

CHAPTER XXXIV

SOME TIME LATER

The little Norman isle, home of Pierre Laroche, so wild and bleak-looking many months of the year, resembles a flowering garden in the spring; then, its lap full of buds and blossoms, smiling, redolent, it lifts itself from the broad bosom of the deep. And all the light embellishments of the golden time it sets forth daintily; fringing the black cliffs with clusters of sea campion, white and frothy as the spray, trailing green ivy from precipitous heights to the verge of the wooing waters, whose waves seem to creep up timorously, peep into the many caves, bright with sea-anemones, and retreat quickly, as awed by a sudden glimpse of fairyland.

Near the entrance of one of these magical chambers, abloom with strange, scentless flowers, sat, a certain afternoon in April, a man and a woman, who, looking out over the blue sea, conversed in desultory fashion.

"From what your father tells me, Mistress Nanette," the man, an aged priest, was speaking, "the Seigneur Desaurac should be here to-day?"

"My father had a letter from him a few days ago to that effect," answered the young woman somewhat shortly.

"Let me see," apparently the old man did not notice the change in his companion's manner, "he has been away now about a year? It was in July he brought the Governor's daughter to the island one day and sailed the next!" Nanette made a movement. "How time flies!" he sighed. "Let us hope it assuages grief, as they say! You think she is contented here?"

"The Lady Elise? Why not? At least, she seems so; has with her, her old nurse, my aunt, who fortunately escaped from the Mount--"

"But the death of her father? It must have been a terrible blow--one not easy to forget!"

"Of course," said Nanette slowly, "she has felt his loss."

The old man gazed down. "I have sometimes wondered what she knows about the causes of the enmity that existed between his Excellency and the Black Seigneur?"

The other's eyes lifted keenly. "When last did you see her, Father?"

"She comes often to my cottage to walk and--"

"Talk?"

"Well, yes!" The fine spiritual face expressed a twinge of uneasiness.

"About the past?"

The priest shifted slightly. "Sometimes! An old man lives much in the past and it is natural to wander on a bit aimlessly at times, and--"

"Confess, Father, she has learned much from you?" Nanette laughed.

"No, no; I trust--"

"Surmised, then!" said the girl. "She is one not easily deceived. Clever is my lady! And you talk, she says nothing, but leads you on! If there's aught she wishes to learn that you know, be assured she's found out from your lips."

"Nay; I'll not believe--'tis true once or twice I've let a word slip. But she noticed not--"

"No doubt!" The island girl's voice expressed a fine scorn. "However, it matters little. Speaks she ever of the Black Seigneur?" suddenly.

"No. Why?"

"Why not?" Nanette's tone was enigmatic.

"I don't understand."

"At any rate, she is better off here than yonder in France, if tidings be true," said the other irrelevantly.

"Ah, ma belle France!" murmured the old man regretfully. "How she is torn within--threatened from without! But fortunately she has her defenders," his voice thrilled, "brave men who have thronged to her needs. I suppose," he continued abruptly, "it's to arrange about the new ship that brings the Seigneur once more to the island?"

"I suppose so," assented the other briefly.

"A true Frenchman, Pierre Laroche, your father, has shown himself, in giving one of his best ships to the cause! Although perhaps he would not have been so ready," thoughtfully, "had not the Paris Assembly seen fit to appoint Andre Desaurac in command of all the vessels to guard the coast against the intrigues of the French royalists with foreign powers and aliens! Well, well, he will find here many old friends!"

"Yourself, for example, Father, who helped him in the courts to establish his right to his name," said the young woman quickly.

"And you, Mistress Nanette," the kindly eyes lighting with a curious, indulgent look, "who went to the Mount alone, unaided, to--"

A frown gathered on the dark, handsome face of the girl. "Unaided?" she said, staring at the sparkles on the waves before her.

"Oh, the people never weary of talking about it! and how you--"

"Yon's a sail!" Abruptly the young woman rose; with skirts fluttering behind her, gazed out to sea.

Several hours later, just before dusk, a ship ran into the harbor, dropped anchor, and sent a boat to the shore. In the small craft sat a number of men, and the first of these to spring to the beach and mount the stone stairway to the inn, was met at the top; warmly greeted, by old Pierre himself! Mon dieu! To see the new-comer was like old times! Only now, the landlord observed jestingly, the profits would be small! But a fig to parsimony, in these days when men's patriotism should be large; do what he, the Black Seigneur, would with the new ship, even if he sunk her, provided it was in good company, and he went not down with her himself! To which protestations the other answered; presented his companions, and greeted the assembled company within.

Busy at a great board, laden with comestibles interspersed with flagons of wines, Nanette welcomed him briefly, and again his glance--keen and assured, that of a man the horizon of whose vision had widened, since last he stood there--swept the gathering. But apparently, one he looked for was not present, and he had again turned to the young woman, a question on his lips, when on the garden side of the house a door opened. It revealed a flowering background, a plateau, yellow in the last rays of the sun; it framed, also, the slender, black-clad figure

of a girl, above whose white brow the waving hair shone like threads of gold.

"An old friend of yours, my Lady!" called out blunt Pierre.

A moment the clear, brown eyes seemed to waver; then became steady, as schooled to some purpose. She came forward composedly; gave the Black Seigneur her hand.

"I--am always glad to see old friends!" said my lady, with a lift of the head, over-conscious, perhaps, of the concentrated gaze of the company.

He looked at her; made perfunctory answer; she seemed about to speak again, when the hand he let fall was caught by another.

"Elise!" From among those who had come ashore, a man in fashionable attire sprang forward, a little thinner than when last she had seen him, and more cynical-looking, as slightly soured by world-contact and the new tendencies of society.

"My Lord!" Certainly was my lady taken unawares; a moment looked at the Marquis as if a little startled; then at the Black Seigneur:

"A pleasant surprise for you, my Lady!" said the latter. "But you owe me no thanks! An order from the chief of the Admiralty, properly

signed and countersigned, directing me to transport the Marquis de Beauvillers hither, was not to be disregarded!"

"A somewhat singular dispensation of Providence, nevertheless!" observed the nobleman dryly. "After our--what shall we call it?--little passage of arms? You must acknowledge, however, that in truth the Lady Elise and myself had some reason to discredit your assurances that night--"

"Far be it from me to dispute it, my Lord," and the Black Seigneur turned, while the Marquis, slightly shrugging his shoulders, addressed my lady.

Half blithely, then half bitterly, relapsing occasionally from the old, debonair manner he had assumed, he spoke of his escape from the Mount; months of hiding in foul places, amid fields and forest, with no word of her; his success, at last, in reaching Paris, and, through rumor, learning where she was, and hastening to her--

A bluff voice interrupted further explanations and avowals; the steaming flesh-pots, it informed the company, awaited not soft words and honied phrases; monarch in his own dining-room, ostentatiously conscious, perhaps, of his own unwonted prodigality, Pierre Laroche waved them to their places--where they would!--so that they waited not!

Quizzically my lord lifted his brow; truly here was a Republican fellow

who appreciated not an honor when it was bestowed upon him, nor saw anything unusual in a Marquis' presence beneath that humble roof. Something of this he murmured to my lady, in a tone others might have heard; but she answered not; took her place, with red lips the firmer, as if to conceal some weakness to which they sought to give way.

Not without constraint the meal passed; the host, desirous to learn the latest political news, looked at the Marquis and curbed a natural curiosity, until a more favorable moment when he and the Black Seigneur should be alone. My lady, although generally made to feel welcome and at home there, seemed now, perhaps, to herself, a little out of place, like a person that has wandered from a world of her own and strayed into another's. Cross-currents, long at strife in her breast, surged and flowed fast; the while she seemed to listen to my lord, who appeared now in lighter, more airy humor. And as she sat thus, with fair head bent a little, she could but hear, at times, above the medley of tones and the sound of servants' footsteps in clattering wooden shoes, the voice of the Black Seigneur--now pledging a toast to old Pierre; anon discussing winds, tides, or ships! A free reckless voice, that seemed to vibrate from the past--to stir anew bright, terrible flames.

Daylight slowly waned; lights were brought in, and, the meal over, old Pierre pushed back in his chair. My lady rose quickly; looked a little constrainedly at the company, at the Marquis, then toward the door. Anticipating her desire, attributing to it, perhaps, a significance

flattering to his vanity, the young nobleman expressed a wish for a stroll; a sight of the garden. At once she assented; a slight tint now on her cheeks, she moved to the door, and my lord followed; as they disappeared, the Black Seigneur laughed--at one of Pierre's jokes!

"Have I not told it before?" said the host.

"Have you?" murmured the Black Seigneur. "Well, a good jest, like an excellent dish, may well be served twice."

"Humph!" observed the landlord doubtfully.

After a pause: "I suppose he will be taking her away soon?"

"Her?" The young man rose.

"The Lady Elise!"

"I suppose so," shortly.

"We shall miss her!" grumbled the landlord as he, too, got up and walked over to the fireplace. "I, who never thought to care for any of the fine folk--I, bluff old Pierre Laroche!--say we shall miss her."

"Knows she how it fared with his Excellency's--her father's--estate? That little, or nothing, is left?"

"Aye."

"And she will agree to the promise I wrote you about?" quickly.

"That you--now that the right to your name has been vindicated--are content to accept half the lands in dispute; her ladyship to retain the other half?"

"Yes; in consideration of that which his Excellency expended in taxes--no small sum!--and what it would cost to carry on vexatious litigation!"

"You are strangely faint-hearted to pursue your advantage," said old Pierre shrewdly. "But," as the other made a gesture, "I put it to her ladyship as you desired me to, and--"

"She consented?" eagerly.

Pierre shook his head. "No, mon capitaine! She will have none of them. And you had heard her: 'A great wrong was unintentionally,' she accented the word, 'done the Seigneur Desaurac by my father, which has now been set right!' 'It has,' I assented, and would have urged further your proposal, when she stopped me. 'Speak no more of this matter!' 'Twas all she said; but--you should have seen her face, and how her eyes shone!"

The young man, looking down, made no answer. "An you are not satisfied," continued Pierre, "broach the question to my lady, yourself."

"I?" A look, half bitter, crossed the other's dark face. "Her father's enemy! Through whose servant, all her misfortunes came about! To revive anew what must so often pass in her mind?"

"Well, well; no doubt you know best, and, certes, now you remind me, she did turn cold and distant when I spoke of your coming. But let idle prejudices enter into practical concerns--it's on a par--of all improvidence! Why, 'twas not long ago, she brought me a jewel or two; Marie, it seems, had foresight enough to snatch them before fleeing from the Mount, and begged me to take them for our kindness, she said; which I did, seeing she would not have it otherwise--nor let herself be regarded as one who could not pay. But to business, mon capitaine!"

And thereafter, for some time, they, or rather, Pierre, talked; the others, save the Marquis, returned to the ship, and only Nanette, busy putting everything to rights, lingered in the room. At length, after papers had been signed and changed hands, the conversation of the host began to wane; frequently had he sipped from a bottle of liqueur at his elbow and now found himself nodding; leaned back more comfortably in the great chair and suffered his head to fall. The clock ticked out the seconds; the young man continued to sit motionless.

"A mon beau'--" Nanette's voice, lightly humming, caused him to look up; with the old mocking expression on her face, the inn-keeper's daughter paused near his chair.

"It was kind of you, mon capitaine, to bring to my lady her Marquis!" As she spoke, she looked toward the garden.

"Why not?" he asked steadily. "The passport and orders were correct."

"Were they, indeed?" she said, tapping the floor with her foot. "You remain with us a few days; or, as of old, must we be content with a brief visit?" she went on.

"We leave to-morrow."

"To-morrow?" The girl's eyes wore a tentative expression. "Late?"

"Early!"

"Oh! In that case, perhaps I shan't have time," Nanette paused; looked at her father; old Pierre's slumbers were not to be broken.

"For what?" asked the Black Seigneur shortly.

"To tell you something!"

"Why not--now?"

"You--are inquisitive?"

"No!"

"Even if it were about--" she looked toward the door that led to the garden.

"The Lady Elise?" he said quickly.

"Oh, you are interested? 'A mon beau'--" a moment she hummed.

"You do not urge me?"

"Wherefore," laconically, although his eyes flashed, "when you have made up your mind to tell!"

"You are right!" She threw back her head. "I have made up my mind! How well you understand women! Almost as well," she laughed mockingly, "as a ship!" He made no response. "When you thanked me once, mon capitaine, for all it pleased you to say I did for you, you may remember," her voice was defiant, "I did not once gainsay you!" More curiously he regarded her. "Perhaps it pleased me," her hand on her hip, "to be thought such a fine heroine. But now," her tone grew a little fierce, "I am tired of hearing people say: 'Nanette risked so

much!' 'Nanette did this!--did that!--when it was she who risked--did it all, one might say."

"She? What do you mean?" The black eyes probed hers now with sudden, fierce questioning.

"That 'twas the Lady Elise saved you. Went knowingly--willingly--as hostage--"

"The Lady Elise!" he cried, an abrupt glow on the dark face.

Nanette's eyes noted and fell, but she went on hurriedly: "She knew of the ambush in the forest; saw part of the note I dropped on the beach--it was brought to her by my aunt who warned her." And in a quick rush of words, as if desirous to be done with it, Nanette told all that had transpired at the Mount.

Incredulously, eagerly, he listened; when, however, she had finished, he said nothing; sat like a man bewildered.

"Well?" said the girl impatiently. Still he looked down. "Well?" she repeated, so sharply old Pierre stirred; lifted his head.

"Eh, my dear?"

She went to the mantel; took from it a candle.

"The Seigneur finds you such poor company," she said, "he desires a light to retire!"

The dawn smote the heavens with fiery lashes of red; from the east the wind began to blow harder, and on the sea the waves responded with a more forcible sweep. At a window in the inn, the Black Seigneur a moment looked out on the gay flowers and the sea and the worn grim face of the cliff; then left his room and made his way downstairs. No one was yet, apparently, astir; an hour or so must elapse ere the time set for departure, and, pending the turn of the tide and adieu to old Pierre, the young man stepped into the garden, through the gate, and, turning into a rocky path, strode out over the cliffs. The island was small; its walks limited, and soon, despite a number of difficulties in the way he had chosen, he found himself at its end--the verge of a great rock that projected out over the blue, sullen sea. For some moments he stood there, listening to the sounds in caverns below, watching the snow-capped waves, the ever-shifting spots on a vast map, and then, shaking off his reverie, started to return.

"A brisk wind to take us back to France," he said to himself; but his thoughts were not of possible April storms, or of his ship. His eyes, bright, yet perplexed, as if from some problem whose solution he had not yet found, were bent downward, only to be raised where the path demanded his closer attention. As he looked up, he became suddenly

aware of the figure of a girl, who approached from the opposite direction.

A quick glint sprang to the young man's eyes, and, pausing, he waited; watched. At that point, the way ran over a neck of rock, almost eaten through by the hungry sea, and she had already started to cross when he first saw her. The path was not dangerous; nor was it easy; only it called for certainty and assurance on the part of the one that elected to take it. My lady's light footstep was sure; although the wind swept rather sharply there, she held herself with confident poise, while from the brown eyes shone a clear, steady light.

"I saw you leave the inn," she said, drawing near the comparatively sheltered spot, where he stood, "and knowing you would soon sail, followed. There is something I wanted to say, and--and felt I should have no other chance to tell you!"

Had she read what was passing in his brain, she would not have faced him, so confident; but, ignorant of what he had learned, the cause of varying lights in his dark eyes, the tender play of emotion on his strong features, she broached her subject with steadfastness of purpose.

"You went away so suddenly the last time, I had no opportunity, then, to thank you for all that you did; and so, I do now--thank you, I mean! Also," a touch of prouder constraint in her tone, "I appreciate your over-generous proposal through Pierre Laroche; although, of course,"

her figure very straight, "I could not--it was impossible--to entertain it. But I am glad you were able to prove. You will understand--and," my lady ended quickly, "I thank you!"

He looked at her long. "It is I who am in your debt!"

"You?" Her brows lifted.

"Yes."

"I--don't think I quite understand." In spite of herself and her resolution, the proud eyes seemed to shrink from a nameless something in his gaze.

"Nor I! Nanette was talking with me last night!"

"Nanette!"

In words, direct, unequivocal, he told her what he had learned; and although my lady laughed, as at something absurd, and strove to maintain an unvarying mien, his eyes challenged evasion; demanded truth! At that moment the space where they stood seemed, perhaps, too small; to hem her very closely in--too closely--as, drawing back, she touched the hard rocky wall!

"Why?" Still endeavoring to regard him as if the charge could only be

preposterous, too unreasonable to answer, she was, nevertheless, conscious of the flame on her face--tacit refutation of the denials in her eyes! "Why?" she repeated.

"That is just what I was asking myself when I saw you, my Lady."

"And, of course, knowing there could be no--that it was too senseless--" The words she was searching for failed her; she looked toward the path over the neck of rock, but he continued to stand between it and her.

"I have heard the story in all its details; all that passed at the Mount, while Nanette was there. And," instead of having undermined his belief, she felt she had only strengthened it, "I am sure you went to the Monastery St. Ranulphe, knowing--"

"You are sure!" she interrupted quickly. "It wasn't long ago you were sure it was I who betrayed you, and--"

"I was wrong, then; but," his eyes continued to meet hers, "I am not wrong now."

Behind her, my lady's hand closed hard on the rock.

"Deny it!" his voice went on. "In so many words!"

"Why should I?" She caught her breath quickly. "I denied something to you once, and you did not believe."

"I'll believe you now!"

"I should feel very much flattered, I am sure; but after--" A spark of defiance began to gleam in her eyes. "You are sure one moment, and not, the next! You are ready to believe, or not to believe!" More certain now, she lifted her head; she, whose assurance and wit had never failed her at court, would not be put to confusion by him!

His answer was unexpected; to her; to himself. Perhaps it was the peasant--the untamed half-peasant--in his blood that caused it; that made a sudden, unceremonious act, his reply! He caught both her hands; drew her to him. He knew she could never care for him--she, the beautiful lady! But he forgot himself for the moment; thought only of what she had done; her courage, her fineness, her delicate loveliness! Her life for his. To pay a fancied debt, perhaps? And all the while he had thought-- Self-reproaches fell from his lips; were followed by bolder, more daring words. All he would have said the night on the beach, when he had borne her from the fiery rock to the ship, now burst from him; all he had felt when he had held her in his arms--motionless, unresisting, the still, white face upturned, offering itself freely to his gaze!

At the neck of the rock, beneath his feet, the waves thundered; near

them, wild birds circled, wheeled and were borne on by the strong breath of the wind. Had he spoken; what had he said? A gradual consciousness of the beating of the sea smote his senses, as with rhythmical regularity it arose. He listened; slowly in his eyes that light that demanded--claimed, as it were, its own--was replaced by another; his hands released hers. My lady made no sound; her proud lips trembled. Very pale, she leaned back.

So silence lengthened. "Pardon, my Lady!" he said at last, very humbly. "It had not occurred to me my secret was not safe; that I, master of ships and men, should not be master of myself! But I had not expected to be alone with your Ladyship, and," a shadow of a smile crossed the strong, reckless face, "your Ladyship can weigh the provocation! If the excuse will not serve, I have none other to offer. Certainly, will I retract nothing. What's said, is said, and--no lies will unsay it!"

He looked at the water; the tide was nearly in; he turned. She would never see him again, for which she would be very glad, since the sight of him must always have been hateful to her. Had not fate decreed--bitterly--she should look upon him only as an enemy? It might be, in time, she would condone his presumption, when his presence would no longer vex her! He was going one way; she, another, soon, with--

"You--you are mistaken, Monsieur!" My lady's tone was tremulous.

"Mistaken?"

"The--Marquis de Beauvillers left last night, on a fishing bark."

"Left!" abruptly he wheeled. "Why?" She did not answer. "You mean?"

Before the sudden swift question that shone from his eyes, hers fell.

"Speak!" He seized her hand; his dark, eager face was near hers now.

"You have sent him away? He will never return?" She lifted her head; answered not in words; but a new light in her eyes met the flash of his. "My Lady!" he cried, bewildered for the moment at what that glance revealed. An instant she seemed once more striving to combat him, when, drawing her gently toward him, he bent lower; kissed softly her lips.

"Is it, then, true--"

"You find it so hard to believe?"

"That you love me? That I seem no longer your enemy?"

"My enemy? You? Who risked so much--saved my life! Ah, no, no! Do you not remember," softly, "he, too, said--'Forget!'"

"I only remember I have long loved you! For me have you ever been the princess--who dwelt in the clouds--in a palace, enchanted--" Her face

changed. "That saddens you! Forgive me!"

"It seems like a dream--that life, then! All made up of lightness and gaiety; courtiers and fine masques, until--" Beneath the bright gold of her hair, my lady's brow knit.

"Until?"

"Nay; I know not until--just when! Only, for long, I seem to have lived in a world, unreal and false. Last night, when in the garden, I felt stifled. This marriage! Arranged--for what?" She made a quick gesture. "The words came--had to come--though they hurt my lord's pride; touched his vanity! Nothing deeper! It was gone. Besides--"

My lady stopped. "Go on!" he urged, his voice eager.

"That is all. At least, all I would acknowledge to myself, then."

"And now?" His arm tightened; he held my lady close. "Now?"

Her lips lifted; though silent, made answer in the abandonment of the moment, the past and all its vicissitudes vanished; only the present held them--the present and the future, beautiful as the horizon, now rosy and glowing beneath the warm touch of the dawn.

The tide came in and the tide went out.

"Mon capitaine must have changed his mind," said old Pierre at the inn. And he gazed toward a ship, stranded on the sands of the harbor.

THE END