in hatred, fell upon the church, because its windows were priceless; shone with saints of inestimable value! In the chapel, an aumbry and a piscina were struck; around the Governor, glass began to clatter and break into bits on the pavement, when suddenly he wavered; his hand sought his heart, then felt for and clung to the monument, as if abruptly seeking support.

"Why did you do it, Seigneur?" As my lady, exclaiming wildly, ran to

her father, Sanchez, from where he lay, looked up to his master.

"Call out, I mean? Not that it matters much now!" His implacable glance, swerving to the Governor, lighted with satisfaction. "The people have paid. And 'twas I--showed them the way!"

"It was you, then--who broke faith in the negotiations for the exchange of prisoners?"

A smile came to the face of the old servant. "I had to," he said simply. "I alone am to blame. No one knew; except, perhaps, the poet, who may have surmised! It was treachery for treachery!" with sudden fierceness. "You could not have done it, nor your father, nor any of the seigneurs before him!" The young man seemed scarcely to hear; his glance had again sought my lady. "But I am only a servant---and in dealing with a viper I used its own tricks! Did you think I had forgotten those stripes? Or the blow he gave your father--in the back?" A moment Sanchez's hand fumbled at his coat; drew out a bag of oilskin. "Here is something that belonged to your father. I took it from his breast the day he died, thinking some time--I can't tell what--only it contains a letter from the former lady of the Mount! When my master got it, he told me to pack a few belongings--that we were going--never to return!"

Sanchez's voice broke off; again he strove to speak; could not; put out his hand. Mechanically the Black Seigneur's closed on that of the old

servant; even as it did so, the latter's fingers clutched suddenly; ceased to move. In the church now all was silent, but without arose discordant sounds, cries, harsh and vengeful, for the Governor!

Starting, the Black Seigneur gazed about, toward him they were clamoring for, now lying still, at the base of the monument. Then releasing the fingers, that seemed yet to hold him, the young man sprang forward, as my lady threw herself wildly, protectingly, over her father. At that touch, the Governor's eyes opened; met hers; the Black Seigneur's!

Nearer the door, now rang the shouts. His Excellency seemed to listen; to realize what they meant; to him--his daughter--

"The Governor! The Governor!"

"Trembles tyrans! Trembles!"

An ironical flash lit up, for an instant, the dying eyes. He, soon, would be beyond reach of these dogs--canaille! But she? His gaze again rested on the Black Seigneur; in that tense, fleeting second, seemed reading his very soul!

"Et la belle comtesse, sa fille!" cried the menacing voices.

A tremor crossed the Governor's face; his pale lips moved. "Forget!



Save her!" An instant his eyes lingered persistently on the young man; then passed to his daughter; as they did so, slowly the light, more human and appealing than any that had ever shone there before, went out of them. My lady's fair head drooped until it lay on her father's breast; unconscious, she seemed yet to shield him with figure inert. But only for a moment!

"Et la belle comtesse!"

Stooping, the Black Seigneur snatched the slender form to his breast; ran back to the altar. There, looking around him, as one who made himself familiar with the place, his glance apparently found what it sought--a small stairway, entrance to the crypt. At the same time he started to descend, the people swept into the church.