

CHAPTER XXXIII

ON THE SANDS

A man, bearing in his arms the motionless form of a woman, paused later that night in the shadow of a low stone hovel, near the lower gate of the Mount. As he crouched beneath the thatch projecting like the rim of an old hat above him his eyes, eager, fierce, studied the distance he had yet to traverse from the end of the narrow alley, where he had stopped, to the open entrance at the base of the rock to the sands. The goal was not far; but a few moments would have sufficed to reach it; only between him and the point he had so long been striving to attain, an obstacle, or group of obstacles, intervened. Before a bonfire of wreckage of stuff--furniture and household goods--several ragged, dissolute fellows sat with bottles before them, drinking hard and quarreling the while over a number of glittering gems, gold snuff-boxes and trinkets of all kinds.

"This bit of ivory for the white stone!"

"Add the brooch!"

"Not I! Look at the picture! Her ladyship, perhaps!"

"They have not found her?"

"No; for all the searching! But she is somewhere; can't have escaped from the Mount. And when the drabs and trulls lay hands on her!"

"Ay, when!" casting the dice.

The man, peering from the alley, hesitated no longer; behind sounded the footsteps of others, and gathering his burden more firmly, he strode boldly forth toward the group and the gate. At his approach, their talk--a jargon of "thieves' Latin" that smacked more of the cabarets of Paris than those of the coast--momentarily ceased; beneath lowering brows, they stared hard.

"What have you there, comrade?" said one.

"Look and see!" answered the man in a rough tone.

"Poor booty! A woman!" quoted another with a harsh laugh. "You're easily pleased. As if wenches were not plentiful enough on other occasions, without wasting time on a night like this, when diamonds and gold are to be had for the searching!"

"And silver plates and watches and rare liquors!" cried a third in knaves' argot. "Every one, however, to his taste! An you prefer a light-of-love to light such as these have," juggling with the gems, "you but stamp yourself a fool."

"You're welcome to your opinion, my friend!" The man with the burden spoke brusquely. "Good night!"

"Stay; why such haste? You seem not a bad fellow. Set the wench down. We'll have sight of her, and, perhaps," with coarse expletives, "if she's a pretty face, and a taste for this fiery liquor the old monks laid down, we'll find a gewgaw or two to her liking!"

But the man made no answer; was about to pass on, when the speaker noticed for the first time the woman's hand, white and small, hanging limply. "What's this? More jewels?" His exclamation was caught up by the others. "Not so fast, comrade! This puts a different face to the matter. Set down the booty, and," springing to his feet, "we'll see what it's worth."

"I'll not stop!" The man looked at him steadily. "On the Mount is, or should be, plenty for all! Go seek for yourself!"

"Pardi!" softly. "Here's one dares speak his mind!"

"I speak plainly," in a tone of authority, "and you would do well to heed!"

"Perhaps," interposing. "What say you, comrades?"

Evil smiles illumined evil faces; they, who had just been on the point

of blows among themselves, now regarded one another with common understanding. One weighed tentatively that delicate weapon, a spontoon; a second stroked his halberd, as liking to feel the smoothness of the shaft, while a third reached for a gleaming "Folard's Partizan." And in the glare of the fire every implement showed sign it had been used that night. The point of the spontoon was as steel crusted o'er; the ax of the halberd might have come from a boucherie; the blade of the "Partizan" resembled a great leaf at autumn-time. This last wavered perilously near the unconscious burden; had the man made a movement to resist, would have struck; but the black eyes, only, combated--held the blood-shot ones. Though not for long; again the weapon seemed about to dart forth; the man about to hurl himself and his burden desperately aside, when, from above, came the sound of hoarse laughing and singing, and simultaneously a number of peasants, Bretons by their dress, burst into view.

"Eh, cockatoo, what now!"

Many of these new-comers were hurt; few free from cuts; but none thought of stanching their wounds. Their principal concern seemed for articles they carried--heavy, light; valuable, paltry--spoils from the high! Two staggered beneath a great chest stamped with the arms of the Mount and its motto, and appeared anxious to hurry--perchance toward the forest on the shore where they might bury their treasure. Others had in their arms imposing pieces of silver; vases and a massive surtout de table that had once belonged to the Cardinal Dubois. A

woman, gaunt, toothless, wore a voluminous bonnet a l'Argus, left at the Mount by one of the ladies of the court; and waved before her a fan, set with jewels. She it was who called out:

"Eh, cockatoo!" shrilly. "Who would you be killing?"

"A selfish fellow that refuses to share!" answered he of the halberd, as if little pleased at the interruption.

"Refuses to share, does he?" she repeated, and, swaggering down, peered forward; only to start back. "The Black Seigneur!"

"The Black Seigneur!"

Those who accompanied her--a rough rabble from field and forest--gazed, not without surprise, or uncouth admiration, at one whose name and fame were well-known on that northern coast; but these evidences of rough approval were not shared by the alien rogues. On my lady's finger the gem still sparkled: held their eyes like a lure. Black Seigneur, or not, they muttered sullenly, what knew they of her he had with him; whose hand was not that of cinder-wench or scullery maid? Let them look at her face! She might be a great lady--she might even be the Governor's daughter herself!

"The Governor's daughter!" All, alike, caught at the word.

"An if she were!" fiercely the Black Seigneur confronted them.

While, hesitating, they sought for a reply, quickly he went on. Who had a better right to her? The Black Seigneur! The Lady Elise! Harshly he laughed. Was it not fair spoil? His Excellency's enemy; his Excellency's daughter. Did they think treasure sweeter than revenge? Let them try to rob him of it! As for the ring? Contemptuously he took it from my lady's hand; threw it among them.

A few scrambled, others were still for finishing the tragedy then. The people versus the lords and their spawn. "Kill at once!" the injunction had gone forth from Paris.

As he spoke, one of the fiercest put out his hand; touched my lady, when the fingers of the Black Seigneur gripped hard his throat; hurled him so violently back, he lay still. Companions sprang to his aid; certain of the peasants interfered.

"Let him alone!"

"He speaks fair!"

"Bah! To-night are all equal."

"Your Black Seigneur no better than others!"

"You lie!" In a high tone the woman with the great lady's hat broke in. "At them, my chickens! Beat well these Paris rogues, who come only for the picking!"

"Yes; beat them well!"

But the runagates of the great city were not of a kind to submit lightly; curses and blows were exchanged; knives gleamed and swords flashed. Amid a scene of confusion, the cause of it stayed not to witness the outcome; running down the sloping way, soon found himself on the sands; then keeping to the shadows, passed around the corner of the wall.

Here, for the time concealed was he safe; none followed, and, leaning against the damp blocks of masonry, breathing hard, as a man weak from fatigue, loss of blood, he sought to recover his strength. It returned only too slowly; the passing lassitude annoyed him; for the moment he forgot he had but recently come from the dungeon and the hardships that sap elasticity and vigor. He was impatient to move on; looked at my lady--and a sudden fear smote him! How white she appeared! Had she-- His hand trembled at her heart; a blank dismay overcame him; then joy-- At that instant he thought not of the gulf between them; was conscious only he held her--slender, beautiful--in his arms; that she seemed all his own, with her breath on his cheek, her soft lips so close. Above sounded the madness of the night; the crackling of flames; the intemperate voices! In the angle of the wall, with darkness a blanket

around them, he pushed back the hair from her clear brow, bent over, closer--suddenly straightened.

"Pardi!" he muttered, a flush on his face. "Am I, then, like the others--pillagers, thieves?"

Several moments he yet stood, breathing deep; then, starting away, set himself to the task of crossing the vast stretch of beach between the Mount and the distant lights of a ship.

The sandy plain had never seemed so interminable; before him, his shadow and that of my lady danced ever illusively away; behind, the great rock gave forth a hundred shooting flames, while, as emblematic of the demolition of so much that was beautiful, higher than saint with helpless sword on cathedral top, a cloud of smoke belched up; waved sidewise like a monstrous funeral plume. A symbol, it seemed to fill the sky; to move and nod and flaunt its ominous blackness from this majestic outpost of the land. Walking in a vivid crimson glow, the Black Seigneur gazed only ahead, where now, on that monotonous desert, the rim of the sea on a sudden obtruded. As he advanced, sparkles red as rubies--laughing lights--leaped in the air; at the same time a seething murmur broke upon the stillness.

Toward those leaping bright points and the source of that deep-sounding cadence, the young man stumbled forward more rapidly, less cautiously, also, it may be; for while he was yet some distance from the water's

rim, his feet fell on sand that gave way beneath them. He would have sprung back, but felt himself sinking; strove to get out, only to settle the deeper! The edge of the lise, with safety beyond, well he could see, where the satin-like smoothness of the treacherous slough! merged into a welcome silk-like shimmering of the trustworthy sands. That verge, however, was remote; out of reach of effort of his to attain; his very endeavors caused him to become the more firmly imbedded. Had he cast my lady aside, possibly could he have extricated himself; but with her, an additional weight, weighing him down--

Loudly he called out; only the sea answered. Now were the clinging particles at his waist; he lifted my lady higher; clear of them! Once more raised his voice--this time not in vain!

"Mon capitaine! Where are you?"

"Here!"

"We don't see you."

"You won't soon, unless--"

The end of a line struck the sand.

The night had almost passed; its last black hour, like a pall, lay over

the sea, where, far from the Mount, a ship swayed and tossed. In the narrow confines of her master's cabin, the faint glimmering of a lamp revealed a man bending over a paper, yellow and worn; the lines so faint and delicate, they seemed almost to escape him!

"How strange, after all these years, the sight of your handwriting!--and now, to be writing you! Yet is it meet--to say farewell! For that which you have heard, mon ami, is true. I am going to die. You say, you heard I was not well; I answer what really you heard; the question, mon ami, beneath your words! ... And, dying, it is well with me. I have wronged no soul on earth--except you, my friend, and you forgive me.... I had hoped the years would efface that old memory. You say they have not.... It is wise you are going away."

The reader paused; listened to the sea; the moaning and sighing, like voices on the wings of the storm.

"You speak in your letter about 'trickery'--used to estrange us! Think no more of it, I beg you. What is past, is gone--as I, part of that past, when we were boy and girl together--soon shall be. And come not near the Mount. There can be no meeting for us on earth. I send you my adieu from afar.... It is only a shadow that speaks ... mon ami."