Under the Rose

By

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Freeditorial

UNDER THE ROSE

CHAPTER I

A NEST OF NINNIES

"A song, sweet Jacqueline!"

"No, no—"

"Jacqueline!—Jacqueline!—"

"No more, I say—"

A jingle of tinkling bells mingled with the squeak of a viola; the guffaws of a rompish company blended with the tuneless chanting of discordant minstrels, and the gray parrot in its golden cage, suspended from one of the oaken beams of the ceiling, shook its feathers for the twentieth time and screamed vindictively at the roguish band.

Jingle, jingle, went the merry bells; squeak, squeak, the tightened strings beneath the persistent scraping of the rosined bow. On his throne in Fools' hall, Triboulet, the king's hunchback, leaned complacently back, his eyes bent upon a tapestry but newly hung in that room, the meeting place of jesters, buffoons and versifiers.

"We appeal to Triboulet—"

"Triboulet!"

A girl's silvery laugh rang out.

"Triboulet!"

Again the derisive musical tones.

Upon his chair of state, the dwarf did not answer; professed not to hear. By the uncertain glimmer of torches and the flickering glow of the fire he was engaged in tracing a resemblance to himself in the central figure of the composition wrought in threads of silk—Momus, fool by patent to Jove, thrust from Olympus and greeting the earth-born with a great grin.

"An excellent likeness!" muttered Triboulet. "A very pretty likeness!" he continued, swelling with pride.

And truly it was said that sprightly ladies, working between love and pleasure times, drew from the court fool for their conception of the

mythological buffoon, reproducing Triboulet's great head; his mouth, proportionately large; his protruding eyes; his bowed back, short, twisted legs and long, muscular arms; and his nose far larger than that of Francis, who otherwise had the largest nose in the kingdom.

But how could they depict the meanness of soul that dwelt in that extraordinary shell? The blithesome tapestry-makers, albeit adepts in form, grace and harmony, could not touch the subjectiveness of existence. Thus it was a double pleasure for Triboulet to see, limned in well-chosen hues, his form, the crookedness of which he was as proud as any courtier of his symmetry and beauty, the while his dark, vain soul lay concealed behind the mask of merry deformity and laughing monstrosity.

"Would your Majesty like to command me?"

The mocking feminine voice recalled Triboulet from his pleasing contemplation.

"No, no!" he answered, sullenly, and condescended to turn his glance upon the assemblage.

Over a goodly gathering of jesters, buffoons, poets, and even philosophers, he lorded it, holding his head as high as his hump would permit and conscious of his own place in the esteem of the king. Not long ago the monarch had laughed and applauded when Triboulet had twisted his features into a horrid grimace, and since then the dwarf's little heart had expanded with such arrogance, it seemed to him he was almost Francis himself as he sat there on Francis' sometime throne; and these Sir Jollys were his subjects all—Marot, Caillette, Brusquet, Villot, and the lesser lights, jesters of barons, cardinals and even bishops! Rabelais, too, that poor, dissolute devil of a writer, learned as Homer, brutish as Homer's swine—all subjects of his, the king of jesters, save one; one whom he eyed with certain fear and wonder; fear, because she was a woman—and Triboulet esteemed all the sex but "highly perfected devils"—and wonder, at finding her different from, and more perplexing than even the rest of her kind!

"Jacqueline!—"

now she was perched on one corner of the table, and her face had a witch-like loveliness, as though borrowing its pallor and beauty from the moon, source of all magic and necromancy. Her eyes shone with such luster that, seeking their hue, they held the observer's gaze in mocking languor, and cheated the inquisitive coxcomb of his quest, the while the disdainful lips curved laughingly and so bewildered him, he forgot the customary phrases

and stood staring like a nonny. Her footstep fell so light, she was so agile and quick, the superstitious dwarf swore she was but a creature of the night and held surreptitious meetings with all the familiar spirits of demonology. As she never denied the uncanny imputation, but only displayed her small white teeth maliciously, by way of answer, Triboulet felt assured he was right and crossed himself religiously whenever she gazed too fixedly at him.

A most gracieuse folle, her dress was in keeping with her character, yellow being the predominating color. To the fanciful adornment of the gown her lithe figure lent itself readily, while her rebellious curls were well adapted to that badge of her servitude, the jaunty cap that crowned their waving abundance.

In especial disdain, from her position upon the corner of the table, her glance wandered down the board and rested on Rabelais, the gourmand, before whom were an empty trencher and tankard. The priest-doctor-writer-scamp who affected the company of jesters and liked not a little the hospitality of Fools' hall, which adjoined the pastry branch of the castle kitchen and was not far removed from the wine butts, had just unrolled a bundle of manuscript, all daubed with trencher grease and tankard drippings, and was about to read aloud the strange adventures of one Pantagruel, when, overcome by indulgence, his head fell forward on the table, almost in the wooden platter, and the papers fluttered to the floor.

"Put him out!" commanded Triboulet from his high place.

But she of the jaunty cap sprang from the table.

"How wise are your Majesty's decrees!" she said mockingly with her glance upon the dwarf. He shifted uneasily in the throne. "You should have put him out before! But now"—turning contemptuously to the poor figure of the great man—"he's harmless. His silence is golden; his speech was dross."

"And yet," answered Marot, thoughtfully, "the king esteems him; the king who is at once scholar, poet, wit, soldier—"

"Soldier!" she exclaimed, quickly. "When he can not conquer Italy and regain his heritage!"

"Can not?" ventured Triboulet, mindful of the dignity of his royal master. "Why not?"

"Because the women would conquer him!"

"Nay; the king prefers the blue eyes of France," spoke up the cardinal's fool, he of the viola.

"Then do you set our queen of fools, our fair Jacqueline, out of his Majesty's good graces," interposed one of the lesser jesters, a mere baron's hireling, who long had burned with secret admiration for the maid of the coquettish cap.

"I am such a fool as to want the good graces of no man—or monarch!" she replied boldly, without glancing at the speaker.

"An he were in love, you would be two fools!" laughed Caillette, the court poet.

"In love, 'tis only the man is the fool or—the fooled!" she returned pointedly, and Caillette, despite his self-possession, flushed painfully. Since Diane de Poitiers had wedded her ancient lord, the poet had become grave, studious, almost sad.

"And is your mistress, the king's ward, fooling with her betrothed?" he asked quickly, conscious of knowing winks and nudges.

"The Princess Louise and the Duke of Friedwald are to wed for reasons of state," said the young woman, gravely. "There'll be no fools."

"Ah, a loveless match!"

"But not a landless one!" retorted she of the cap without the bells. "Besides, it cements the friendship of Francis and Charles V! What more would you? But I'll tell you a secret."

At that the company flocked around her, as though there was something enticing in her tone; the vague promise of an interesting bit of gossip or the indefinite suggestion of a court scandal.

"A secret!" said the cardinal's fool, rubbing his hands together. His master often rewarded him for particularly choice morsels of loose tittle-tattle.

"Oh, nothing very wicked!" she answered, waving them back with her small hand. "'Tis only that they play at make-believe in love, the princess and her betrothed! But after all, it is far more sensible than real love-making, where if the pleasure be more acute, the pangs are therefore the greater. She addresses to him the tenderest counterfeit verses; he returns them in kind. She even simulated such an illusory sadness that the duke has sent his own jester, who has but just arrived at court, to amuse her (ahem!) dullness, until he himself could come!"

At this the cardinal's buffoon looked disappointed, for his master liked more highly-flavored hearsay, while Triboulet frowned and brought down his heavy fist upon the arm of the throne.

"A new jester forsooth!" he exclaimed.

"And why not?" Lifting her swart brows, quizzically.

"We are already overstocked with 'prentice fools," he retorted, looking over the throng.

"Ah, you fear perhaps some one may depose you?" remarked Jacqueline coldly.

A guarded laugh arose from the gathering and the dwarf's eyes gleamed.

"Depose me, Triboulet!" he shouted, rising. "Triboulet is sovereign lord of all at whom he mocks! His wand is mightier than an episcopal miter!"

In his overweening rage and vanity he fairly crouched before the throne, eying them all like a cat. His thick lips trembled; his eyes became bloodshot.

He forgot all prudence.

"Doth not the king himself seek my advice?" He laughed horribly. "Hath not, perhaps, many a fair gentleman been burned—aye, burned to ashes as a Calvinist!—at my suggestion!"

"Miserable wretch! Spy!" exclaimed the young woman, paler than a lily, as she bent her eyes, with fully opened lids, upon him.

As if to shield himself, he raised his hand, yet drunkenness or wrath overcame caution and superstition, and the red eyes met the dark ones. But a moment, and the former dropped sullenly; a strange thrill ran through him. He thought he was bewitched.

"Non nobis Domine!" he murmured, striving to recall a hymn. As Latin was the language of witchcraft, so, also, was it the antidote. Contemptuously she turned her back and walked slowly to the fire. Upon her white face and supple figure played the elfish glow, lighting the little cap and the waving tresses beneath.

Regarding her furtively, Triboulet's courage returned, since she was looking at the coals, not at him.

"Ho, ho!" he said jocosely. "You all thought I was sincere. Listen, my children! The art of fooling lies in trumped-up earnestness." He smiled hideously.

"Bravo, Triboulet!" cried an admiring voice.

"Only time and art can give you such mastery over the passions," continued the jester. "Which one of you would depose me? Who so ugly as I? Poets, philosophers! I snap my fingers at them. Poor moths! And you dare bait me with a new-comer! Let him look to himself!" From earnestness to grandiloquence was but a step.

"Let him come!" And Triboulet, imitating the pose of Francis himself, drew his wooden sword.

"Let him come!" he repeated, fiercely.

"Who?" called out a gay and reckless voice.

Through the doorway leading into the kitchen stepped a young man; slender, almost boyish in appearance, with light-brown hair and deep-set eyes that belied the gaiety and mirth of his features. His costume, that of a Jester, was silk of finest texture and design, upon which were skilfully fashioned in threads of silver the arms of Charles V, King of Spain and Emperor of Germany, the powerful rival of Francis, whose friendship now, for reasons of state, the latter sought.

Smilingly the foreign jester gazed around the room; at the unusual furnishings, picturesque, yet appropriate; at the inmates, the fools scattered about the great board or near the mighty fireplace; the renowned philosopher, Rabelais, sleeping on his arms, with hand outstretched toward the neglected tankard; at the striking appearance of the girl who looked with casual, careless interest upon him; at the grotesque, crook-backed figure before the throne.

And observing the incongruity of his surroundings, he laughed lightly, while his glance, turning inquiringly if not insolently, from one to the other, lingered in some surprise upon the young woman. He had heard that in far-away France the motley was not confined to men. Had not Jeanne, queen of Charles I, possessed her jestress, Artaude de Puy, "folle to our dear companion," as said the king? Had not Madame d'Or, wearer of the bells, kept the nobles laughing? Had not the haughty, eccentric Don John, his handsome, merry joculatrix, attached to his princely household?

But knowing only by rumor of these matters, the jester from abroad looked hard at her, the first madcap in petticoats he had ever seen. For her part, Jacqueline bore his scrutiny with visible annoyance.

"Well," she said impatiently, a flash of resentment in her fine eyes, "have you conned me over enough?"

"Too much, mistress," he replied in no wise abashed, "an it hath displeased you. Too little to please myself."

"Yourself!" she returned, with sudden anger at his persistent gaze. "Some lord's plaything to beat or whip; a toy—"

"And yet a poet who can make rhymes on woman's beauty," he answered with a careless laugh.

"Another courtier!" grumbled Triboulet. "Lacking true wit, fools nowadays essay only compliments to cover their dullness."

With the same air of insolent amusement, the new-comer turned to the throne and its occupant, whom he subjected to an even more deliberate investigation.

"Is it man or manikin, gentle mistress?" he asked, after concluding his examination.

She did not deign to answer, but the offended Triboulet waved his wooden sword vindictively.

"Manikin!" he roared, and sprang with vicious lunges upon the duke's jester, who falling back before the suddenness of the assault, whipped out his weapon in turn, and, laughing, threw himself into an attitude of defense.

"A mortal combat!" cried the cardinal's wit-snapper.

"Charles V and Francis!" exclaimed Caillette, referring to the personal challenge which had once passed between the two great monarchs. "With a throne for the victor!" he added gaily, indicating Triboulet's chair of state.

The clatter and din awoke Rabelais, who drowsily regarded the combatants with lack-luster gaze and undoubtedly thought himself once more amid the fanciful conflicts of fearful giants.

"Fall to, Pantagruel, my merry Paladin!" he exclaimed bombastically. "Cut, slash, stab, fence and justle!" And himself, reaching for an imaginary sword, encountered the tankard which he would have raised to his lips but that his

shaggy head fell again to the board before his willing arm had obeyed the passing impulse of his sluggish brain.

"Fence!—justle!" he murmured, and slept once more.

But the parrot, again disturbed, could not so easily compose itself to slumber. Whipping its head from its downy nest, it outspread its gray wings gloriously and screamed and shouted, as though venting all the thunders of the Vatican upon the offending belligerents. And above the uproar and noise of arms, rabble and bird, arose the piercing voice of Triboulet:

"Watch me spit this bantam-cock!"

CHAPTER II

A ROYAL EAVESDROPPER

Tough and sharp-pointed, a wooden sword was no insignificant weapon, wielded by the thews and sinews of a Triboulet. Crouching like an animal, the king's buffoon sprang with headlong fury, uttering hoarse, guttural sounds that awakened misgivings regarding the fate of his too confident antagonist.

"Do not kill him, Triboulet!" cried Marot, alarmed lest the duke's fool should be slain outright. "Remember he has journeyed from the court of Charles V!"

"Charles V!" came through Triboulet's half-closed teeth. "My master's one great enemy!"

"Hush!" muttered Villot. "Our master's enemy is now his dear friend!"

"Friend!" sneered the other, but even as he thrust, his sword tingled sharply in his hand, and, whisked magically out of his grip, described a curve in the air and fell at a far end of the room. At the same time a stinging blow descended smartly on the dwarf's hump.

"Pardon me!" laughed the duke's fool. "Being unused to such exercise, my blade fell by mistake on your back."

If looks could have killed, Triboulet would have achieved his original purpose, but after a vindictive though futile glance his head drooped despondently. To have been thus humiliated before those whom he regarded as his vassals! What jest could restore him the prestige he had enjoyed; what play of words efface the shame of that public chastisement? Had he been beaten by the king—but thus to suffer at the hand of a foreign fool! And the monarch—would he learn of it?—the punishment of the royal jester? As in a dream, he heard the hateful voices of the company.

"'Tis not the first time he has been wounded—there!" said fearless Caillette, who openly acknowledged his aversion for the king's favorite fool. "But be seated, gentle sir," he added to the stranger, "and share our rough hospitality."

"Rough, certes!" commented the other, as he returned his blade to his belt. "And as I see no stool—"

"There's the throne!" returned Caillette, courteously. "Since you have overcome Triboulet, his place is yours."

"A precarious place!" said the new-comer, easily, dropping, nevertheless, into the chair.

"The king is dead! Long live the king!" cried the cardinal's jester.

"Long live the king!" they shouted, every fool and zany raising a tankard, save the dwarf and the young woman, the former continuing to glare vindictively upon the usurper, and the latter to all intent remaining oblivious of the ceremony of installation. Poised upon a chair, she idly thrust her fingers through the gilded bars of the cage that hung from the rafters and gently stroked the head of the now complaisant bird.

"Poor Jocko! Poor Jocko!" she murmured.

"La!—la!—la!—" sang the parrot, responsive to her light caress.

"Your Majesty's wishes! Your Majesty's decree!" exclaimed the monastic wit-worm.

"Hear! hear!" roared Brusquet.

"Silence!" commanded Marot. "His Majesty speaks."

"Toot! toot! toot!" rang out the flourish of a trumpet, a clarion prelude to the fiat from the throne.

The new king in motley arose; heedless, devil-may-care, very erect in his preposterously pointed shoes.

"I appoint you, Thony, treasurer of the exchequer, because you are quick at sleight-of-hand," he began.

"Good," laughed Marot. "An he's more light-fingered than his predecessor, he's a master of prestidigitation!"

"You, Brusquet," went on the new master of Fool's hall, "I reward with the government of Guienne, for he who governs his own house so ill is surely fitted for greater tasks of incompetency."

This allusion to the petticoat rule which dominated the luckless jester at home was received in good part by all save the hapless domestic bondman himself.

"You, Villot, are made admiral of the fleet."

Villot smiled, thinking how Francis had but recently bestowed that office upon the impoverished husband of pretty Madame d'Etaille.

"Thanks, your Majesty," he began, "but if some post nearer home—"

"You are to sail at once!"

"But my wife—"

"Will remain at court!" announced the duke's jester with great decision.

Villot made a wry face. The king in motley smiled significantly. "A safe haven, Villot! Besides, remember a court without ladies is like a spring without flowers."

A movement resembling apprehension swept through the company. The epigram had been Francis'; the court—a flower-bed of roses—was, in consequence, a thorny maze for a jester to tread. From her chair at the far end of the room, the young woman looked at the new-comer for the first time since his enthronement. Her fingers yet played between the gilded bars; the posture she had assumed set forth the pliant grace of her figure. Above the others, she glanced at him, her hair very black against the golden cage; her arm, very white, half unsheathed from the great hanging sleeve.

"You are over-bold," she said, a peculiar smile upon her lips.

"Nay; I have spoken no treason, mistress," he retorted blithely.

"Not by word of mouth, perhaps, but by imputation."

He raised his brows with a gesture of wanton protest, while the face before him clouded. Her eyes held his; her little teeth just gleamed between the crimson of her lips.

"I presume you consider Charles the more fitting monarch?" she continued.

Was it the disdain of her voice? Did she read his passing thoughts? Did she challenge him to utter them?

"In truth," the jester said carelessly, "Charles builds fortresses, not pleasure palaces; and garrisons them with soldiers, not ladies."

She half-smiled. Her glance fell. Her hand moved caressingly, the sleeve waving beneath.

"Poor Jocko! Poor Jocko!" she murmured.

Triboulet's glance beamed with delight. She was casting her spell over his enemy.

"Oh," muttered Triboulet, "if the king could but have heard!"

Perhaps it was a breath of air, but the tapestry depicting the misadventures of Momus waved and moved. Triboulet, who noted everything, saw this, and suffered an expression of triumph momentarily to rest upon his malignant features. Had his prayer been answered? "A spring without flowers," forsooth! Dearly cherished the august gardener his beautiful roses. Great red roses; white roses; blossoms yet unopened!

Following his gaze, a significant light appeared in the young woman's eyes, while her arm fell to her side.

"Now to see Presumption sue for pardon," she whispered to herself.

One by one the company, too, turned in the direction Triboulet was looking. In portraiture the classical buffoon grinned and gibed at them from the tapestry; and even from his high station above the clouds Jupiter, who had ejected the offending fool of the gods, looked less stern and implacable. An expectant hush fell upon the assemblage, when suddenly Jove and Momus alike were unceremoniously thrust aside, and, as the folds fell slowly back, before the many-hued curtain stood a man of stately and majestic mien.

A man whose appearance caused deep-seated consternation, whose forbidding aspect made the very silence portentous and terrifying. With dress slashed and laced, rich in jewelry and precious stones, he remained motionless, regarding the motley gathering, while an ominous half-smile played about his features. He said nothing, but his reserve was more sinister than language. Capricious, cruel was his face; in his eyes shone covert enjoyment of the situation.

Would he never speak? With one hand he stroked his beard; with the other he toyed with the lace on his doublet.

"You were talking, children," he said, finally, "before I came in."

"If your Majesty," ventured Triboulet, "has heard all, your Majesty will not blame—us!" And he glanced malevolently toward the duke's Jester, who, upon the king's abrupt entrance, had descended from the platform.

Observing the emblazoned arms of Charles V upon the dress of the culprit, a faint look of surprise swept Francis' face. Did it recall that fatal day, when on the field of battle, a rival banner had waved ever illusively; ever beyond his reach? Now it shone before him as though mocking his friendship for his one-time powerful enemy, the only man he feared, the emperor who had

overthrown him. The sinister smile of the king gave way to gloomy thoughtfulness.

"Who is this knave?" he asked at length, fixedly regarding the erstwhile badge of his defeat.

"A poor fool, Sire!" replied the kneeling man.

"Those arms, embroidered on your dress—what do they mean?" said the king shortly.

"The arms of my master's master, your Majesty!" was the over-confident answer.

"Who is your master?"

"The Duke of Friedwald, Sire, the betrothed of the Princess Louise."

"And your purpose here?"

"My master sent me to the princess. 'I'll miss thee, rogue,' said he. ''Tis proof of love to send thee, my merry companion of the wine cup! But go! Nature hath formed thee to conjure sadness from a lady's face.' So I set out upon my perilous journey, and, favored by fortune, am but safely arrived. I was e'en now about to repair to the princess, whom I trust, in my humble way, to amuse."

"And thou shalt!" said the king, significantly.

"Oh, your Majesty!" with assumed modesty.

"That is," added Francis, "if it will amuse her to see you hanged!"

"And if it did not amuse her, Sire?" spoke up the new-comer, without a tremor in his voice.

"What then?" asked the king.

"It would be a breach of hospitality to hang me, the servant of the duke who is servant of Charles V!" he replied boldly.

Francis started. Like a menace shone the arms of the great emperor. Vividly he recalled his own humiliation, his long captivity, and mistrusted the power of his subtile, amiable friend-enemy. Friendship? Sweeter was hatred. But the promptings of wisdom had suggested the policy of peace; the reins of expediency drove him, autocrat or slave, to the doctrines of loving

brotherhood. He turned his gloomy eyes upon the glowing countenance of Triboulet.

"What say you, fool?"

"Your Majesty," answered the eager dwarf, "could hang him without breach of hospitality."

"How do you make that good, Triboulet?" asked the monarch.

"The duke has given him to the princess. The princess is a subject of your Majesty. The king of France has jurisdiction over the princess' fool and surely can proceed in so small a matter as hanging him."

Francis bent a malignant look upon the young man. Behind the dwarf stood the jestress, now an earnest spectator of the scene.

"This new-comer's stay with us promises to be brief, Caillette," she whispered.

"Hark, you witch! He answers," returned the poet.

"What can he say?" she retorted, shrugging her shoulders. "He is already condemned."

"Are you pleased, mistress? Just because the poor fellow stared at you overmuch."

"Oh," she said, insensibly, "it was written he should hang himself. Now we'll hear how ably Audacity parleys with Fate."

"It would be no breach of hospitality, Sire, to hang the princess' fool," spoke the condemned man with no sign of waning confidence, "yet it would seem to depreciate the duke's gift. Your Majesty should hang the one and spare the other. 'Tis a matter of logic," he went on quickly, "to point out where the duke's gift ends and the princess' fool begins. A gift is a gift until it is received. The princess has not yet received the duke's gift. Therefore, your Majesty can not hang me, as the princess' fool; nor would your Majesty desire to hang me as the duke's gift."

Imperceptibly the monarch's mien relaxed, for next to a contest with blades he liked the quick play of words.

"Answer him, Triboulet," he said.

"Your Majesty—your Majesty—" stammered the dwarf, and paused in despair, his wits failing him at the critical juncture.

"Enough!" commanded the king, sternly. A sound of suppressed merriment even as he spoke startled the gathering. "Who laughed?" he cried suddenly. "Was it you, mistress?" fastening his eyes upon the young woman.

Her head fell lower and lower like some dark flower on a slender stem. From out of the veil of her mazy hair came a voice, soft with seeming humility.

"It might have been Jocko, Sire," she said. "He sometimes laughs like that."

The king looked from the woman to the bird; then from the bird to the woman, a gleam of recollection in his glance.

"Humph!" he muttered. "Is this where you serve your mistress? Look to it you serve not yourself ill!"

An instant her eyes flashed upward.

"My mistress is at prayers," she answered, and looked down again as quickly.

"And you meanwhile prefer the drollery of these madcaps to the attentions of our courtiers?" said Francis, more gently. "Certes are you gipsy-born!"

Her hands clasped tighter, but she answered not, and he turned more sternly to the new king of the motley. "As for you," he continued, "for the present the duke's gift is spared. But let the princess' fool look to himself. Remember, a guarded tongue insures a ripe old age, and even a throne in Fools' hall is fraught with hazard. Here! some of you, take this"—indicating the sleeping Rabelais—"and throw it into the horse-pond. Yet see that he does not drown—your heads upon it! 'Tis to him France looks for learning."

He paused; glanced back at the kneeling girl. "You, Mistress Who-Seeks-to-Hide-Her-Face, teach that parrot not to laugh!" he added grimly.

The tapestry waved. Mute the motley throng stared where the king had stood. A light hand touched the arm of the duke's fool, and, turning, he beheld the young woman; her eyes were alight with new fire.

"In God's name," she exclaimed, passionately, "let us leave. You have done mischief enough. Follow me."

"Where'er you will," he responded gallantly.

CHAPTER III

A GIFT FOR THE DUKE

The sun and the breeze contended with the mist, intrenched in the stronghold of the valley. From the east the red orb began its attack; out of the west rode the swift-moving zephyrs, and, vanquished, the wavering vapor stole off into thin air, or hung in isolated wreaths above the foliage on the hillside. Soon the conquering light brightly illumined a medieval castle commanding the surrounding country; the victorious breeze whispered loudly at its gloomy casements. A great Norman structure, somber, austere, it was, however brightened with many modern features that threatened gradually to sap much of its ancient majesty.

"Fill up the moat," Francis had ordered. "'Tis barbaric! What lover would sigh beneath walls thirty feet thick! And the portcullis! Away with it! Summon my Italian painters to adorn the walls. We may yet make habitable these legacies from the savage, brutal past."

So the mighty walls, once set in a comparative wilderness, a tangle of thicket and underbrush, now arose from garden, lawn and park, where even the deer were no longer shy, and the water, propelled by artificial power, shot upward in jets.

Seated at a window which overlooked this sylvan aspect, modified if not fashioned by man, a young woman with seeming conscientiousness, told her beads. The apartment, though richly furnished, was in keeping with the devout character of its fair mistress. A brush or aspersorium, used for sprinkling holy water, was leaning against the wall. Upon a table lay an open psalter, with its long hanging cover and a ball at the extremity of the forel. Behind two tall candlesticks stood an altar-table which, being unfolded, revealed three compartments, each with a picture, painted by Andrea del Sarto, the once honored guest of Francis.

The Princess Louise, cousin of Francis' former queen, Claude, had been reared with rigid strictness, although provided with various preceptors who had made her more or less proficient in the profane letters, as they were then called, Latin, Greek, theology and philosophy. The fame of her beauty had gone abroad; her hand had been often sought, but the obdurate king had steadfastly refused to sanction her betrothal until Charles, the emperor, himself proposed a union between the fair ward of the French monarch and one of his nobles, the young Duke of Friedwald. To this Francis had assented, for he calculated upon thus drawing to his interests one of his rival's most chivalrous knights, while far-seeing Charles believed he could

not only retain the duke, but add to his own court the lovely and learned ward of the king.

And in this comedy of aggrandizement the puppets were willing—as puppets must needs be. Indeed, the duke was seriously enamored of the princess, whose portrait he had seen in miniature, and had himself importuned the emperor to intercede with Francis, knowing that the only way to the lady's hand was through the good offices of him who aspired to the mastery of all Europe, if not the world.

Charles, unwilling to disoblige one whose principality was the most powerful of the Austrian provinces he sought to absorb in his scheme for the unification of all nations, offered no demur to a request fraught with advantage to himself. Besides, cold and calculating though he was, the emperor entertained a certain affection for the duke, who on one occasion, when Charles had been sore beset by the troops of Solyman, had extricated his royal leader from the alternatives of ignominious capture or an untimely end. Accordingly, a formal proposal, couched in language of warm friendship to the king, was despatched by the emperor. When Francis, with some misgiving, arising from experience with womankind, laid the matter before Louise, she, to his surprise, proved her devotion and loyalty by her entire submissiveness, and the king, kissing her hand, generously vowed the wedding festivities should be worthy of her beauty and fealty.

Was she thinking of that scene now and the many messages which had subsequently passed between her distant lover and herself, as the white fingers ceased to tell the beads? Was she questioning fate and the future when the rosary fell from her hand and the clinking of the great glass beads on the hard floor aroused her from a reverie? Languidly she rose, crossed the room toward a low dressing table, when at the same time one of the several doors of the apartment opened, admitting the jestress, Jacqueline, whose long, flowing gown of dark green bore no distinguishing mark of the motley she had assumed the night before. The dreamy, almost lethargic, gaze of the princess rested for a moment upon the ardent eyes of the maid who stood motionless before her.

"The duke's jester who arrived last night awaits your pleasure without," said the girl.

"Bid him enter. Stay! The fillet for my hair. Seems he a merry fellow?"

"So merry, Madam, he mimicked the king last night in Fool's hall, beat Triboulet, appointed knaves in jest to high offices, and had been hanged for his forwardness but that he narrowly saved his neck by a slender device."

"What; all that in so short a time!" exclaimed the princess. "A most presumptuous rogue!"

"The king, Madam, was behind the tapestry and heard it all: his appointment of Thony as treasurer, because he is apt at palming money; Brusquet, governor of Guienne, since he governs his own home so ill; and Villot, admiral of the fleet, that he might sail away and leave his pretty wife behind him."

"I'll warrant me the story is known to the entire court ere this," laughed the lady. "Won't Madame d'Etaille be in a temper! And the admiral when he hears of it—on the high seas! The king was eavesdropping, you say, and yet spared the jester? He must bear a charmed life."

"He dubbed himself the duke's gift, Madam, and boldly claimed privilege under the poor cloak of hospitality."

"Surely," murmured the princess, "there will be no lack of entertainment with this knave under the same roof. Too much entertainment, I fear me. Well, admit the bold fellow."

Crossing to the door, the maid pushed it back and the figure of the jester passed the threshold:—a figure so graceful and well-built, the lady's eyes, turning toward him with mild inquiry, lingered with approval; lingered, and were upraised to a fair, handsome face, when approval gave way to wonder.

Was this the imprudent, hot-brained rogue who had swaggered in Fools' hall, and made a farce of the affairs of the nation? His countenance seemed that of a courtier rather than a low-born scape-grace; his bearing in consonance, as, approaching the princess, he knelt near the edge of her sweeping crimson garment. Quietly the maid withdrew to a corner of the apartment where she seated herself on a low stool, her fingers idly playing with the delicate carvings of a vase of silver, containing water that had been blessed and standing conveniently near the aspersorium.

"You come from the Duke of Friedwald, fool?" said the mistress, recovering from her surprise.

"Yes, Princess."

Louise smiled, and looked toward the maid as if to say: "Why, he's a model of decorum!" but the girl continued regarding the figures on the vase, seemingly indifferent to the scene before her.

"I hear, sirrah, but a poor account of your behavior last night," continued the princess. "You must have a care, or I shall send you back to the duke and command him to have you whipped. You have been here but overnight, yet how many enemies have you made? The king; the admiral, and—last but not least—a certain lady. Poor fool! you may have saved your neck, but for how long? Fie! what an account must I give of you to your master!"

"Ah, Madam," he answered quickly, "you show me now the folly of it all."

"Let me see," she went on more gently, "what we may do, since you are penitent? The king may forgive; the admiral forget, but the lady—she will neither forget nor forgive. Fortunately, I think she fears to disoblige me, and, if I let it be known you are an indispensable part of my household—" she paused thoughtfully—"besides, she has a little secret she would keep from the king. Yes; the secret will save you!" And Louise smiled knowingly, as one who, although most devout, perhaps had missed a few paters or credos in listening to idle worldly gossip.

"Madam," he said, raising his head, "you overwhelm me with your goodness."

"Oh, I like her not; a most designing creature," returned the lady carelessly. "But you may rise. Hand me that embroidery," she added when he had obeyed. "How do I know the duke, my betrothed, whom I have never seen, has not sent you to report upon my poor charms? What if you were only his emissary?"

"Princess," he answered, "I am but a fool; no emissary. If I were—"

"Well?"

She smiled indulgently at the open admiration written so boldly upon his face, and, encouraged by her glance, he regarded her swiftly, comprehensively; the masses of hair the fillet ill-confined; eyes, soft-lidded, dreamy as a summer's day; a figure, pagan in generous proportions; a foot, however, petite, Parisian, peeping from beneath a robe, heavy, voluminous, vivid!

"If you were?" she suggested, passing a golden thread through the cloth she held.

"I would write him the miniature he has of you told but half the truth."

"So you have seen the miniature? It lies carelessly about, no doubt?" Yet her tone was not one of displeasure.

"The duke frequently draws it from his breast to look at it."

"And so many handsome women in the kingdom, too!" laughed the princess. "A tiny, paltry bit of vellum!"

Her lips curled indulgently, as of a person sure of herself. Did not the fool's glance pay her that tribute to which she was not a stranger? Her lashes, suddenly lifted, met his fully, and drove his look, grown overbold, to cover. The princess smiled; she might well believe the stories about him; yet was not ill-pleased. "Like master; like man!" says the proverb. She continued to survey the graceful figure, well-poised head and handsome features of the jester.

"Tell me, sirrah," she continued, "of the duke. Straightforwardly, or—I'll leave thee to the mercy of madam the admiral's wife! What is he like?"

"A fairly likely man!"

"'Tis what one says of a man when one can say nothing else. He is not then very handsome?"

"He has never been so considered!"

The princess' needle remained suspended, then viciously plunged into the golden Cupid she was embroidering. "The king hath played with me," she murmured. "He represented him as one of the most distinguished-appearing knights in the emperor's domains. Is he dark or light?" she went on.

"Dark."

"Tall?"

"Rather short."

"His eyes?" said the lady, after an ominous pause.

"Brown."

"His manners?"

"Those of a soldier."

"His speech?"

"That of one born to command."

"Command!" returned the princess, ironically. "Odious word!"

"You, Madam," quickly answered the jester, "he would serve."

A moment her glance challenged his, coldly, proudly, and then her features softened. The indolent look crept into her eyes once more; the tension of her lips relaxed.

"Command and serve!" laughed the princess. "A paradox, if not a paragon, it seems! Not handsome—probably ugly!—a soldier—full of oaths—a blusterer—strong in his cups! What a list of qualifications! Well"—with a sigh—"what must needs be must be! The emperor plays the rook; Francis moves his pawn—my poor self. The game, beyond the two moves, is naught to us. Perhaps we shall be sacrificed, one or both! What of that, if it's a draw, or one of the players checkmates the other—"

"But, Princess," cried the fool, "he loves you! Passionately!—devotedly!—"

"A passing fancy for a painted semblance!" said the lady, as rising she turned toward the casement, the golden Cupid falling from her lap to the floor. In the rhythmic ease of her movement, in her very attitude, was consciousness of her own power, but to the poet-jester, surrounded as he was by symbols of worship and devotion, her expressed self-doubt seemed that of some saintly being, cloistered in the solitude of a sanctuary.

"Nay," he answered swiftly, "he has but to see you—with the sunlight in your hair—as I see you now! The pawn, Madam, would become a queen; his queen! What would matter to him the game of Charles or Francis? Let Charles grow greater, or Francis smaller. His gain would be—you!"

The fingers of the maid who sat at the far end of the room ceased to caress the silver vase; her hands were tightly clasped together; in her dark eyes was an ironical light, as her gaze passed from the jester to her mistress. Almost motionless stood the princess until he had finished; motionless it would have seemed but for the chain on her breast, which rose and fell with her breathing. From the jeweled network which half-bound her hair shone flashes of light; a tress which escaped the glittering environment lay like a serpent of gold upon the crimson of her gown where the neck softly uprose. A hue, delicately rich as the tinted leaves of orange blossoms, mantled her cheeks.

She shook her head in soft dissent. "Queen for how long?" she answered gently. "As long as gentle Claude was queen for Francis? As long as saintly Eleanor held undisputed sway?"

"As long as Eleanor is queen in the hearts of her people!" he exclaimed, passionately. "As long as France is her bridegroom!"

Deliberately she half-turned, the coil of gold falling over her shoulder. Near her hand, white against the dark casement, a blood-red rose trembled at the entrance of her chamber, and, grasping it lightly, she held it to her face as if its perfume symbolized her thoughts.

"Is there so much constancy in the world?" she asked musingly. "Can such singleness of heart exist? Like this flower which would bloom and die at my window? A bold flower, though! Day by day has it been growing nearer. Here," she added, breaking it from the stem and holding it to the jester.

"Madam!" he cried.

"Take it," she laughed, "and—send it to the duke!" Kneeling, he received it. "Thou art a fellow of infinite humor indeed. Equally at home in a lady's boudoir, or a fools' drinking bout. Come, Jacqueline, Queen Marguerite awaits our presence. She has a new chapter to read, but whether another instalment of her tales, or a prayer for her Mirror of the Sinful Soul, I know not. As for you, sir"—with a parting smile—"later we shall walk in the garden. There you may await us."

CHAPTER IV

AN IMPATIENT SUITOR

"Well, Sir Mariner, do you not fear to venture so far on a dangerous sea?" asked a mocking voice.

"A dangerous sea, fair Jacqueline?" he replied, stroking the head of the hound which lay before the bench. "I see nothing save smiling fields and fragrant beds of flowers."

"Oh, I recognize now Monsieur Diplomat, not Sir Mariner!" she retorted.

Beneath her head-dress, resembling in some degree two great butterfly wings, her face looked smaller than its wont. Laced tight, after the fashion, the cotte-hardie made her waist appear little larger than could be clasped by the hands of a soldier, while a silken-shod foot with which she tapped the ground would have nestled neatly in his palm. Was it pique that moved her thus to address the duke's jester? Since he had arrived, Jacqueline had been relegated, as it were, to the corner. She, formerly ever first with the princess, had perforce stood aside on the coming of the foreign fool whose company her mistress strangely seemed to prefer to her own.

First had it been talking, walking and jesting, in which last accomplishment he proved singularly expert, judging from the peals of laughter to which her mistress occasionally gave vent. Then it had become riding, hawking and, worst of all, reading. Lately Louise, learned, as has been set forth, in the profane letters, had displayed a marked favor for books of all kinds—The Tree of Battles, by Bonnet, the Breviary of Nobles in verse, the "Livre des faits d'armes et de chevalerie," by Christine de Pisan; and in a secluded garden spot, with her fool and servant, she sedulously pursued her literary labors.

As books were rare, being hand-printed and hand-illumined, the princess' choice of volumes was not large, but Marguerite, the king's sister, possessed some rarely executed poems—in their mechanical aspect; the monarch permitted her the use of several precious chronicles; while the abbess in the convent near by, who esteemed Louise for her piety and accomplishments, submitted to her care a gorgeously painted, satin-bound Life of Saint Agnes, a Roman virgin who died under the sanguinary persecution of Diocletian. But Jacqueline frowningly noticed that the saint's life lay idle—conspicuously, though fittingly, on the altar-table—while a manuscript of the Queen of Navarre suspiciously accompanied the jester when he sought the pleasant nook selected for reading and conversation.

It was to this spot the maid repaired one soft summer afternoon, where she found the fool and a volume—Marguerite's, by the purple binding and the love-knot in silver!—awaiting doubtless the coming of the princess; and at the sight of them, the book of romance and the jester who brought it, what wonder her patience gave way?

"You have been here now a fortnight, Monsieur Diplomat," she continued, bending the eyes which Triboulet so feared upon the other.

"Thirteen days, to be exact, sweet Jacqueline!" he answered calmly.

"Indeed! Then there is some hope for you, if you've kept track of time," she returned pointedly.

Still he forbore to qualify his manner, save with a latent smile that further exasperated the girl.

"What mean you, gentle mistress?" he asked quietly, without even looking at her.

"'Sweet Jacqueline!' 'Gentle mistress!' you are profuse with soft words!" she cried sharply.

"And yet they turn you not from anger."

"Anger!" she said, her eyes flashing. "Not another man at court would dare to talk to me as you do."

At this he lifted his brows and surveyed her much as one would a spoiled child, a glance that excited in her the same emotion she had experienced the night of his arrival in Fools' hall, when he had contemplated her in her garb of Joculatrix, as some misplaced anomaly.

"I know, mistress," he returned ironically, "you have a reputation for sorcery. But I think it lies more in your eyes than in the moon."

"And yet I can see the future for all that," she replied, persistently, defiantly.

"The future?" he retorted, and looked from the earth to the sky. "What is the goal of yonder tiny cloud? Can you tell me that?"

"The goal?" she repeated, uplifting her head. "Wait! It is very small. The sun is already swallowing it up."

"Heigho!" yawned the jester, outstretching his yellow-pointed boot, "I catch not the moral to the fable—an there be one!

"The moral!" she said, quickly. "Ask Marot."

"Why Marot?" Balancing the stick with the fool's head in his hand.

"Because he dared love Queen Marguerite!" she answered impetuously. "The fool in motley; the lady in purple! How he jested at her wedding! How he wept when he thought himself alone!"

"He had but himself to blame, Jacqueline," returned the other with composure, although his eyes were now bent straight before him. "He could not climb to her; she could not stoop to him. Yet I daresay, it was a mad dream he would not have foregone."

"Not have foregone!" she exclaimed, quickly. "What would he not have given to tear it from his breast; aye, though he tore his heart with it! That day, bright and fair, when Henry d'Albret, King of Navarre, took her in his arms and kissed her brow! When amid gay festivities she became his bride! Not have foregone? Yes; Marot would forego that day—and other days."

Still that inertia; that irritating immobility. "What a tragic tale for a summer day!" was his only comment.

"And Caillette!" she continued, rapidly. "Distinguished in mien, graceful in manner. In the house of his patron, he dared look up to that nobleman's daughter, Diane de Poitiers. A dream; a youthful dream! Enter Monsieur de Brézé, grand seneschal of Normandy. Shall I tell you the rest? How Caillette stares, moody, knitting his brows at his cups! Of what is the jester thinking?"

"Whether the grand seneschal will let him sleep with the spaniels, Jacqueline, or turn him out," laughed the jester.

Angrily she clasped her hands before her. "Is it the way your mind would move?" she retorted.

"A jester without a roof to cover him is like a dog without a kennel, mistress."

Disdain, contempt, rapidly crossed her face, but her lip curved knowingly and her voice came more gently, because of the greater sting that lay behind her words.

"You but seek to flout me from my tale," she said sweetly. "Caillette is none such, as you know. They were young together. 'Twas said he confessed his love; that tokens passed between them. Rhymes he writ to her; a flower,

perhaps, she gave him. A flower he yet cherishes, mayhap; dried, faded, yet plucked by her!"

Involuntarily the hand of her listener touched his breast, the first sign he had made that her story moved him. Jacqueline, watching him keenly, smiled, and demurely looked away. Her next words seemed to dance from her lips, as with head bent, like a butterfly poised, she addressed her remark to vacancy.

"A flower for himself, no doubt! Not given him for another!"

Whereupon she turned in time to catch the burning flush which flamed his cheek and left it paler than she had ever seen it. At this first signal of her success—proving that he was not impregnable to her attack—she hummed a little song and beat time on the sward with a green-shod foot.

"What mean you?" he asked, momentarily dropping his unruffled manner.

"Not much!" Lightly she tripped to a bush, broke off a flower and regarded it mischievously. "Why should people hide that which is so sweet and fragrant?" she remarked, and set the rose in her hair.

"Hide?" he said, looking at the flower, but not at her.

"I trust you kept the rose, Monsieur Diplomat?" she spoke up, suddenly, her expression most serious.

"What rose?" he asked, now become restless beneath her cutting tongue.

"What rose! As if you did not know! How innocent you look! How many roses are there in the world? A thousand? Or only one? What rose? Her rose, of course. Have you got it? I hope so—for the duke is coming and might ask for it!"

This, then, was the information she had taken such a roundabout way to communicate! It was to this end she had purposely led the conversation by adroit stages, studying him gaily, impatiently or maliciously, as she marked the effect of her words upon him. All alive, she stepped back laughing; elate, she put her arms about a branch of the rose-bush and drew a score of roses to her bosom, as though she were a witch, impervious to thorns. He had risen—yes, there was no doubt about it!—but her sunny face was turned to the flowers. His countenance became at once puzzled and thoughtful.

"The duke—coming—" He condescended to ask for information now.

Sidewise she gazed at him, unrelenting. "Does the flower become me?" she asked.

"The duke—coming—" he repeated.

"How impolite! To refuse me a compliment!" she flashed.

The next moment he was by her side, and had taken her arm, almost roughly. "Speak out!" he cried. "Some one is coming! What duke is coming?"

"You hurt me!" she exclaimed, angrily. He loosened his grasp.

"What duke?" she answered scornfully. "Her duke! Your duke! The emperor's duke!"

"The Duke of Friedwald?" he asked.

"Of course! The princess' fiancé; bridegroom-to-be; future husband, lord and master," she explained, with indubious and positive iteration.

"But the time—set for the wedding—-has not expired," he protested with what she thought seemed a suspicion that she was playing with him.

"That is easily answered," she said cheerfully. "The duke, it seems, has become more and more enamored. Finally his passion has so grown and grown he fears to let it grow any more, and, as the only way out of the difficulty, petitioned the king to curtail the time of probation and relieve him of the constantly augmenting suspense. To which his most gracious Majesty, having been a lover himself (on divers occasions) and measuring the poor fellow's troubles by the qualms he has himself experienced, has seen generously fit to cut off a few weeks of waiting and set the wedding for the near future."

"How know you this?" he demanded, sharply, striding to and fro.

"This morning the princess sent me with a message to the Countess d'Etampes. You know her? You have heard? She has succeeded the Countess of Châteaubriant. Well, the king was with her—not the Countess of Châteaubriant, but the other one, I mean. They left poor me to await his Majesty's pleasure, and, as the Countess d'Etampes has but newly succeeded to her present exalted position and the king has not yet discovered her many imperfections, I should certainly have fallen asleep for weariness had I not chanced to overhear portions of their conversation. The Countess d'Etampes, it seemed, was very angry. 'Your Majesty promised to send her home,' she said. 'But, my dear, give me time,' pleaded the king. 'Pack her off at once,' she demanded, raising her voice. 'Send her to her

husband. That's where she belongs. Think of him, poor fellow!' Laughing, his Majesty capitulated. 'Well, well, back to her castle goes the Countess of Châteaubriant!' Thereupon—"

"But the duke, mistress," interrupted the jester, who had become more and more impatient during the prolonged narration. "The duke?"

"Am I not to tell it in my own way?" she returned. "What manners you have! First, you pinch my arm until I must needs cry out. Then you ask a question and interrupt me before I can answer."

"Interrupt!" he muttered. "You might have told a dozen tales. What care I for the king's Jezebels?"

"Jezebels!" she repeated, in mock horror. "I see plainly, if you don't die one way, you will another."

"'Tis usually the case. But go on with your story."

"If I can not tell it in my own way—"

"Tell it as you will, if your way be as slow as your tongue is sharp," he answered sullenly.

"Sharp! Jezebels! You deserve not to hear, but—the king, it seems, had laid the duke's request before the Countess d'Etampes. 'Here is an impatient suitor,' he said gaily. 'How shall we cure his passion?' 'By marrying him,' blithely answered this light-of-love. '"Tis a medicine that never fails!' His Majesty frowned; I could not see him, but felt sure of it from his tone, for although he neglects the queen, yet, to some degree, is mindful of her dignity. 'Marriage is a holy state, Madam,' he replied severely. 'There's no doubt about it, Francis,' returned the lady, 'and therefore is the antidote to passion. But a man bent on matrimony is like a child that wants a toy. Better give it to him at once—the plaything will the sooner be thrown aside!' 'Nay, Madam,' he said reprovingly, 'the duke shall have his wish, but for no such reason.' 'What reason then?' quoth she, petulantly. 'Because thou hast shown me love is a monarch stronger than any king and that we are but as slaves in its hands!' he exclaimed, passionately. 'I know I shall like the duke,' cried she, 'since he is the cause of that pretty speech.'

"At this point, not daring to listen longer, I coughed; there was silence; then the countess herself appeared at the door and looked at me sharply. With such grace as I could command, I delivered my message, left the house and was hurrying through the garden when chance threw you in my way. And now you have it all, sir."

"The princess—has she heard the king has received a letter from the duke, and that his Majesty has changed the wedding date?"

The jester spoke slowly, but Jacqueline was assured that beneath his deliberate manner surged deep and conflicting emotions; that his calmness was no more than a mask to conceal his pain. Had he given utterance to the feeling that beset him, had he betrayed more than a suggestion of the passion, rage or grief which struggles for mastery beneath a forced sloth of sensibility, she would have once more mocked him with laughter. But perhaps his very quiescence inclined her to look upon him with a grain of sympathy or compassion, for her tones were now grave.

"The princess knows; has heard all from the king. Not long since he sent for her. Will she consent? What else can she do? 'Tis the monarch who commands; we who obey!"

"Is the court then only a mart, a guildhall?" he exclaimed. "A woman—even a princess—should be won, not—exchanged!"

Her lashes drooped; in her gaze shone once more the ironical amusement. "Why," she said, "from what wilds, or forests, have you come? The heart follows where the trader lists! Think you the princess will wear the willow?" she laughed. "How well you know women!"

"Do you mean that she—"

"I mean that her welfare is in strong hands; that there will be few greater in all the land; none more honored! The duke's principality is vast—but here comes the princess." The hound sprang to his feet and ran gamboling down the path. "Ask her the rest yourself, most Unsophisticated Fool! Ah,"—with a touch she could not resist—"what a handsome bride she will make for the duke!"

CHAPTER V

JACQUELINE FETCHES THE PRINCESS' FAN

Through the flowery path, so narrow her gown brushed the leaves on either side, the Princess Louise appeared, walking slowly. A head-dress, heart-shaped, held her hair in its close confines; the gown of cloth-of-silver damask fitted closely to her figure, and, from the girdle, hung a long pendent end, elaborately enriched. With short, sharp barks, the dog bounded before her, but the hand usually extended to caress the animal remained at her side.

Intently the jester watched her draw near and ever nearer, their common trysting spot, her favorite garden nook. A handsome bride, forsooth, as Jacqueline had suggested. All in white was she now; a glittering white, with silver adornment; ravishingly hymeneal. A bride for a duke—or a king—more stately than the queen; handsomer than the favorite of favorites who ruled the king and France.

"Jacqueline," she said, evincing neither surprise nor any other emotion, as she approached, "go and fetch my fan. I believe 'tis in the king's ante-chamber."

"Madam carried no fan when"—began the girl.

"Then 'tis somewhere else. Do not bandy words, but find it."

Sinking on the bench as the maid walked quickly away, she remained for some moments in silent thought,—a reverie the jester forbore to disturb. Her head rested on her arm, from which fell the flowing sleeve almost to the ground; her wrist was lightly inclasped by a slender golden band of delicate Byzantine enamel work; over the sculptured form of the stone griffin that constituted one of the supports of the ancient Norman bench flowed the voluminous folds of her dress, partly concealing the monster from view. Against the clambering ivy which for centuries had reveled in this chosen spot, and which the landscape gardeners of Francis had wisely spared, lay her hand, a small ring of curious workmanship gleaming from her finger. The ring caused the jester to start, remembering he had last seen it worn by the king.

Truly, the capricious, but august, monarch must have been well pleased with the complaisance of his fair ward, and the face of the fool, glowing and eager, became on the instant hard and cold. Did he experience now the first pangs of that sorrow Jacqueline had vividly portrayed as the love-portion of Marot and Caillette? Faintly the ivy whispered above the princess, telling

perhaps of other days when, centuries gone by, some Norman lady had been wooed and won, or wooed and lost, in the shadow of the griffin, which, silent, sphinx-like, yet endured through the ages.

Idly the Princess Louise plucked a leaf from the old, old vine, picked it apart and let the pieces float away. As they fluttered and fell at the jester's feet she regarded him with thoughtful blue eyes.

"How far is it," she asked, "to the duke's principality?"

If he had doubted the maid's story, he was now convinced. The ring and her question confirmed Jacqueline's narrative. Moodily he surveyed the great claws of the griffin, firmly planted on the earth, and then looked from the feet to the laughing mouth of the stone figure, or so much of it as the shining dress left uncovered.

"About fifteen days' journey, Princess," he replied.

"No farther?"

"Barring accidents, it may be made in that time."

She did not notice how dull was his tone; how he avoided her gaze. Blind to him, she turned the ring around and around on her finger, as though her thoughts were concentrated on it.

"Accidents," she repeated, her hand now motionless. "Is the way perilous?"

"The country is most unsettled."

"What do you mean by unsettled?" she continued, bending forward with fingers clasped over her knees. Supinely she waved a foot back and forth, showing and then withdrawing the point of a jeweled slipper, and a suggestion of lavender in silk network above. "What do you call unsettled?"

"The country is infested with many roving bands commanded by the so-called independent barons who owe allegiance to neither king nor emperor," he answered. "Their homes are perched, like eagles' nests, upon some mountain peak that commands the valleys travelers must proceed through. A fierce, untamed crew, bent on rapine and murder!"

"Did you encounter any such?" Gently.

"Ofttimes."

"And left unscathed?"

"Because I was a jester, Madam; something less than man; a lordling's slave; a woman's plaything! Their sentinels shared with me their flasks; I slept before their signal fires, and even supped in the heart of their stone fastnesses. Fools and monks are safe among them, for the one amuses and the other absolves their sins. Yet is there one free baron," he added reflectively, "whom even I should have done well to avoid; he, the most feared, the most savage! Louis, the bastard of Pfalz-Urfeld!"

"Have you ever met him?" asked the princess, in a mechanical tone.

"No," with a short laugh. "A few of his knaves I encountered, however, whose conduct shamed the courtesy of the other mountain rogues. I all but fared ill indeed, from them. To the pleasantry of my greeting, they replied with the true pilferer's humor; the free baron had ordered every one searched. They would have robbed and stripped me, despite the color of my coat, only fortunately, instead of a fool's staff, I had a good blade of the duke's. For a moment it was cut and thrust—not jest and gibe; the suddenness of the attack surprised them, and before they could digest the humor of it the fool had slipped away."

She leaned inertly back against the soft cushion of ivy. In the shadow the tint on her cheeks deepened, but below the sunlight played about her shoulders through leafy interspace, or crept in dancing spots down over her gown and arms.

"The duke would not be molested by these outlaws?" she continued, pursuing her line of questioning.

"The duke has a strong arm," he answered cautiously. "They may be well content to permit him to come and go as he sees fit."

"Well, well," she said, perversely, "I was only curious about the distance and the country."

"For leagues the land is wild, bleak, inhospitable, and then 'tis level, monotonous, deserted, so lonely the song dies on the wandering minstrel's lips. But the duke rides fast with his troop and soon would cover the mountain paths and dreary wastes."

"Nay," she interrupted impatiently, "I asked not how the duke would ride."

"I thought you wished to know, Princess," he replied, humbly.

"You thought"—she began angrily, sitting erect.

"I know, Princess; a fool should but jest, not think."

"Why do you cross me to-day?" she demanded petulantly. "Can you not see—"

Abruptly she rose; impatiently moved away; but a few steps, however, when she turned, her face suddenly free from annoyance, in her eyes a soft decision.

"There!" she exclaimed with a smile, half-arch, half-repentant. "How can any one be angry on such a day—all sunshine, butterflies and flowers!"

He did not reply, and, mistress once more of herself, she drew near.

"What a contrast to the stuffy palace, with all the courtiers, ministers and lap-dogs!" she went on. "Here one can breathe. But how shall we make the most of such a day? Stroll into the forest; sit by the fountain; run over the grass?"

Her voice was softer than it had been; her words fraught with suggestions of exhilarating companionship. Did she note their effect? At any rate, she laughed lightly.

"But how," she resumed, surveying the great enfolding skirt, "could one trip the sward with this monstrous gown, weighted with wreaths of silver? Is it not but one of the many penalties of high birth? Oh, for the short skirts of the lowly! What comfort to be arrayed like Jacqueline!"

"And she, Princess, doubtless thinks likewise of more gorgeous apparel." His heart beat faster as he strove to answer her in kind.

"A waste of cloth in vanity, as saith Master Calvin!" she replied, lifting her arms that shone with creamy softness from the dangling folds of heavy silk. "Were it not for this courtly encumbrance, I should propose going into the fields with the haymakers. You may see them now—look!—through the opening in the foliage."

With an expression, part resignation, part regret, she leaned against the wind-worn griffin which formed the arm of the bench. Fainter sounded the warning of the jestress in the ears of the duke's fool; so faint it became but a weak admonition. More and more he abandoned himself to the pleasure of the moment.

"To make the most of the day," the princess had said.

How? By denying himself the sight of her ever-varying grace; by refusing to yield to the charm of her voice. He raised his head more boldly; through her drooping lashes a lazy light shot forth upon him, and the shadow of a smile

seemed to say: "That is better. When the mistress is indulgent, a fool should not be unbending. A melancholy jester is but poor company."

And so her mood swayed his; he forgot his resolution, his pride, and yielded to the infatuation of the moment. But when he endeavored to call the weapons of his office to his aid, her glance and the shadow of that smile left him witless. Jest, fancy and whim had taken flight.

"Well?" she said. "Well, Sir Fool?"

His color shifted; withal his half-embarrassment, there was something graceful and noble in his bearing.

"Madam"—he began, and stopped for want of matter to put into words.

But if the princess was annoyed at the new-found dullness of her plaisant, her manner did not show it.

"What," she said, gently; "no news from the court; no word of intrigue; no story of the king? I should seek a courtier for my companion, not a jester. But there! What book have you brought?" indicating the volume that lay upon the bench.

"Guillaume de Lorris's 'Romance of the Rose,'" he answered, more freely.

"Where did we leave off?"

"Where the hero, arriving at a fountain, beheld a beautiful rose tree," said the fool in a low tone. "Desiring the rose, he reached to gather it—"

"Yes, I remember. And then, Reason and Danger did battle with Love."

"Is it your wish we continue?" he asked, taking the book in his hand.

"I would fain learn if he gathers his rose. Nay, sit here on the bench and I"—brightly—"may look over your shoulder ever and anon, to steal a glimpse of the pretty pictures."

Unquestioningly, he obeyed her, the book, illumined, gleaming in the sunshine; the letters, red, gold, many-hued, dancing before them. Love in crimson, the five silver shafts of Cupid, the Tower of Jealousy, a frowning fortress, the Rose, incentive for endless striving and endeavor—all floated by on the creamy parchment leaves. So interested was she in these wondrous pages, executed with such precision and perfection, with marginal adornment, and many a graceful turn and fancy in initial letter and tail-

piece, she seemed to him for the moment rather some simple lowly maiden than a proud princess of the realm.

"How much splendor the penman has shown!" she murmured, her breath on his cheek. "'Tis more beautiful than the 'Life of Saint Agnes.' Is not that figure well done? A hard, austere old man; Reason, I believe, in monkish attire."

"Reason, or Duty, ever partakes of the monastery," he retorted with a short, mirthless laugh.

"Duty; obedience!" she broke in. "Do I not know them? Please turn the page."

Reaching over, she herself did so, her fingers touching his, her bosom just brushing his shoulder; and then she flushed, for it was Venus's self the page revealed, standing on a grassy bank and showing Love the rose. Around the queen of beauty floated a silver gauze; her hair was indicated by threads of gold tossed luxuriantly about her; upon the shoulder of Love rested her hand, encouraging him in his quest. Most zealously had the monk-artist executed the lovely lady, as though some heart-dream flowed from the ink on his pen, every line exact, each feature radiantly shown. Some youthful anchorite, perhaps, was he, and this the fair temptation that had assailed his fancy; such a vision as St. Anthony wrestled with in the grievous solitude of his hermit cell.

From the book and the picture, the jester, feeling the princess draw back impulsively, dared look up, and, looking up, could not look down from a loveliness surpassing the idealization on vellum of a monkish dream. From head to foot, the sunlight bathed the princess, glistening in her hair until it was alive with light. Even when he gazed into her blue eyes he was conscious of a more flaming glory than lay in the heavens of their depths; a splendent maze that shed a brightness around her.

"Oh, Princess," he said, wildly, "I know what the king hath told you! Why you wear the monarch's ring!"

"The monarch's ring!" she repeated, as recalled suddenly from wandering thought. "Why—how know you—ah, Jacqueline—"

"And a ring signifieth consent. You will fulfill the king's desire?"

"The king's desire?" she replied, mechanically. "Is it not the will of God?"

"But your own heart?" he cried, holding her with his eager gaze.

She laid her hand on his shoulder; her eyes answered his. Did she not realize the tragedy the future held for him? Or did to-morrow seem far off, and the present become her greater concern? Was hers the philosophy of Marguerite's code which taught that the sweets of admiration should be gathered on the moment? That a cry of pain from a worshiping heart, however lowly, was honeyed flattery to Love's votaries? As the jester looked at her a sudden chill seized his breast. Jacqueline's mocking laughter rang in his ears. "Ask her the rest yourself, most Unsophisticated Fool!"

"Then you will obey the king?" he persisted, dully.

"Why," she answered, smiling and bending nearer, "will you spoil the day?"

"You would give yourself to a man, whether or not you loved him?"

A frown gathered on the princess' brow, but she stooped, herself picked up the book he had dropped, brushed the earth from it and seated herself upon the bench. Her manner was quiet, resolute; her action, a rebuke to the forward fool.

"Will you not read?" she said, with an inscrutable look.

"True," he exclaimed, rising quickly, "I was sent to amuse—"

"And you have found me a too exacting mistress?" she asked, more gently, checking the implied reproach.

"Exacting!" he repeated.

"What then?" she said, half sadly.

"Nothing," he answered.

But in his mind Jacqueline's scornful words reiterated themselves: "Think you the princess will wear the willow?"

Taking the book, he opened it at random, mechanically sinking at her feet. The quest, the idle quest! Was it but an awakening? So far lay the branch above his reach! His voice rose and fell with the mystic rhythm of the meter, now dwelling on death and danger, the shortness of life, the sweetness of passion; then telling the pleasures of the dance.

Taking the book, he opened it at random, mechanically sinking at her feet.

Taking the book, he opened it at random,

mechanically sinking at her feet.

Lower fell the princess' hand until it touched the reader's head; touched and lingered. Before the fool's eyes the letters of the book became blurred and then faded away. Doubt, misgiving, fear, vanished on the moment. The flower she had given him seemed to burn on his heart. He forgot the decree of the king; her equivocation; the unanswered question. Passionately he thrust his hand into his doublet.

"The rose and love are one," he cried. "The rose is—"

"Pardon me, Madam," said a voice, and Jacqueline, clear-eyed, calm, stood before them; "the fan was not in the king's ante-chamber, or I should have been here sooner. I trust you have not been put out for want of it?"

"Not at all, Jacqueline," returned her mistress, with a natural, tranquil movement, "although"—sharply—"you were gone longer than you should have been!"

CHAPTER VI

THE ARRIVAL OF THE DUKE

Proficient as a poet, bold as a soldier, adroit as a statesman, the king was, nevertheless, most fitted for the convivial role of host, and no part that he played in his varied repertoire afforded such opportunity for the nice display of his unusual talents. History hath sneered at his rhymes as flat, stale and unprofitable; upon the bloody field he had been defeated and subsequently imprisoned; clever in diplomacy, the sagacity of his opponent, Charles, had in truth overmatched him; yet as the ostentatious Boniface, in grand bib and tucker, prodigal in joviality and good-fellowship, his reputation rests without a flaw.

In anticipation of the arrival of the duke and his suite, the monarch had ordered a series of festivities and entertainments such as would gratify his desire for pageantry and display, and at the same time do honor to a guest who was to espouse one of France's fairest wards. To the castle repaired tailors, embroiderers and goldsmiths to make and devise garments for knights, ladies, lords and esquires and for the trapping, decking and adorning of coursers, jennets and palfries. Bales of silks and satins had been long since conveyed thither from distant Paris, in anticipation of the coming marriage; and the old Norman castle that had once resounded with the clashing of arms, the snap of the cross-bow and the clang of the catapult now echoed with the merry stir and flurry of peace; a bee-hive of activity wherein were no drones; marshal, grand master, chancellor and grand chamberlain preparing for mysteries and hunting parties; dowagers, matrons and maids making ready for balls and other pastimes.

With this new influx of population to the pleasure palace came a plentiful sprinkling of wayside minstrels, jugglers, mountebanks, dulcimer and lute players, street poets who sang the praises of some fair cobbleress or pretty sausage girl; scamps of students from the Paris haunts of vice, loose fellows who conned the classical poets by day and took a purse by night; dancers, dwarfs, and merry men all, not averse to—

"Haunch and ham, and cheek and chine

While they gurgled their throats with right good wine."

Here sauntered a wit-cracker, a peacock feather in his hand, arm-in-arm with an impoverished "banquet beagle," or "feast hound;" there passed a jack in green, a bladder under his arm and a tankard at his belt, with which latter he begged that sort of alms that flows from a spigot. As vagrant followers hover on the verge of a camp, or watchful vultures circle around

their prey, so these lower parasites (distinct from the other well-born, more aristocratic genus of smell-feast) prowled vigilantly without the castle walls and beyond the limits of the royal pleasure grounds, finding occasional employment from lackey, valet or equerry, who, imitating their betters, amused themselves betimes with some low buffoon or vulgar clown and rewarded him for his gross stories and antics with a crust and a cup.

Faith, in those thrice happy days, every henchman could whistle to him his shabby poet, and every ostler hold court in the stable, with a visdase, or ass face, to keep the audience in a roar, and a nimble-footed trull to set them into ecstasies. But woe betide the honest wayfarer who strolled beyond the orderly precincts of the king's walls after dusk; for if some street coxcomb was too drunk to rob him, or a ribald Latin scholar saw him not, he surely ran into a nest of pavement tumblers or cellar poets who forthwith stripped him and turned him loose in the all-insufficient garb of nature.

A fantastic, waggish crew—yet Francis minded them not, so long as they observed sufficient etiquette to keep their distance from his royal person and immediate following. This nice decorum, however, be it said, was an unwritten law with these waifs and scatterlings, knowing the merry monarch who tolerated them afar would feel no compunction at hanging them severally, or in squads, from the convenient branches of the trees surrounding the castle, should the humor seize him that such summary chastisement were best for their morals and the welfare of the community. Thus, though bold, were they also shy, drinking humbly from a black-jack quart in the kitchen and vanishing docilely enough when the sovereign cook bid them be gone with warm words or by flinging over them ladles of hot soup.

One bright morning, like rabbits peeping from their holes when they hear the footfall of the hunter, these field ramblers and wayside peregrinators were all agog, emerging from grassy cover and thicket retreat, to gaze open-mouthed after a gay cavalcade that issued from the castle gate, and rode southward with waving banner and piercing trumpet note.

"The king, knaves!" cried a grimy estray with bells upon his person that jingled like those of a Jewish high priest, to a group of players and gamesters. "Already my mouth waters at the thoughts of the wedding feast, and the scraps and bones that will be thrown away. There I warrant you we'll all find hearty cheer."

"Why are fools ever welcome at a wedding?" asked a singing scholar.

"Because there are two in the ceremony, and the rest make the chorus," answered a philandering mime.

"And our merry monarch goeth down the road to meet one of the two," said a close-cropped rogue.

"Well, he's a brave knight to come so far to yield himself captive—to a woman," returned the student. "As Horace saith—"

"Thou calumniator! shrimp of a man!" exclaimed a dark-browed drab dressed like a gipsy, seizing the scholar's short doublet. "An I get at you—"

"Take the garment, you harridan, not the man," he retorted, slipping deftly out of the jerkin and dancing away to a safe distance.

"Ha! there's wedded bliss for you!" laughed a man in Franciscan attire, a rough rascal disguised as one of those priests called "God's fools" or "Christ's fools." "A week ago, when I married them, they were billing and cooing. But to your holes, children! When the king returns he would not have his guest gaze upon such scarecrows and trollops. Disperse, and Beelzebub take you!" And as the group scattered the sound of beating horses' hoofs died away in the distance.

Francis was unusually good-humored that day. Apprised by a herald that the duke and his followers were nearing the castle, he had sent the messenger back announcing a trysting-place, and now rode forth to meet his guest and escort him with honor to the castle. Upon a noble steed, black as night, the monarch sat; the saddle and trappings crimson in color; the stirrup and bit, of gold; a jaunty plume of white ostrich feathers waving above the jetty mane. The costume of the king's stalwart figure displayed a splendid suit of plate armor, enriched with chased work and ornament in gold, his appearance in keeping with his character of monarch and knight who sought to revive the spirit of chivalry at a period when the practical modern tendencies seriously threatened to undermine the practices and traditions of a once-exalted, but now fast-failing, institution for the regulation of morals and conduct.

By his side, less radiant only in comparison with the august monarch, rode the rank and quality of the realm, with silver and spangles, and fluttering plumes, scabbards gleaming with jewels, and girdles adorned with rich settings. Furiously galloping behind came an attenuated snow-white charger, bearing the hunchback. A bladder dangling over his shoulder, his bagpipe hanging from his waist, Triboulet bobbed frantically up and down, clinging desperately to the saddle or winding his legs about the charger's neck to preserve his equilibrium.

"You would better jog along more quietly, fool," observed a courtier, warningly, "or you will suffer for it."

"Alas, sir," replied Triboulet, "I stick my spurs into my horse to keep him quiet, but the more I prick him the more unruly I find the obstinate beast."

The king, who heard, laughed, and the dwarf's heart immediately expanded, auguring he should soon be restored to the monarch's favor; for since the night the buffoon had failed to answer the duke's jester in Fools' hall Francis had received Triboulet's advances and small pleasantries with terrifying coldness. In fact, the dwarf had never passed such an uncomfortable period during his career, save on one memorable occasion when a band of mischievous pages had set upon him, carried him to the scaffold and nailed his enormous ears to the beam. Now, reassured, burning with delight, the jester spurred presumptuously forward, no longer feeling bound to lag in the rear.

"Go back!" cried an angry knight. "I can not bear a fool on my right."

Triboulet reined in his horse, but pushed ahead on the other side of the rider who had spoken.

"I can bear it very well," he retorted and found his proud reward in the company's laughter. The remark, moreover, passed from lip to lip to the king, and the misshapen jester felt his little cup of happiness filled once more to the brim; his old prestige seemed coming back to him; holding his position in the road, he gazed disdainfully at the disgruntled knight, and the other returned the look with one of hearty ill-will, muttering an imprecation and warning just above his breath.

"Sire," called out Triboulet, loudly, now above fearing courtier, knight or any high official of the realm, "the Count de Piseione says he will beat me to death."

"If he does," good-naturedly answered the king, "I will hang him quarter of an hour afterward."

"Please, your Majesty, hang him quarter of an hour before."

Thus right pleasantly, with quip and jest, and many a smart sally, did the monarch and his retinue draw near the meeting spot, where at a fork of the road, beneath the shade of overhanging branches, were already assembled a goodly group of soldiers. Beyond them, at a respectful distance, stood many beasts of burden, heavily laden, the great packs promising stores of rare and costly gifts. At the head of the troopers was a thick-set man, with broad

shoulders and brawny frame, mounted on a powerful gray horse. This leader, whom the approaching company surmised to be the duke, sat motionless as a statue, gazing steadfastly at the shining armor and gallant figure of the king who spurred to him, a friendly greeting on his lips. Then, lightly springing to earth and throwing his bridle to one of his troop, the foreign noble approached the royal horseman on foot, and, bending his head, knelt before him, respectfully kissing his hand.

Grim, silent, with hardened faces, the duke's men regarded the scene, their dusty attire (albeit rich enough beneath the marks of travel), sun-burned visages and stolid manner in marked contrast with the bearing and aspect of the king's gay following. One of the alien troop pulled a red mustachio fiercely and eyed a blithe popinjay of the court with quizzical superiority; the others remained, stock-still, but observant.

"I see you are punctual and waiting, noble sir!" said the monarch gaily when the initial formalities had been complied with. "But that is no more than should be expected from—an impatient bridegroom." Then, gazing curiously, yet with penetrating look, on the features of his guest, who now had arisen: "You appear slightly older than I expected from the letter of our dear friend and brother, the emperor."

And truly the duke's appearance was that of a man more nearly five and thirty than five and twenty; his face was brown from exposure and upon his brow the scar of an old sword wound; yet a fearless, dashing countenance; an eye that could kindle to headlong passion, and a thick-set neck and heavy jaw that bespoke the foeman who would battle to the last breath.

"Older, Sire?" he replied with composure. "That must needs be, since living in the saddle ages a man."

"Truly," returned the monarch, instinctively laying his hand upon his sword. "The clash of arms, the thunder of hoofs, the waving banners—yes, Glory is a seductive mistress who robs us of our youth. Have I not wooed her and found—gray hairs? Who shall give me back those days?"

"History, your Majesty, shall give them to posterity," answered the duke.

"Even those we lost to Charles?" muttered the king, a shadow passing over his countenance.

"Glory, Sire, is a mistress sometimes fickle in her favors."

"And yet we live but for—" He broke off abruptly, and with the eye of a trained commander surveyed the duke's men. "Daredevils; daredevils, all!" he muttered.

"Rough-looking fellows, Sire!" apologized the duke, "but tried and faithful soldiers. Somewhat dusty and road-worn." And his eyes turned meaningly to the king's suite; the flashing girdles of silver, the shining hilts, the gorgeous cloaks and even the adornment of ribbons.

"Nay," said Francis meditatively, "on a rough journey I would fain have these fire-eaters at my back. They look as though they could cut and hew."

"Moderately well, your Majesty," answered the duke with modesty.

"Will you mount, noble sir, and ride with me? Yonder is the castle, and in the castle is a certain fair lady whom you, no doubt, fain would see."

Long gazed the Duke of Friedwald at the distant venerable pile of stone; the majestic turrets and towers softly floating in a dreamy mist; the setting, fresh, woody, green. Long he looked at this inviting picture and then breathed deeply.

"Ah, Sire, I would the meeting were over," he remarked in a low voice.

"Why so, sir?" asked the king in surprise. "Do you fear you will not fancy the lady?"

"I fear she may not fancy me," retorted the nobleman, soberly. "Your own remark, Sire; that I appear older than you had expected?" he continued, gravely, significantly.

"A recommendation in your favor," laughed the monarch. "I ever prefer sober manhood to callow youth about me. The one is a prop, stanch, tried; the other a reed that bends this way and that, or breaks when you press it too hard."

"I should be lacking in gratitude were I not deeply appreciative of your Majesty's singular kindness," replied the duke, his face flushing with pleasure. "But your Majesty knows womankind—"

"Nay; I've studied them a little, but know them not," retorted Francis, dryly.

"And it is unlikely the lady may find me all her imagination has depicted," went on the nobleman, with palpable embarrassment. "My noble master, the emperor, hath—regarding me still as but a stripling from his own vantage point of age and wisdom—represented me a young man in his proposals.

But though I'm younger than I look, and feel no older than I am, how young, or how old, shall I seem to the princess?"

"Young enough to be her husband; old enough for her to look up to," answered the monarch, reassuringly.

"Again," objected the duke, meditatively regarding the castle, "she may be expecting a handsome, debonair bridegroom, and when she sees me"—ruefully surveying himself—"what will she say?"

"What will she say? 'Yes' at the altar. Is it not enough?" Leaning back in his saddle, the king's face expressed the enjoyment he derived from the conversation with the backward and too conscientious soldier. Here was a groom whose wedding promised the court much amusement and satisfaction in those jovial days of jesting and merry-making.

"Come," resumed the king, encouragingly, "I'll warrant you more forward in battle."

"Battle!" said the duke. "That's another matter. To see your foeman's gleaming eyes!—but hers!— Should they express anger, disdain—"

"Let yours show but the greater wrath," advised the king, complaisantly. "In love, like cures like! Let me be your physician; I'll warrant you'll find me proficient."

"I've heard your Majesty hath practised deeply," returned the noble, readily, in spite of his perplexity.

"Deeply?" Francis lifted his brow. "I am but a superficial student; master only of the rudiments; no graduate of the college of love. Moreover, I've heard the letters you exchanged were—ahem!—well-enough writ. You pressed your suit warmly for one unlearned, a mere novice."

"Because I had seen her face, your Majesty; had it ever before me in the painted miniature. Any man"—with a rough eloquence and fervor that impressed the king with the depth of his passion—"could well worship at that fair shrine, but that she—"

"Forward, I beg you!" interrupted the king. "Womankind are but frail flesh, sir; easily molded; easily won. She is a woman; therefore, soft, yielding; yours for the asking. You are over valorous at a distance; too timorous near her. Approach her boldly, and, though she were Diana's self, I'll answer for your victory! Eh, Triboulet, are our ladies cold-hearted, callous, indifferent to merit?"

"Cold-hearted?" answered the dwarf, with a ludicrous expression of feigned rapture. "Were I to relate—but, no, my tongue is silent—discretion—your Majesty will understand—"

"Well," said the duke, "with encouragement from the best-favored scholar in the kingdom and the—ugliest, I should proceed with more confidence."

"Best-favored!" smirked the little monster. "Really, you flatter me."

"A whimsical fellow, Sire," vouchsafed the nobleman.

"When he is not tiresome," answered the monarch. "On, gentlemen!" And the cavalcade swept down the road toward the castle. Far behind, with cracking of whip, followed the mules and their drivers.

CHAPTER VII

THE COURT OF LOVE

The rough Norman banqueting hall, with its massive rafters, frayed tapestries and rude adornment of bristling heads of savage boars, wide-spreading antlers and other trophies of the chase, had long since been replaced under the king's directions by an apartment more to the satisfaction of a monarch who was a zealous and lavish patron of the brilliant Italian school of painting, sculpture and architecture. Those barbarous decorations, celebrating the hunt, had been relegated to subterranean regions, the walls dismantled, and the room turned over to a corps of artists of such renown as Da Vinci, François Clouet, Jean Cousin and the half-mad Benvenuto Cellini.

Where formerly wild boars had snarled with wicked display of yellow tusks from the blackened plaster, now Cleopatra, in the full bloom of her mature charms, reclined with her stalwart Roman hero in tender dalliance. Where once the proud and stately head of the majestic stag had hung over door and panel, now classic nymphs bathed in a pellucid pool, and the only horns were those which adorned the head of him who, according to the story, dared gaze through the foliage, and was rewarded for his too curious interest by—that then common form of punishment—metamorphosis.

Overhead, vast transformation from the great ribbed beams of oak and barren interspaces, graceful Peri floated on snow-white clouds and roguish Cupids swam through the azure depths, to the edification of nondescript prodigies, who constituted the massive molding, or frame, to the decorative scene. The ancient fireplace, broad and deep, had given way to an ornate mantel of marble; the capacious tankard and rotund pewter pot of olden times, suggestive of mighty butts of honest beer, had been supplanted by goblets of silver and gold, covered with scroll work, arabesques or chiseled figures.

In this spacious hall, begilt, bemirrored, assembled, on the evening of the duke's arrival, Francis, his court and the guest of the occasion. From wide-spreading chandeliers, with their pendent, pear-shaped crystals, a thousand candles threw a flood of light upon the scene, as 'mid trumpet blast and softer strains of harmony, King Francis and good Queen Eleanor led the way to the royal table; and thereat, shortly after, at a signal from the monarch, the company seated themselves.

At the head of the board was the king; on his right, his lawful consort, pale, composed, saintly; on his left, the Countess d'Etampes, rosy, animated, free.

Next to the favorite sat the "fairest among the learned and most learned among the fair," Marguerite, beloved sister of Francis, and her second husband, Henry d'Albret, King of Navarre; opposite, Henry the dauphin and his spouse, Catharine de Medici; not far removed, Diane de Poitiers, whose dark eyes Henry ever openly sought, while Catharine complacently talked affairs of state with the chancellor.

In the midst of this illustrious company, and further surrounded by a plentiful sprinkling of ruddy cardinals, fat bishops, constables, governors, marshals and ladies, more or less distinguished through birth or beauty, the Duke of Friedwald and the Princess Louise were a center of attraction for the wits whose somewhat free jests the license of the times permitted. At the foot of the royal table places had been provided for Marot, Caillette, Triboulet, Jacqueline and the duke's fool.

The heads and figures of the ladies of the court were for the most part fearfully and wonderfully bedecked. In some instances the horned-shaped head-dress had been followed by yet loftier steeples, "battlements to combat God with gold, silver and pearls; wherein the lances were great forked pins, and the arrows the little pins." With more simplicity, the Princess Louise wore her hair cased in a network of gold and jewels, and the austere French moralist who assailed the higher bristling ramparts of vanity would, perhaps, have borne in silence this more modest bastion of the flesh and the devil.

But the face beneath was a greater danger to those who hold that beauty is a menace to salvation; on her cheek hung the rosy banner of youth; in her eyes shone the bright arrows of conquest. And the duke, discarding his backwardness, as a soldier his cloak before battle, watched the hue that mantled her face, proffered his open breast to the shining lances of her gaze, and capitulated unconditionally before the smile of victory on her blood-red lips. With his great shoulders, his massive neck and broad, virile face, he seemed a Cyclops among pygmies in that gathering of slender courtiers and she but a flower by his side.

"I thought, Sire, your duke was timorous, bashful as a boy?" murmured the Countess d'Etampes to the king.

"He was—on the road!" answered the king thoughtfully.

"Then has he marvelously recovered his assurance."

"In love, Madam, as in battle, the zest grows with the fray," said Francis with meaning.

"And the duke is reputed a brave soldier. He looks very strong, as if—almost—he might succeed with any woman he were minded to carry off."

"To carry off!" laughed the monarch. "'Tis he, Madam, who will be bound in tethers! At heart he's shame-faced as a callow younker."

She wilfully shook her head. "No woman could keep him in leading-strings, your Majesty. There is something domineering, savage, crushing, in his hand. Look at it, on the table there. Is it not mighty as an iron gauntlet? What other man at the board has such a brutal hand? The strength in it makes me shudder. Will she not bend to it; kiss it?"

With amused superiority Francis regarded his fair neighbor on the left. "Women, Madam, are but hasty judges of men," he said, dryly, "and then 'tis fancy more than reason which governs their verdict. If the duke should seem over-confident, 'tis to hide a certain modesty, and not to appear out of confidence in so large a company."

"And yet, Sire, at their first meeting he did not comport himself like one easily put out," persisted the favorite. "'"Tis with a cold hand you welcome me, Princess,' he said, noticing her insensibility of manner. Then rising he gazed upon her long and deep, as a soldier might survey a battlefield. 'And yet,' said he, still holding her fingers, 'I'll warrant me warm blood could course through this little hand.' At that the color rose in her cheek; behold! the statue was touched with life and she looked at him as drawn against her will. 'If my hand be cold, my Lord,' she answered, courteously, 'it belies the character of your welcome.' Whereupon he laughed like one who has had a victory."

"Beshrew me," said the king, modifying his last observation, "if women are not all eyes and ears! I neither heard nor saw all that. A little constraint—a natural blush to punctuate their talk—the meeting seemed conventional enough. 'Tis through your own romantic heart you looked, Anne!"

Quicker circulated the goblets of silver, gold and crystal; faster babbled the pretty lips; brighter grew the eyes beneath the stupendous towers that crowned the heads of the court ladies. All talked at once without disturbing the king, who now whispered soft nothings in the ear of the countess. From the other tables in the hall arose a varying cadence of clatter and laughter, which increased with the noise and din of the king's own board; a clamor always just subservient to the deeper chorus of the royal party; an accompaniment, as it were, full yet unobtrusive, to the hubbub from the more exalted company. But the princely uproar growing louder, the grand-masters, grand-chamberlain, gentlemen of the chamber and lesser lights of

the church were enabled to carol and make merry with less restraint. The pungent smell of roses permeated the hall, arising from a screen of shrubbery at one end of the room wherein sang a hundred silver-toned birds.

At the king's table Caillette recited a merry roundelay, and Triboulet roared out tale after tale, each more full-flavored than the one that went before it, flinging smart sayings at marriage, and drawing a ludicrous picture of the betrayed husband. Villot, a lily in his hand, which he regarded ever sentimentally, caroled the boisterous espousals of a yokel and a cinder-wench, while Marot and a bishop contended in a heated argument regarding the translation of a certain passage of Ovid's "Art of Love."

Singularly pale, unusually tranquil, the duke's fool furtively watched his master and the princess. In contrast to his composure, Jacqueline's merriment seemed the more unrestrained; she laughed like a witch; her hands flashed with pretty gestures, and she had so tossed her head, her hair floated around her, wild and disordered.

"Why are you so quiet?" she whispered to the duke's fool.

"Is there not enough merriment, mistress?" he answered, gravely.

"There can never be any to spare," she said. "And you would do well to remember your office."

"What do you mean?" he asked, absently.

"That you have many enemies; that you can not live at court with a jaundiced countenance. Heigh-ho! Alackaday! You should hie yourself back to the woods and barren wastes of Friedwald, Master Fool."

Her sparkling glance returned to the exhilarating scene. Well had the assemblage been called a court of love. Now soft eyes invited burning glances, and graceful heads swayed alluringly toward the handsome cavaliers who momentarily had found lodgment in hearts which, like palaces, had many ante-chambers. From hidden recesses, strains of music filled the room with tinkling passages of sensuous, but illusive, harmony; a dream of ardor, masked in the daintiness of a minuet.

Upon the back of the princess' chair rested one of the duke's hands; with the other he lifted his glass—a frail thing in fingers better adapted for a sword-hilt or massive battle mace.

"Drink, Princess," he said, bending over her, "to—our meeting!"

Her eyelids fluttered before his look; her breast rose a little. The scar on his brow held her gaze, as one fascinated, but she drew away slightly and mechanically sought the tiny golden goblet at her elbow. Dreamily, dreamily, sounded the rhythmical music; heavily, so heavily hung the perfume in the air! Full of mist seemed the hall; the king, the queen, the countess, all of the party, unreal, fanciful. The touch of the goblet chilled her lips and she put it down quickly.

"Is not the wine to your liking?" he asked, his hand tightening on her chair. "Perhaps it is too sour for your taste?"

"Nay; I thought it rather sweet," she answered. "Oh, I meant not that—"

"It is sweet wine, Princess," he said, setting down an empty glass. "Sweeter than our Austrian vintage. Not white and thin and watery, but red—red as blood—red as your heart's blood—or mine—"

Crash! from the hand of the duke's jester had fallen a goblet to the floor. The princess started, turned; for a moment their glances bridged the distance from where she sat, to the fools' end of the table; then hers slowly fell; slowly, and she passed a hand, whereon shone the king's ring, across her brow; looked up, as though once more to span infinity with her gaze, when her eyes fell short and met the duke's. Deliberately he lifted his filled glass.

"Red as your heart's blood—and mine—my love!" he repeated; and then stared sharply across the table at his jester.

Triboulet, swaggering in his chair, so high his feet could not touch the floor, surveyed the broken glass, the duke and the duke's fool. For some time his vigilant eyes had been covertly studying the unconscious foreign jester, noting sundry signs and symptoms. Nor had the princess' look when the goblet had fallen, been lost upon the misshapen buffoon; alert, wide-awake, his mind, quick to suspect, reached a sudden conclusion; a conclusion which by rapid process of reasoning became a conviction. Privileged to speak where others must need be silent, his profession that of prying subtlety, which spared neither rank nor power so that it raised a laugh, he felt no hesitation in publishing the information he had gleaned by his superior mental nimbleness.

"Ho! ho!" he bellowed, the better to attract attention to himself. "The duke sent his fool to amuse his betrothed and the fool hath lost his heart to his mistress."

The king left off his whispering, Catharine turned from the chancellor, Diane ceased furtively to regard Caillette, while the Queen of Navarre laughed nervously and murmured:

"Princess and jester! It will make another tale."

But Henry of Navarre looked gravely down. He, and Francis' queen—a passive spectator at the feast—and a bishop, whose interest lay in a truffled capon, alone followed not the direction of the duke's eyes. The fair favorite of the king clapped her hands, but the monarch frowned, not having forgotten that night in Fools' hall when the jester had appointed rogues to offices.

"What is this? A fool in love with the princess?" said the king, ominously.

"Even so, your Majesty," cried Triboulet. "But a moment ago Duke Robert did whisper to his bride-to-be, and the fool's hand trembled like a leaf and dropped his glass. Tra! la! la! What a situation! Holy Saint-Bagpipe! Here's a comedy in high life!"

"A comedy!" repeated the duke, and half-rose from his chair, regarding his fool with surprise and anger.

Now Triboulet roared. Had he not in the past attained his high position of favorite jester to the king by his very foolhardihood? And were not trusting lovers and all too-confiding husbands the legitimate butt of all jesting?

"Look at the fool," he went on exultantly. "Does any one doubt his guilt? He is silent; he can not speak!"

And, indeed, the foreign jester seemed momentarily disconcerted, although he strove to appear indifferent.

"A presumptuous knave!" muttered Francis, darkly. "He saved his neck once only by a trick."

"Oh, the duke would not mind, now, if you were to hang him, Sire," answered Triboulet, blithely.

"True!" smiled the king. "The question of breach of hospitality might not occur. What have you to say, fool?" he continued, turning to the object of the buffoon's insidious and malicious attack.

"Laugh!" whispered Jacqueline, furtively pressing the arm of the duke's fool. "Laugh, or—"

The touch and her words appeared to arouse him from his lethargy and the jester arose, but not before the princess, with flaming cheeks, but proud bearing, had cast a quick glance in his direction; a glance half-appealing, half-resentful. Idly the joculatrix regarded him, her hands upon the table playing with the glasses, her lips faintly repeating the words of a roundelay:

"For love is madness;

While madness rules,

Fools in love

Remain but fools!

Sing hoddy-doddy,

Noddy!

Remain but fools!"

With the eyes of the company upon him, the duke's fool impassively studied the carven figure on his stick. If he felt fear of the king's anger, the resentment of his master, or the malice of the dwarf, his countenance now did not betray it. He had seemed about to speak, but did not.

"Well, rascal, well?" called out the king. "Do you think your wand will save you, sirrah?" he added impatiently.

"Why not, Sire?" tranquilly answered the jester.

The duke's face grew more and more ominous. Still the fool, looking up, did not quail, but met his master's glance freely, and those who observed noted it was the duke who first turned away, although his jaw was set and his great fist clenched. Swiftly the jester's gaze again sought the princess, but she had plucked a spray of blossoms from the table and was holding it to her lips, mindlessly biting the fragrant leaves; and those who followed the fool's glance saw in her but a picture of languid unconcern such as became a kinswoman of the king.

Almost imperceptibly the brow of the plaisant clouded, but recovering himself, he confronted the king with an enigmatic smile.

"Why not?" he repeated. "In the Court of Love is not the fool's wand greater than a king's miter or the pastoral staff of the Abbé de Lys? Besides, Sire," he added quickly, "as a fool takes it, in the Court of Love, not to love—is treason!"

"Good!" murmured the bishop, still eating. "Not to love is treason!"

"Who alone is the culprit? Whose heart alone is filled with umbrage, hatred, pique?"

"Triboulet! Triboulet, the traitor!" suddenly cried the countess, sprightly as a child.

"Yes; Triboulet, the traitor!" exclaimed the fool, pointing the wand of folly at the hunchback.

Even Francis' offended face relaxed. "Positively, I shall never hang this fellow," he said grimly to Marguerite.

"Before this tribunal of ladies whose beauty and learning he has outraged by his disaffection and spleen, I summon him for trial," continued the duke's jester. "Triboulet, arise! Illustrious ladies of the Court of Love, the offender is in your hands."

"A little monster!" spoke up Diane with a gesture of aversion, real or affected.

"He is certainly somewhat reprehensible," added the Queen of Navarre, whose tender heart ever inclined to the weaker side.

"An unconscionable rogue," murmured the bishop, complacently clasping his fat fingers before him.

"So he is already tried by the Church and the tribunal," went on the plaisant of the duke. "The Church hath excommunicated him and the Court of Love—"

"Will banish him!" exclaimed the countess mirthfully, regarding the captious monarch with mock defiance.

"Yes, banish him; turn him out," echoed Catharine, carelessly.

"But, your Majesty!" remonstrated the alarmed Triboulet, turning to the monarch whose favor he had that day enjoyed.

"Appeal not to me!" returned Francis, sternly. "Here Venus rules!" And he gallantly inclined to the countess.

"Venus at whom he scoffs!" broke in Jacqueline, shrilly, leaning back in her chair with her hands on her hips.

"You witch!—you sorceress!—it was you who"—he hissed with venomous glance.

"Hear him!" exclaimed the girl, lightly. "He calls me witch—sorceress—because, forsooth, I am a woman!"

"A woman—a devil"—muttered Triboulet between his closed teeth.

"And now," she cried, rising, impetuously, "he says that women are devils! What shall we do with him?"

"Pelt him out!" answered the countess. "Pelt him out!"

With peals of merriment and triumphant shouts, the court, of one accord, directed a fusillade of fruits, nuts and other viands at the head and person of the raging and hapless buffoon, the countess herself, apple in hand—Eve bent upon vengeance—leading in the assault. The other tables responded with a cross-fire, and heavier articles succeeded lighter, until after having endured the continuous attack for a few moments as best he might, the unlucky dwarf raised his arms above his head and fairly fled from the hall, leaving behind in his haste a bagpipe and his wooden sword.

"So may all traitors be punished!" said the bishop unctuously, as he reached for a dish of confections that had escaped the fair hands in search of ammunition.

"Well," laughed the Countess d'Etampes, "if we have the support of the Church—"

"I will confess you, myself, Madam," gallantly retorted the bishop.

"And all the Court of Love?" asked Marguerite.

"Ah, your Highness—all?—I am old—in need of rest—but with an assistant or two—"

"Assistant or two!" interrupted Catharine, imperiously. "Would the task then be so great?"

"Nay"—with gentle expostulation—"but you—members of the court—are many; not your sins."

"I suppose," whispered Jacqueline to the duke's fool, when the attention of the company was thus withdrawn from the jester's end of the table, "you think yourself in fine favor now?"

"Yes," he answered, absently; "thanks to your suggestion."

"My suggestion!" she repeated, scornfully. "I gave you none."

"Well, then, your crossing Triboulet."

"Oh, that," she replied, picking at a bunch of grapes, "was to defend my sex, not you."

"But your warning for me to laugh?"

"Why," she returned, demurely, "'twas to see you go more gallantly to your execution. And"—eating a grape—"that is reasonably certain to be your fate. You've only made a few more enemies to-night—the duke—the—"

"Name them not, fair Jacqueline," he retorted, indifferent.

"True; you'll soon learn for yourself," she answered sharply. "I think I should prefer to be in Triboulet's place to yours at present."

"Why," he said, with a strange laugh, "there's a day for the duke and a day for the fool."

Deliberately she turned from him and sang very softly:

"For love is madness;

(A dunce on a stool!)

A king in love,

A king and a fool!

Sing hoddy-doddy,

Noddy!

A king and a fool!"

The monarch bent over the countess; Diane and the dauphin exchanged messages with their eyes; Catharine smiled on Villot; the princess listened to her betrothed; and the jestress alone of all the ladies leaned back and sang, heart-free. But suddenly she again broke off and looked curiously at the duke's plaisant.

"Why did you not answer them with what was first in your mind?" she asked.

"What was that?" he said, starting.

"How can I tell?" she returned, studying him.

"You can tell a great deal," he replied.

"Sing hoddy-doddy,

Noddy!

The duke and the fool"—

she hummed, deigning no further words.

CHAPTER VIII

A BRIEF TRUCE

"Turn out these torch-bearers, human candlesticks, and valets de chambre, and I'll get me to bed," commanded the duke, standing in the center of his room, and the trooper with the fierce red mustaches waved a swarm of pages, cup-bearers and attendants from the door and closed it. "How are the men quartered, Johann?"

"With all the creature comforts, my Lord," answered the soldier. "The king hath dressed them like popinjays; they drink overmuch, dice, and run after the maids, but otherwise are well-behaved."

"Drink; dice; run after the maids!" said the noble, gazing thoughtfully downward. "Hold them in check, Johann, as though we were in a campaign."

"Yes, my Lord," returned the man, staring impassively before him.

"And especially keep them from the kitchen wenches. There's more danger in these femmes de chambre, laundresses and scullery Cinderellas than in a column of glittering steel. Remember, no Court of Love in the scullery. Now go! Yet stay, Johann!" he added, suddenly. "This fool of ours is a bold fellow. Look to him well!"

Saluting respectfully, an expression of quick intelligence on his florid features, the trooper backed out of the room. With his hands behind him, his shoulders bent forward, the duke long pondered, his look, keen and discerning; his perspicacity clear, in spite of Francis' wine, or the intoxication of the princess' eyes. Although the noble's glance seemed bent on vacancy, it was himself as well as others he was studying; weighing the memorable events of the evening; recalling to mind every word with the princess; reviewing her features, the softening of her cold disdain; now, mentally distrustful, because she was a woman; again, confident he already dominated the citadel of her heart.

But a new element had entered into the field; an element unforeseen—the jester!—and, although not attaching great importance to this possible source of hazard in his plans for the future, the duke was too good a soldier to disregard any risk, however slight. In love and battle, every peril should be avoided; every vulnerable point made impregnable. Besides, the fool was audacious, foolhardy; his language of covert mockery and quick wit proved him an intelligent antagonist, who might become a desperate one.

"A woman and a fool," muttered the duke, striding with quick step across his chamber, "are two uncertain quantities. The one should be subjected; the other removed!"

Museful, he stood before the niche, wherein shone a cross of silver, set with amethysts and turquoise, his rugged face lighted by the uncertain flickering of the candles.

"Removed!" he repeated, contemplatively. "And she—"

The clear tinkling of a bell broke in upon his cogitation; a faint, musical sound that seemed at his very elbow. He wheeled about abruptly, saw nothing save the mysterious shadows of the curtains, the flickering lamps, the dark outline of the canopy of the great bed. Instinctively he knew he was not alone, and yet his gaze, rapidly sweeping the apartment, failed to perceive an intruder.

Again the tinkling, a low laugh, and, turning sharply toward an alcove from whence the sounds came, the duke, through the half-light and trailing, sombrous shadows of its entrance, perceived a figure in a chair. From a candle set in a spiked, enameled stick, a yellow glimmering, that came and went with the sputtering flame, rested upon an ironical face, a graceful figure in motley and a wand with the jester's head and the bell. Without rising, the plaisant quizzically regarded the surprised nobleman, who in spite of his self-control had stepped back involuntarily at the suddenness of the encounter.

"Good evening, my Lord," said the fool. "I am like the genii of the tale. You think of me, and I appear."

Regaining his composure at once, the king's guest bent his heavy brows over his deep-set eyes, and deliberately surveyed the fool.

"And now," went on the jester, gaily, "it is in your mind I am like as suddenly to—disappear! Am I at fault?"

"On the contrary, you are unusually clear-witted," was the answer.

"Oh, my Lord, you over-estimate my poor capacity!" returned the nobleman's unasked caller with a deprecatory gesture.

The hands of the other worked impatiently; his herculean figure blocked the doorway. "You are a merry fellow!" he observed. "It is to be regretted, but—confess you have brought it upon yourself?"

"What? My fate? Oh, yes!" And he indifferently regarded the wand and the wooden figure upon it, without moving from the chair.

"You have no fear?" questioned the duke, quietly.

"Fear? Why should I?"

Yawning, the fool stretched his arms, looking not at the nobleman, but beyond him, and, instinctively, the princess' betrothed peered over his shoulder in the semi-darkness behind, while his hand quickly sought his sword.

"Fie, most noble Duke!" exclaimed the jester. "We have no eavesdroppers or interlopers, believe me! We are entirely alone, you and I—master and fool. There; come no nearer, I beg!" As the nobleman menacingly moved toward him.

"Have you any argument to advance, Sir Fool, why I should not?" said the other, grimly, a gleam of amusement depicted on his broad face as he paused the while.

"An argument, sharp as a needle, somewhat longer!" replied the jester, touching his breast and drawing from between the folds of his doublet a shining hilt.

Harsh and loud laughed the king's guest. "You fool," he said, "you had your opportunity below there in the hall and missed it. You hesitated, went blindly another course, and now"—with ominous meaning—"you are here!"

Upon the stick a candle dripped, sputtered and went out; the jester bent forward and with the copper snuffer on the table near by deftly trimmed the remaining light.

"Only fools fight in darkness," he remarked, quietly, "and here is but one of them."

"You pit yourself and that—plaything!—against me?" asked the burly soldier, derisively.

"Have you hunted the wild boar, my Lord?" lightly answered the other. "How mighty it is! How savage! What tusks! You know the pastime? A quick step, a sure arm, an eye like lightning—presto! your boar lies on his back, with his feet in the air! You, my Lord, are the boar; big, clumsy, brutal! Shall we begin the sport? I promise to prick you with every rush."

The prospective bridegroom paused thoughtfully.

"There is some justice in what you say," he returned, his manner that of a man who has carefully weighed and considered a matter. "I confess to partiality for the thick of the fray, the brunt of the fight, where men press all around you."

"Assuredly, my Lord; for then the boar is in his element; no matter how he rushes, his tusks strike yielding flesh."

"Why should we fight at all—at present?" cautiously ventured the noble, with further hesitation. "Not that I doubt I could easily crush you"—extending his muscular arms—"but you might prick me, and, just now, discretion may be the better part of valor. I—a duke, engaged to wed a princess, have much to lose; you, nothing! A fool's stroke might kill a king."

"Or a knave, my Lord!" added the plaisant.

"Or a knave, sirrah!" thundered the duke, the veins starting out on his forehead.

The jester half drew his dagger; his quiet confidence and glittering eye impressed even his antagonist, inured to scenes of violence and strife.

"Is it a truce, most noble Lord?" said the fool, significantly. "A truce wherein we may call black, black; and white, white! A truce which may be broken by either of us, with due warning to the other?"

Knitting his brow, the noble stood motionless, deeply pondering, his headlong passion evidently at combat with his judgment; then his face cleared, a hard, brusque laugh burst from his lips and he brought his fist violently down on the massive oak table near the door.

"So be it!" he assented, with a more open look.

"A truce—without any rushes from the boar?"

"Fool! Does not my word suffice?" contemptuously retorted the duke.

"Yes; for although you are—what you are—you have been a soldier, and would not break a truce."

"Such commendation from—my jester is, indeed, flattering!" satirically remarked the king's guest, seating himself in a great chair which brought him face to face with the fool and yet commanded the door, the intruder's only means of retreat.

"Pardon me, the duke's jester, you mean?"

"Yes; mine!"

"A distinction with a difference!" retorted the fool. "It is quite true I am the duke's jester; it is equally untrue I am yours. Therefore, we reach the conclusion that you and the duke are two different persons. Plainly, not being the duke, you are an impostor. Have you any fault to find with my reasoning?"

"On the contrary," answered the other, with no sign of anger or surprise, "your reasoning is all that could be desired. Why should I deny what you already know? I was aware, of course, that you knew, when I first learned his jester was in the castle. Frankly, I am not the duke—to you!"

"But with Francis and the court?" suggested the fool, uplifting his brows.

"I am the duke—and such remain! You understand?"

"Perfectly, my Lord," replied the jester, shrugging his shoulders. "But since I am not the king, nor one of the courtiers, whom, for the time being, have I the honor of addressing? But, perhaps, I am over-inquisitive."

"Not at all," said the other, with mocking ceremony. "You are a whimsical fellow; besides, I am taken with a man who stands near death without flinching. To tell you the truth, our truce is somewhat to my liking. There are few men who would have dared what you have to-night. And although you're only a fool—will you drink with me from this bottle on the table here? I'm tired of ceremonies of rank and would clink a glass in private with a merry fellow. What say you?"

And leaning over, he filled two large goblets with the rich beverage from a great flask placed on the stand for his convenience. His face lighted with gross conviviality, but behind his jovial, free manner, that of a trooper in his cups, gleamed a furtive, guarded look, as though he were studying and testing his man.

"I'm for a free life; some fighting; but snug walls around for companionship," he continued. "Look at my soldiers now; roistering, love-making! Charles? Francis? Not one of the troop would leave me for emperor or king! Not one but would follow me—where ambition leads!" Holding up the glass, he looked into the depths of the thick burgundy. "Why, a likely fellow like you should carry a gleaming blade, not a wooden sword. I know your duke—a man of lineage—a string of titles long as my arm—an underling of the emperor, while I"—closing his great jaw firmly—"owe allegiance to no man, or monarch, which is the same thing. Drink, lad; I'm pleased I did not kill you."

"And I," laughed the plaisant, "congratulate myself you are still alive—for the wine is excellent!"

"Still alive!" exclaimed the king's guest, boisterously, although a dark shadow crossed his glance.

"I'm scarred from head to foot, and my hide is as tough as—"

"A boar's?" tapping his chin with the fool's head on his wand.

"Ah, you will have your jest," retorted the host of the occasion, good-naturedly. "It's bred in the bone. A quality for a soldier. Next to courage is that fine sense of humor which makes a man a bon camarade. Put down your graven image, lad; you were made to carry arms, not baubles. Put it down, I say, and touch glasses with Louis, of Pfalz-Urfeld."

"The bastard of Hochfels!" exclaimed the jester, fixedly regarding the man whose name was known throughout Europe for his reckless bravery, his personal resources and his indomitable pride or love of freedom and independence, which held him aloof from emperor or monarch, and made him peer and leader among the many intractable spirits of the Austrian country who had not yet bowed their necks to conquest; a soldier of many battles, whose thick-walled fortress, perched picturesquely in mid-air on a steep mountain top, established his security on all sides.

"The same, my friend of the motley," continued the other, not without complacency, observing the effect of his announcement on the jester.

"He who calls himself the free baron of Hochfels?" observed the fool, setting down the glass from which he had moderately partaken.

"Aye; a man of royal and peasant blood," harshly answered the free-booter. "Ambition, arrogance, are the kingly inheritance; strength, a constitution of iron, the low-born legacy. What think you of such an endowment?"

"You are far from your castle, my Lord of Hochfels," commented the jester, absently, unmindful of a question he felt not called upon to answer.

"And yet as safe as in my own mountain nest," retorted the free baron, or free-booter, indifferently. "Who would betray me? There is not a trooper of mine but would die for his master. You would not denounce me, because—but why enumerate the reasons? I hold you in the palm of my hand, and, when I close my fingers, there's the end of you."

"But where—allow me; the wine has a rare flavor," and he reached for the flask.

"Drink freely," returned the pretender; "it is the king's own, and you are my guest. You were about to ask—"

"Whence came the idea for this mad adventure?" said the jester, his eyes seemingly bent in admiration on the goblet he held; a half globe of crystal sustained by a golden Bacchus.

"Idea!" repeated the self-called baron, with a gesture of satisfaction. "It was more than an idea. It was an inspiration, born of that chance which points the way to greatness. The feat accomplished, all Europe will wonder at the wanton exploit. At first Francis will rage; then seeing me impregnably intrenched, will make the best of the marriage, especially as the groom is of royal blood. Next, an alliance with the French king against the emperor. Why not; was not Francis once ready to treat even with Solyman to defeat Charles, an overture which shocked Christendom? And while Charles' energies are bent to the task of protecting his country from the Turks, a new leader appears; a devil-may-care fellow—and then—and then—"

He broke off abruptly; stared before him, as though the fumes of wine were at last beginning to rise to his head; toyed with his glass and drank it quickly at a draft. "What an alluring will-o'-the-wisp is—to-morrow!" he muttered.

"An illusive hope that reconciles us with to-day," answered the plaisant.

"Illusive!" cried the other. "Only for poets, dreamers, fools!"

"And you, Sir Baron, are neither one nor the other," remarked the jester. "No philosopher, but a plain soldier, who chops heads—not logic. But the inspiration that caused you to embark upon this hot-brained, pretty enterprise?"

"Upon a spur of rock that overlooks the road through the mountain is set the Vulture's Nest, Sir Fool," began the adventurer in a voice at once confident and arrogant. "At least, so the time-honored fortress of Hochfels is disparagingly designated by the people. As the road is the only pass through the mountains, naturally we come more or less in contact with the people who go by our doors. Being thus forced, through the situation of our fortress, into the proximity of the traveling public, we have, from time to time, made such sorties as are practised by a beleaguered garrison, and have, in consequence, taken prisoners many traffickers and traders, whose goods and chattels were worthy of our attention as spoils of war. Generally, we have confined our operations to migratory merchants, who carry more of value and cause less trouble than the emperor's soldiers or the king's troopers, but occasionally we brush against one of the latter bands so that

we may keep in practice in laying our blades to the grindstone, and also to show we are soldiers, not robbers."

"Which remains to be proved," murmured the attentive jester. "Your pardon, noble Lord"—as the other half-started from his chair—"let me fill your glass. 'Tis a pity to neglect such royal wine. Proceed with your story. Come we presently to the inspiration?"

"At once," answered the apparently appeased master of the fortress, wiping his lips. "One day our western outpost brought in a messenger, and, when we had stripped the knave, upon him we found a miniature and a letter from the princess to the duke. The latter was prettily writ, with here and there a rhyme, and moved me mightily. The eagle hath its mate, I thought, but the vulture of Hochfels is single, and this reflection, with the sight of the picture and that right, fair script, saddened me.

"And then, on a sudden, came the inspiration. Why not play a hand in this international marriage Charles and Francis were bringing about? I commanded the only road across the mountain; therefore, did command the situation. The emperor and the king should be but the wooden figures, and I would pull the strings to make them dance. The duke, your master, why should he be more than a name? The princess' letter told me she had never seen her betrothed. What easier than to redouble the sentries in the valley, make prisoners of the messengers, clap them in the fortress dungeons, read the missives, and then despatch them to their respective destinations by men of my own?"

"Then that was the reason why on my way through the mountains your knaves attacked me?" said the listener quickly.

"Exactly; to search you. How you slipped through their hands I know not." And he glanced at the other curiously.

"They were but poor rogues," answered the jester quickly.

"Certainly are you not one!" exclaimed the free baron, with a glance of approval at the slender figure of his antagonist. "Two of them paid for their carelessness. The others were so shamed, they told me some great knight had attacked them. A fool in motley!" he laughed. "No wonder the rogues hung their heads! But in deceiving me," he added thoughtfully, "they permitted their master to run into an unknown peril—his ignorance that a fool of the duke, or a fool wearing the emblem of the emperor, had gone to Francis' court."

"You were saying, Sir Free Baron, you intended to read the messages between the princess and the duke, and afterward to despatch them by messengers of your own?" interrupted the plaisant.

"Such were my plans. Moreover, I possessed a clerk—a knave who had killed an abbot and fled from the monastery—a man of poetry, wit and sentiment. Whenever the letters lacked for ardor, and the lovers had grown too timid, him I set to forge a postscript, or indite new missives, which the rogue did most prettily, having studied love-making under the monks. And thus, Sir Fool, I courted and won the princess—by proxy!"

"Of a certainty, your wooing was at least novel, Sir Knight of the Vulture's Nest," dryly observed the jester. "Although, had my master known the deception, you would, perhaps, have paid dearly for it."

"Your master, forsooth!" laughed the outlaw lord. "A puny scion of a worn-out ancestry! Such a woman as the princess wants a man of brawn and muscle; no weakling of the nursery."

"Well," said the fool, slowly, "you became intermediary between the princess and the duke, and the king and the emperor. But to come into the heart of France; to the king's very palace—did you not fear detection?"

"How?" retorted the other, raising his head and resting his eyes, bloodshot and heavy, on the fool's impassive features. "The road between the two monarchs is mine; no message can now pass. The emperor and the duke may wonder, but the way here is long, and"—with a smile—"I have ample time for the enterprise ere the alarm can be given."

"And you paved the way for your coming by altering the letters of the duke, or forging new ones?" suggested the listener.

"How else? A word added here and there; a post-script, or even a page! As for their highnesses' seals, any fool can break and mend a seal. In a week the duke will wonder at the princess' silence; in a fortnight he will become uneasy; in a month he will learn the cage has been left open and the bird hath flown. Then, too, shall the gates of the dungeon be set ajar, and the true, but tardy, messengers permitted to go their respective ways. Is it not a nice adventure? Am I not a fitter leader than your duke?"

"Undoubtedly," returned the jester. "He sits at home, while you are here in his stead. But what will the princess say when she learns?"

"Nothing. She loves me already."

The fool turned pale; the hand that held his glass, however, was firm, and he set the goblet down without a tremor.

"She may weep a little, but it will pass like a summer shower. Women are weak; women are yielding. Have I not reason to know?" he burst out. "I, a—"

Brusquely he arose from his chair, leaving the sentence uncompleted. Sternly he surveyed the jester.

"Why not take service with me?" he continued, abruptly. "Austria is ripe to revolt against the tyranny of the emperor. With the discontent in the Netherlands, the dissensions in Spain, Europe is like a field, cut up, awaiting new-comers."

He paused to allow the force of his words to appeal to the other's imagination. "What say you?" he continued. "Will you serve me?"

"The matter's worth thinking over," answered the fool, evasively.

"Well, take your time," said the king's guest, regarding him more sharply. "And now, as the candles are low and the flask is empty, you had better take your leave."

At this intimation that the other considered the interview ended, the fool started to his feet and deliberately made his way to the door opening into the corridor.

"Good-night!" he said, and was about to depart when the free baron held him with a word.

"Hold! Why have you not attempted to unmask me—before?"

Steadily the two looked at each other; the eyes of the elder man, cruel, deep, all-observing; those of the younger, steady, fearless, undismayed. Few of his troopers could withstand the sinister penetration of Louis of Hochfels' gaze, but on the jester it seemed to have no more effect than the casual glance of one of Francis' courtiers.

"You knew—and yet you made no sign?" continued the master of the fortress.

"Because I like a strong play and did not wish to spoil it—too soon!"

The questioner's brow fell; the lids half-veiled the dark, savage eyes, but the mouth relaxed. "Ah, you always have your answer," he returned with apparent cordiality. "Good-night—and, by the by, our truce is at an end."

"The truce—and the wine," said the jester, as with a ceremonious bow, he vanished amid the shadows in the hall.

Slowly the free baron closed the door and locked it; looked at the cross and at the bed, but made no motion toward either.

"He has already rejected my proposal," thought the self-styled duke. "Does he seek for higher rewards by betraying me? Or is it, then, Triboulet told the truth? Is he an aspiring lover of the princess? Or is he only faithful to his master? Why have I failed to read him? As though a film lay across his eyes, that index to a man's soul!"

Motionless the free baron stood, long pondering deeply, until upon the mantel the richly-chased clock began to strike musically, yet admonishingly. Whereupon he glanced at the cross; hesitated; then, noting the lateness of the hour, and with, perhaps, a mental reservation to retrieve his negligence on the morrow, he turned from the silver, bejeweled symbol and immediately sought the sensuous bodily enjoyment of a couch fit for a king or the pope himself.

CHAPTER IX

THE FLIGHT OF THE FOOL

Another festal day had come and gone. The crimson shafts of the dying sun had succumbed to the lengthening shadows of dusk, and the pigeons were wending their way homeward to the castle parapets and battlements, when, toward the arched entrance on the front, strode the duke's fool. Beyond the castle walls and the inclosure of the pleasure grounds the peace of twilight rested on the land; the great fields lay becalmed; the distant forests were bivouacs of rest.

The afternoon had been a labor of pleasure; about the great basin of the fountain had passed an ever-varying shifting of moving figures; between the trees bright colors appeared and vanished, and from the heart of concealed bowers had come peals of laughter or strains of music. Unnoticed among the merry throng in palace and park, the jester had moved aimlessly about; unobserved now, he turned his back upon the gray walls, satiated, perhaps, with the fêtes inaugurated by the kingly entertainer. But as he attempted to pass the gate, a stalwart guard stepped forward, presenting a formidable-looking glave.

"Your permit to leave?" he said.

"A permit? Of course!" replied the fool, and felt in his coat. "But what a handsome weapon you have; the staff all covered with velvet and studded with brass tacks!"

"Has the Emperor Charles, then, no such weapons?" asked the gratified soldier.

"None so handsome! May I see it?" The guard unsuspiciously handed the glave to the jester, who immediately turned it upon the sentinel.

"Give it back, fool!" cried the alarmed guard.

"Nay; I am minded to call out and show a soldier of France disarmed by a foreign fool."

"As well chop off my head with it!" sighed the man.

"And if I wish to walk without the gate?" suggested the jester.

"Go, good fool!" replied the other, without hesitation.

"Well, here is the glave. If any one admires it again, let him study the point. But why may no one pass out?"

"Because so many soldiers and good citizens have been beaten and robbed by those who hover around the palace. But you may go in peace," he added. "No one will harm a fool. If 'tis amusement you seek, there's a camp on the verge of the forest where a dark-haired, good-looking baggage dances and tells cards. You can find the place from the noise within, and if you're merry, they'll welcome you royally. Go; and God be with you!"

The jester turned from the good-natured guard and quickly walked down the road, which wound gracefully through the valley and lost itself afar in a fringe of woodland. A light pattering on the hard earth behind caused him to look about. Following was a dog that now sprang forward with joyous demonstration. The fool stooped and gravely caressed the hound which last he had seen at the princess' feet.

"Why," he said, "thou art now the fool's only friend at court."

When again he moved on with rapid, nervous stride, the animal came after. Darker grew the road; deeper hued the fields and stubble; more somber the distant castle against the gloaming. Only the cry of a diving night-bird startled the stillness of the tranquil air; a rapacious filcher that quickly rose, and swept onward through the sea of night. Its melancholy note echoed in the breast of the fool; mechanically, without relaxing his swift pace, he looked upward to follow it, when a short, sharp bark behind him and a premonition of impending danger caused him to spring suddenly aside. At the same time a dagger descended in the empty air, just grazing the shoulder of the jester, who, recovering himself, grasped the arm of his assailant and grappled with him. Finding him a man of little strength, the fool easily threw him to the earth and kneeling on his breast in turn menaced the assailant with the weapon he had wrested from him.

"Have you any reason, knave, why I should spare you?" asked the fool.

"If I had—for want of breath—it would fail me!" answered the miscreant with some difficulty.

The duke's jester arose. "Get up, rogue!" he said, and the man obeyed.

He was a pale, gaunt fellow, with long hair, unshaven face, hollow cheeks, and dark eyes, set deeply in his head and shaded by thick, black brows. His dress consisted of a rough doublet, with lappet sleeves, carried down to a point, tight leggings, broad shoes and the puffed upper hose; the entire raiment frayed and worn; his flesh, or, rather, his bones, showing through

the scanty covering for his legs, while his feet were no better protected than those of a trooper who has been long on the march. He displayed no fear or enmity; on the contrary, his manner was rather friendly than otherwise, as though he failed to understand the enormity of his offense and the position in which he was placed. Shifting from one foot to another, he crossed his great, thin hands before him and patiently awaited his captor's pleasure. The latter surveyed him curiously, and, noting his woebegone features and beggarly attire, pity, perhaps, assuaged his just anger toward this starveling.

"Why did you wish to kill me?" asked the jester quietly, if somewhat impatiently.

"It was not my wish, Master Fool," gently replied the other, but even as he spoke the resignation in his manner gave way to a look of apprehension. Lifting his hand, he felt in his breast and glanced about him on the road. Then his face brightened.

"With your permission—I have e'en dropped something—"

And stooping, the scamp-scholar picked up a small, leathern-bound volume from the ground, where it had fallen during the struggle, and held it tightly clutched in his hand. "Ah," he muttered with a glad sigh, "I feared I had lost it—my Horace! And now, Sir Jester, what would you with me?"

"A question I might answer with a question," replied the fool. "Having failed in your enterprise, why should I spare you?"

"You shouldn't," returned the vagabond-student. "The ancients teach but the irrevocable law of retribution."

To hear a would-be assassin, a castaway out of pocket and heels and elbows, calmly proclaiming the Greek doctrine of inevitableness, under such circumstances, would have surprised an observer even more experienced and worldly than the duke's fool. Involuntarily his face softened; this pauvre diable gazed upon eternity with the calm eyes of a Socrates.

"You do not then beg for life?" said the plaisant, his former impatience merging into mild curiosity.

"Is it worth begging for?" asked the straitened book-worm. "Life means a pinched stomach, a cold body; Death, no hunger to fear, and a bed that, though cold, chills us not. What we know not doth not exist—for us; ergo, to lie in the earth is to rest in the lap of luxury, for all our consciousness of it. But to be unconscious of the ills of this perishable frame, Horace likewise must be as dead to us as our aches and pains. Thus is life made preferable

to death. Yes; I would live. Hold, though—" he again hesitated in deep thought—"what avails Horace if—" he began.

"Why, what new data have entered in the premises?" observed the wondering jester.

"Nanette!" was the gloomy answer.

"Who, pray, is Nanette?" asked the fool, thrusting his assailant's weapon in his jerkin.

"A wanton haggard whose tongue will run post sixteen stages together! Who would make the devil himself malleable; then, work, hammer and wire-draw him!"

"And what is she to you?"

"My wife! That is, she claims that exalted place, having married me one night when I was in my cups through a false priest who dresses as a Franciscan monk. 'Fools in the court of God' are these priests called, and truly he is a jester, for certainly is he no true monk. But Nanette, nevertheless, asserts she is the lawful partner of my sorrows. So work your will on me. A stroke, and the shivering spirit is wafted across the Styx."

"And if I gave you not only your life—for a consideration hereafter to be mentioned—but a small silver piece as well?" suggested the jester, who had been for some moments buried in thought.

"Ha!" ejaculated the scamp-student, brightening. "Your gift would match the piece I already have and which—dolt that I was!—I overlooked to include in my chain of reasoning." And thrusting his hand into his ragged doublet, after some search he extracted a diminutive disk upon which he gazed not without ardor. "Thus are we forced to start the chain of reasoning anew," he remarked, "with Horace and this bit of metal on one side of the scales and Nanette on the other. Now unless the devil sits on the beam with Nanette—which he's like to do—the book and the bit of dross will outweigh her and we arrive at the certitude that life, qualified as to duration, may be happily endured."

"What argument does the dross carry, knave?" demanded the fool, looking down at the hound that crouched at his feet.

"With it may be purchased that which warms the pinched stomach. With it may be bought an elixir, so strong and magical, it may breed defiance even

of Nanette. Sir Fool, I have concluded to accept life and the small silver piece."

"Well and good," commented the jester. "But there are conditions attached to my clemency."

"Conditions!" retorted the vagabond. "What are conditions to a philosopher, once he has reached a logical assurance?"

"First, you must find me a horse. Your Nanette, as I take it, is a gipsy and in the camp, are, surely, horses."

"But why should you want a horse? 'Tis not far to the castle?" said the puzzled scholar.

"No; but 'tis far away from it. Next, tell me where you got that small piece of silver, like the one I have promised you?"

"From Nanette."

"What for?"

"To accomplish that which I have failed to do," replied the student, willingly. "But, alas, not having earned it, have I the right idly to spend it?" he added, dolefully, half to himself.

"Why did Nanette—" began the jester.

But the other raised his arm with an expostulatory gesture. "Many things I know," he interrupted; "odds and ends of erudition, but a woman's mind I know not, nor want to know. I had as soon question Beelzebub as her; yea, to stir up the devil with a stick. If sparing my life is contingent on my knowing why she does this, or that, then let me pay the debt of nature."

"No; 'tis slight punishment to take from a man that which he values so little he must reason with himself to learn if he value it at all," returned the duke's jester, slowly. "We'll waive the question, if you find me the horse."

"'Tis Nanette you must ask. There's but one, old, yet serviceable—"

"Then take me to Nanette."

"Very well. Follow me, sir; and if you're still of a mind when you see her, you can question her."

"Why, is she so weird and witch-like to look upon?" said the fool.

"Nay; the devil hides his claws behind the daintiest fingers, all pink and white. He conceals his cloven hoof in a slipper, truly sylph-like."

"You arouse my curiosity. I would fain meet this fair monster."

"Come then, Master Fool," replied the scamp-student, leaving the road for the field to the right, and the jester, after a moment's deliberation, turned likewise into the stubble, while the hound, as if satisfied with the service it had performed, slowly retraced its way toward the castle, stopping, however, now and then to look around after the two men, whose figures grew smaller and smaller in the distance. For some space they walked in silence; then the scholar paused, and, pointing to a low, rambling house that once had been a hunter's lodge and now had fallen into decay, exclaimed:

"There's where she lives, fool. I'll warrant she's not alone."

At the same time a clamor of voices and a chorus of rough melody, coming from the cottage, confirmed the assurance his spouse was not, indeed, holding solitary vigil.

"'Tis e'en thus every night," murmured the scamp student in a melancholy tone. "She gathers 'round her the scum of all rudeness; ragged alchemists of pleasure, who sing incessantly, like grasshoppers on a summer day."

"Where is the horse?" said the jester, abruptly.

"Stalled in one of the rooms for safe keeping. There are so many rascals and thieves around, you see—"

"They e'en rob one another!" returned the fool.

Advancing more cautiously, the two men approached the ancient forester's dwelling, the hue and cry sounding louder as they drew near, a mingled discord of laughter, shouting and caterwauling, with a woman's piercing voice at times dominating the general vociferation. The philosopher shook his head despondingly, while, creeping to one of the windows, the jester looked in.

Near the fire was a misshapen creature, a sort of monstrous imbecile that chattered and moaned; a being that bore some resemblance to the ancient morios once sold at the olden Forum Morionum to the ladies who desired these hideous animals for their amusement. At his feet gamboled a dwarf that squeaked and screeched, distorting its face in hideous grimaces. Scattered about the room, singing, bawling or brawling, were indigent morris dancers; bare-footed minstrels; a pinched and needy versificator; a

reduced mountebank; a swarthy clown, with a hare's mouth; joculators of the streets, poor as rats and living as such, straitened, heedless fellows, with heads full of nonsense and purses empty, poor in pocket, but rich in plaisanterie.

Upon the table, with cards in her lap, which she studied idly, sat a hard-featured, deep-bosomed woman, neither old nor uncomely, with thick, black hair, coarse as a horse's mane, cheeks red as a berry, glowing with health. In her pose was a certain savage grace, an untrammeled freedom which revealed the vigorous outlines of a well-proportioned figure. Her eye was bright as a diamond and bold as a trooper's; when she lifted her head she looked disdainfully, scornfully, fiercely, upon the strange and monstrous company of which she was queen.

"Where can the thief-friar be?" muttered the student. "He is usually not far off from sweet Nanette."

"You mean the monk who had a hand in your nuptials?"

"Who else? He, the source of all ill. He who gave her the money of which she e'en presented me a moiety. Whoever employed him—was it your friends, gentle sir?—rewarded him with gold. Being a craven rogue, I e'en suspect him of shifting the task to myself for a beggarly pittance, whilst he is off with the lion's share."

The jester, watching the company within, made no reply. From the student to the woman, to the friar, was a chain leading—where? He found it not difficult to surmise. Suddenly Nanette threw down the cards and laughed harshly.

"Neither the devil nor his imps could read the things that are happening in the castle!"

Then abruptly springing from the table, she made her way to the fire, over which hung a pot of some savory stew, a magnet to the company's sharp desire; for throughout all the boisterous merriment wandering glances had invariably returned to it. To reach the kettle and make herself mistress of the culinary preparations, she cuffed a dwarf with such vigor that he hobbled howling from a suspicious proximity to the appetizing mess to a safe refuge beneath the table. With equally dauntless spirit, she pushed aside the herculean morio who had been childishly standing over the pot, licking his fingers in eager anticipation; whereupon the imbecile set up a sharp cry that blended with the deeper roar of the lilliputian.

"And I caught the rabbit!" piteously bellowed the latter from his retreat.

"And I found the turnips!" cried the colossal idiot, tears running down his lubberly cheeks.

"Peace, you demons!" exclaimed the woman, waving the spoon at them, "or, by the hell-born, you'll ne'er taste morsel of it!"

Quieted by this stupendous threat, they closed their mouths and opened their eyes but the wider, while the gipsy spouse of the student stirred and stirred the mixture in the iron pot, gazing at the fire with frowning brow as though she would read some page of the future in the leaping flames.

"Saw you but now how she served the dwarf and the overgrown lump?" whispered the student to the duke's fool. "Are you still minded to meet her?"

For answer the jester left the window, stepped to the door, and, opening it, strode into the room.

CHAPTER X

THE FOOL RETURNS TO THE CASTLE

As the duke's fool suddenly appeared in the crowded apartment, the hubbub abruptly ceased; the minstrels and mountebanks gazed in surprise at the slender figure of the alien jester whose rich garments proclaimed him a personage of importance, one who had reached that pinnacle in buffoonery, the high office of court plaisant. The morio crouched against the wall, his fear of the new-comer as great as his body was large; the garret minstrels stopped strumming their instruments, while the woman at the fire uttered a quick exclamation and dropped the spoon with a clatter to the floor, where it was promptly seized by the dwarf, who, taking advantage of the woman's consternation, thrust it greedily to his lips. But soon recovering from her wonderment, the gipsy soundly boxed the dwarf's ears, recovered her spoon and set herself once more to stirring the contents of the pot.

The jester observed her for a moment—the heavy, bare arm moving round and round over the kettle; her sunburnt legs uncovered to the knee; the masculine attitude of her figure with the torn and worn garments that covered her—and she seemed to him a veritable trull of disorder and squalor. The gipsy, too, looked at him over her shoulder, and, as she gazed, her hand went slower and slower, until all motion ceased, and the spoon lay on the edge of the pot, when she turned deliberately, offering him the full sight of her bold cheeks and shameless eyes.

"Are you Nanette, wife of this philosopher?" asked the duke's fool, approaching, and indicating the miserable scamp who clung near the doorway as one undecided whether to enter or run away.

"Yes; I am Nanette, his true and lawful spouse," she answered with a shrill laugh. "Wilt come to me, true-love?" she called out to her apprehensive yoke-mate.

"Nay; I'll go out in the air a while," hurriedly replied the vagabond-scholar, and quickly vanished.

"Ah, how he loves me!" she continued.

"So much he prefers a cony-burrow to his own fireside," said the fool dryly.

"A hole i' the earth is too good for such a scurvy fellow," she retorted. "But what would you here, fool? A song, a jest, a dance? Or have you come to learn a new story, or ballad, for the lordlings you must entertain?" Unabashed, she approached a step nearer.

"Your stories, mistress, would be unsuited for the court, and your ballads best unsung," he retorted. "I came, not to sharpen my wits, but to learn from whom the thief-friar got the small piece of silver you gave your consort, and, also, to procure a horse."

Her brazen eyes wavered. "A horse and a fool flying," she muttered. "Even what the cards showed. The fool seeking the duke!" A puzzled look crossed her face. "But the duke is here?" she continued to herself. "A strange riddle! All the signs show devilment, but what it is—"

"Good Nanette," interrupted the jester, satirically, "I have no time for spells or incantation."

"How dared you come here," she said, hoarsely, "after—"

"After your mate proved but an indifferent servant of yours?" he concluded, meeting her sullen gaze with one so stern and inflexible that before it her eyes fell.

"Do you not know," she said, endeavoring to maintain a hardened front, "I have but to say the word, and all these friends of mine would tear you to pieces? What would you do, my pretty fellows, an I ask you?" she cried out, her voice rising audaciously. "Would you suffer this duke's jester to stand against me?"

Glances of suspicion and animosity shot from a score of eyes; fists were half-clenched; knives appeared in a trice from the concealment of rags, and a low murmur arose from the gathering. Even the imbecile morio, nature's trembling coward, became suddenly valiant, and, with huge frame uplifted, seemed about to spring savagely upon the fool. An expression of disgust replaced all other feeling on the features of the duke's plaisant.

"Spare me your threats, Nanette," he replied, coldly. "Had you intended to set them on me, you would have done it long ere this."

The woman hesitated. His calm, almost contemptuous, confidence was not without its effect upon her. Had he trembled, she would have spoken, but before his disdain, and the gay splendor of his attire, conspicuous amid rags from rubbish heaps, she felt a sudden consciousness of her own unclean environment; at the same time unusual warnings in her conjurations recurred to her. Something about him—was it dignity or pride or a nameless fear she herself experienced but could not understand?—beat down her eyes and she turned them doggedly away.

Abruptly she moved to the fire and again began to stir the mess, while the suppressed excitement in the room at once subsided. A minstrel lightly touched his battered dulcimer; a poet hummed a song in the dialect of thieves; a juggler began practising some deft work for hand and eye, and he of the hare lip sank quietly into a corner and patiently watched the simmering pot. The dwarf, with some misgiving, as a dog that is beaten crawls cautiously out of its kennel, crept from beneath the table.

"Oh, mistress," he whimpered, "some of it has boiled over!"

"Boiled over!" echoed the morio, mournfully.

At the same time the woman grasped the handle of the heavy kettle, lifted it from the jack, displaying in her bared arms the muscles of a man, and, staggering beneath the load, bore it steaming to the table. Amid the subsequent confusion, the gipsy held aloof from the demolition of the rabbit, and, seating herself at the foot of the table, began moodily once more to turn the cards.

A merry droll acted as host and dipped freely for all with the long spoon, commenting the while he dispensed the mess according to the wants of the miscellaneous gathering: "Pot-luck! 'Tis luck, and they're no field mice in it! There's everything else!" or "A bit of rabbit, my masters! I'll warrant he'll hop down your throats as fast as e'er he jumped a hillock." And, when one ate too greedily, slap went a spoonful of gravy o'er him with: "I thought you would catch it, knave!"

"Are they not blithe devils 'round the caldron?" muttered the woman. "There it is again!"—Bending over the bits of pasteboard on the table. "The duke here! And the fool on horseback! What do the cards mean?"

"That I must have the horse, Nanette," said the duke's jester, standing motionless and firm before the fireplace.

"Are you the fool?" she asked, more to herself than him. "Why does he wish to ride away?"

"Will you sell me the horse?" he demanded.

She hesitated. Around them danced the shadows of the kettle-gourmands:

"A kern and a drole, a varlet and a blade

A drab and a rep, a skit and a jade—"

sang the street poet; the dwarf and the morio (a lilliputian and Gulliver) fought a mimic combat; the juggler and the clown, who could eat no more, were keeping time to a chorus by beating with their empty trenchers on the table.

"Sell you the horse? For what?" asked the gipsy.

"For five gold pieces."

"A fool with five gold pieces!" she exclaimed, incredulously.

"Here! You may see them." And he opened a purse he carried at his girdle.

"Do not let them know," she said, hurriedly. "They would kill you and—"

"You would not get the money," he added, significantly. "If you act quickly, find me a horse and let me go; it is you, not they, who will profit."

Abruptly she rose. "It is fate," she remarked, her eyes greedy.

His glance, as he stood there, proud and stern, cut her sharply. "Say cupidity, Nanette!" he laughed softly. "It is more profitable not to betray me. In the one case you get much; in the other, little."

"Stay here," she replied, hastily. "I'll fetch the horse." And vanished.

A moment he remained, then resolutely turning to the door through which she had disappeared, opened it, and found himself in a combined sleeping-room and stable; a dark apartment, with floor of hardened earth and a single window, open to wind and weather. The atmosphere in this chamber for man and beast was impregnated with the smell of mold and dry-rot, mingled with the livelier effluvium of dirt and grime of years; but amid the malodor and mustiness, on a couch under the window, slumbered and snored the false Franciscan monk. By his side was a tankard, half-filled with stale sack, and in his hand he clutched a gold piece as though he had had an intimation it would be safer there than elsewhere on his person during the pot-valiant sleep he had deliberately courted. His hood had fallen back, displaying a bullet head, red cheeks and purple nose, while the wooden beads of this sottish counterfeit of a friar trailed from his girdle on the ground. From a stall in a far corner a large, bony-looking nag turned its head reproachfully, as if mentally protesting against such foul quarters and the poor company they offered. Its melancholy whinny upon the appearance of the woman was a sigh for freedom; a sad suspiration to the memory of radiant clover fields or poppy-starred meadows.

"Why, here's a holy man worn out by too many paternosters," commented the duke's fool, standing on the threshold; and then gazed from the gold piece in the monk's hand to the woman. "I need not ask where you got the silver, Nanette. 'Tis a chain of evidence leading—where?"

The gipsy replied only with dark looks, regarding his intrusion in this inner sanctuary as a fresh provocation for her just displeasure. The jester, however, paid no attention to these signs of new acerbity on her face.

Crossing to the couch, he shook the monk vigorously, but the latter only held his piece of money tighter like a miser whose treasure is threatened, and snored the louder. Again the fool essayed to waken him, and this time he opened his eyes, felt for his beads and commenced to mutter a prayer in Latin words, strung together in meaningless phrases.

"Why," commented the jester, "his learning is as false as his cloak. Wake up, sirrah! Would you approach Heaven's gate with a feigned prayer on your lips and a toss-pot in your hand?"

"Christe tuum—I absolve you! I absolve you!" muttered the friar. "Go your way in peace."

"Hear me, thou trumped-up monk; do you want another piece of gold?"

"Gold!" repeated the other, tipsily. "What—what for? To—to help some fool to paradise—or purgatory? 'Tis for the Church I beg, good people. The holy Church—Church I say!"

Winking and blinking, seeing nothing before him, he held out a trembling hand. "The piece of gold—give it to me!" he mumbled.

"Yes; in exchange for your cloak," answered the jester.

"My cloak, thou horse-leech! Sell my skin for—piece of gold! Want my cloak? Take it!" And the dissembler rolled over, extending his arms. The jester grasped the garment by the sleeves and with some difficulty whipped it from him.

"Now hand me—the money and—cover me with rags that—I may sleep," continued the beer-bibber. "So"—as he grasped the money the fool gave him and stretched himself luxuriously beneath a noisome litter of cast-off clothes and rubbish—"I languish in ecstasies! The angels—are singing around me."

With growing surprise and ill-humor had the woman observed this novel proceeding, and now, when the jester had himself donned the false friar's gown, she said grudgingly:

"You did not give him one of the five pieces?"

"No; there are still five left."

"A bit of gold for a cloak!" she grumbled. "It is overmuch. But there!" Unfastening a door that looked out upon the field. "Give me the money and be gone."

He grasped the bridle of the horse, handed her the promised reward, and, drawing the hood of the monk's garment over his head, led the nag out into the open air. The door closed quickly behind him and he heard the wooden bolt as it shot into place. Above the dark outlines of the forest, the moon, full-orbed, now shone in the sky, with a myriad attendant stars, its silver beams flooding the open spaces and revealing every detail, soft, dreamy, yet distinct. A languorous, redolent air just stirred the waving grain, on which rested a glossy shimmer.

As the fool was about to spring upon the horse, a shadow suddenly appeared around the corner of the house and the animal danced aside in affright. Before the jester could quiet and mount the nag, the shadow resolved itself into a man, and, behind him, came a numerous band, the play of light on helmet, sword and dagger revealing them as a party of troopers. Doubtless having indulged freely, they had become inclined to new adventures, and accordingly had bent their footsteps toward the "little house on the verge of the wood," where merry company was always to be found. At the sight of the duke's fool and the horse they pressed forward, and, with one accord, surrounded him.

"The Franciscan monk!" cried one.

"Where is he going so late with the nag?" asked another.

"He's off to confess some one," exclaimed a third.

"A petticoat, most likely, the rogue!" rejoined the second speaker.

"Well, what have we to do with his love affairs?" laughed the first trooper. "Ride on, good father, and keep tryst."

"Yes, ride on!" the others called out.

The monk bowed. An interruption which had promised to defeat his designs seemed drawing to a harmless conclusion. His hopes ran high; the soldiers had not yet penetrated beneath the costume; he had already determined to leap upon the horse in a rush for freedom when a heavy, detaining hand was laid on his shoulder.

"One moment, knave!" said a deep voice, and, wheeling sharply, the fool looked into the keen, ferret eyes of the trooper with the red mustaches. "I have a question to ask. Have you done that which you were to do?"

The friar nodded his assent. "The fool will trouble the duke no more," he answered.

"Ah, he is"—began the soldier.

"Even so. And now pray let me pass."

"Yes; let him pass!" urged one of the soldiers. "Would you keep some longing trollop waiting?"

The leader of the troopers did not answer; his glance was bent upon the ground. "Yes, you may go," he commented, "when—" and suddenly thrust forth an arm and pulled back the enshrouding cloak.

"The duke's fool!" he cried. "Close in, rogues! Let him not escape."

Fiercely the fool's hand sought his breast; then, swiftly realizing that it needed but a pretext to bring about the end desired by the pretender in the castle, with an effort he restrained himself, and confronted his assailants, outwardly calm.

"'Tis a poor jest which fails," he said, easily.

"Jest!" grimly returned he of the red mustaches. "Call you it a jest, this monk's disguise? Once on the horse, it would have been no jest, and I'll warrant you would soon have left the castle far behind. Yes; and but for the cloven foot, the jest, as you call it, would have succeeded, too. Had it not been," he added, "for the pointed, silken shoe, peeping out from beneath the holy robe—a covering of vanity, instead of holy nakedness—you would certainly have deceived me, and"—with a brusque laugh—"slipped away from your master, the duke."

"The duke?" said the jester, as casting the now useless cloak from him, he deliberately scrutinized the rogue.

"The duke," returned the man, stolidly. "Well, this spoils our sport for to-night, knaves," he went on, turning to the other troopers, "for we must e'en escort the jester back to the castle."

"Beshrew him!" they answered, of one accord. "A plague upon him!"

And slowly the fool and the soldiers began to retrace their way across the moon-lit fields, the trooper with the red mustaches grumbling as they went: "Such luck to turn back now, with all those mad-caps right under our nose! A curse to a dry march over a dusty meadow! An unsanctified dog of a monk! 'Tis like a campaign, with naught but ditch water to drink. The devil take the friar and the jester! Forward! the fool in the center, and those he would have fooled around him!"

And when they disappeared in the distance the gipsy woman might have been seen leaving the house by the stable door and leading in the horse.

CHAPTER XI

A NEW MESSENGER TO THE EMPEROR

Between Caillette and the duke's jester had arisen one of those friendships which spring more from similitude than unlikeness; an amity of which each had been unconscious in its inception, but which had gradually grown into a sentiment of comradeship. Caillette was of noble mien, graceful manner and elegant address; a soldier by preference; a jester against his will, forced to the office by the nobleman who had cared for and educated him. In the duke's fool he had found his other self; a man who like himself lent dignity to the gentle art of jesting; who could turn a rhyme and raise a laugh without resorting to grossness.

The line of demarcation between the clown and the merry-and-wise wit was, in those days, not clearly drawn. The stories of the former, which made the matrons look down and the maidens to hide their faces, were often more appreciated by the inebriate nobles than some subtile comicality or nimble lines of poetry, that would serve to take home and think over, and which improved with time like a wine of sound body. Triboulet abused the ancient art of foolery, thought Caillette; the duke's plaisant played upon it with true drollery, and as a master who has a delicate ear for an instrument, so Caillette, being sensitive to broadness or stupidity which masked as humor or pleasantry, turned naturally from the mountebank to the true jester.

Moreover, Caillette experienced a superior sadness, sifted through years of infestivity and gloom, beginning when Diane was led to the altar by the grand seneschal of Normandy, that threw an actual, albeit cynical, interest about the love-tragedy of the duke's fool which the other divined and—from his own past heart-throbs—understood. The plaisant to the princess' betrothed, Caillette would have sworn, was of gentle birth; his face, manner and bearing proclaimed it; he was, also, a scholar and a poet; his courage, which Caillette divined, fitted him for the higher office of arms. Certainly, he became an interesting companion, and the French jester sought his company on every occasion. And this fellowship, or intimacy, which he courted was destined to send Caillette forth on a strange and adventuresome mission.

The day following the return of the duke's fool to the castle, Francis, who early in his reign had sought to model his life after the chivalrous romances, inaugurated a splendid and pompous tournament. Some time before, the pursuivants had proclaimed the event and distributed to the knights who were to take active part the shields of arms of the four juges-diseurs, or umpires of the field. On this gala occasion the scaffolds and stands

surrounding the arena were bedecked in silks of bright colors; against the cloudless sky a thousand festal flags waved and fluttered in the gentle breeze; beneath the tasseled awning festoons of bright flowers embellished gorgeous hangings and tapestries.

The king rode from the castle under a pavilion of cloth of gold and purple velvet, with the letters F and R, boldly outlined, followed by ladies and courtiers, pages and attendants. Amid the shouts and huzzas of the people, the monarch and his retinue took their places in the center of the stand, the royal box hung with ornate brocades and trimmings.

In an inclosure of white, next to that of the king, was seated the Lady of the Tournament, the Princess Louise, and her maids of honor, arrayed all in snowy garb, and, against the garish brilliancy of the general background, a pompous pageantry of colors, the decoration of this dainty nook shone in silvery contrast. A garland of flowers was the only crown the lady wore; no other adornment had her fair shoulders save their own argent beauty, of which the fashion of the day permitted a discernible suggestion. One arm hung languorously across the railing, as she leaned forward with seeming carelessness, but intently directed her glance to the scene below, where the attendants were arranging the ring or leading the wondrously pranked-out chargers to their stalls.

Behind her, motionless as a statue, with face that looked paler, and lips the redder, and hair the blacker, stood the maid Jacqueline. If the casual glance saw first the blond head, the creamy arms and sunny blue eyes of the princess, it was apt to linger with almost a start of wonder upon the striking figure of the jestress, a nocturnal touch in a pearly picture.

"On my word, there's a decorative creature for any lord to have in his house," murmured the aged chancellor of the kingdom, sitting near the monarch. "Who is she?"

"A beggar's brat Francis found here when he took the castle," replied the beribboned spark addressed. "You know the story?"

"Yes," said the white-haired diplomat, half-sadly. "This castle once belonged to the great Constable of Dubrois. When he fell from favor the king besieged him; the constable fled and died in Spain. That much, of course, I—and the world—know. But the girl—"

"When our victorious monarch took possession of this ancient pile," explained the willing courtier, "the only ones left in it were an old gamekeeper and his daughter, a gipsy-like maid who ran wild in the woods. Time hath tamed her somewhat, but there she stands."

"And what sad memories of a noble but unfortunate gentleman cluster around her!" muttered the chancellor. "Alas, for our brief hour of triumph and favor! Yesterday was he great; I, nothing. To-day, what am I, while he—is nothing."

A great murmur, resolving itself into shouts and resounding outcry, interrupted the noble's reminiscent mood, as a thick-set figure in richly chased armor, mounted on a massive horse, crossed the arena.

"Bon Vouloir!" they cried. "Bon Vouloir!"

It was the name assumed by the free baron for the day, while other knights were known for the time being by such euphonious and chivalrous appellations as Vaillant Desyr, Bon Espoir or Coeur Loyal. Bon Vouloir, upon this popular demonstration, reined his steed, and, removing his head-covering, bowed reverently to the king and his suite, deeply to the Lady of the Tournament and her retinue, and carelessly to the vociferous multitude, after which he retired to a large tent of crimson and gold, set apart for his convenience and pleasure.

From the purple box the monarch had nodded graciously and from the silver bower the lady had smiled softly, so that the duke had no reason for dissatisfaction; the attitude of the crowd was of small moment, an unmusical accompaniment to the potent pantomime, of which the principal figures were Francis, the King Arthur of Europe, and the princess, queen of beauty's unbounded realm.

In front of the duke's pavilion was hung his shield, and by its side stood his squire, fancifully dressed in rich colors. Behind ranged the men of arms, whose lances formed a fence to hold in check the people from far and wide, among whom the pick-purses, light-fingered scamps, and sturdy beggars conscientiously circulated, plying themselves assiduously. The fashion of the day prescribed carrying the purse and the dagger dangling from the girdle, and many a good citizen departed from the tourney without the one and with the other, and it is needless to say which of the two articles the filcher left its owner. And none was more enthusiastic or demonstrative of the features of the lists than these rapacious riflers, who loudly cheered the merry monarch or shouted for his gallant knights, while deftly cutting purse-cords or despoiling honest country dames of brooches, clasps or other treasured articles of adornment.

Near the duke's pavilion, to the right, had been pitched a commodious tent of yellow material, with ropes of the same color, and a fool's cap crowning the pole in place of the customary banner. Over the entrance was suspended

the jester's gilded wand and a staff, from which hung a blown bladder. Here were quartered the court jesters whom Francis had commanded to be fittingly attired for the lists and to take part in the general combat. In vain had Triboulet pleaded that they would occasion more merriment if assigned to the king's box than doomed to the arena.

"That may be," Francis had answered, "but on this occasion all the people must witness your antics."

"Antics!" Triboulet had shuddered. "An I should be killed, your Majesty?"

"Then it will be amusing to see you quiet for once in your life," had been the laughing reply.

And with this poor assurance the dwarf had been obliged to content himself—not merrily, 'tis true, but with much inward disquietude, secretly execrating his monarch for this revival of ancient and barbarous practices.

Now, in the rear of the jesters' pavilion, his face was yellow with trepidation, as the armorer buckled on the iron plates about his stunted figure, fastening and riveting them in such manner, he mentally concluded he should never emerge from that frightful shell.

"The worst of it is," dryly remarked the hunchback's valet as he briskly plied his little hammer, "these clothes are so heavy you couldn't run away if you wanted to."

"Oh, that the duke were married and out of the kingdom!" Triboulet fervently wished, and the fiery comments of Marot, Villot and those other reckless spirits, who seemed to mind no more the prospect of being spitted on a lance than if it were but a novel and not unpleasant experience to look forward to, in no wise served to assuage his heart-sinking.

At the entrance of the pavilion stood Caillette, who had watched the passing of Bon Vouloir and now was gazing upward into a sea of faces from whence came a hum of voices like the buzzing of unnumbered bees.

"Certes," he commented, "the king makes much of this unmannered, lumpish, beer-drinking noble who is going to wed the princess."

"Caillette," said the low voice of the duke's jester at his elbow, "would you see a woman undone?"

"Why, mon ami!" lightly answered the French fool, "I've seen many undone—by themselves."

"Ah," returned the other, "I appeal to your chivalry, and you answer with a jest."

"How else," asked Caillette, with a peculiar smile that was at once sweet and mournful, "can one take woman, save as a jest—a pleasant mockery?"

"Your irony precludes the test of friendship—the service I was about to ask of you," retorted the duke's fool, gravely.

"Test of friendship!" exclaimed the poet. "'Tis the only thing I believe in. Love! What is it? A flame! a breath! Look out there—at the flatterers and royal sycophants. Those are your emissaries of love. Ye gods! into the breasts of what jack-a-dandies and parasites has descended the unquenchable fire of Jove! Now as for comradeship"—placing his hand affectionately on the other's shoulder—"by Castor and Pollux, and all the other inseparables, 'tis another thing. But expound this strange anomaly—a woman wronged. Who is the woman?"

"The Princess Louise!"

Caillette glanced from the place where he stood to the center of the stand and the white bower, inclining from which was a woman, haughty, fair, beautiful; one whose face attracted the attention of the multitude and who seemed not unhappy in being thus scrutinized and admired. Shaking his head slowly, the court poet dropped his eyes and studied the sand at his feet.

"She looks not wronged," he said, dryly. "She appears to enjoy her triumphs."

"And yet, Caillette, 'tis all a farce," answered the duke's jester.

"So have I—thought—on other occasions."

And again his gaze flew upward, not, however, to the lady whom Francis had gallantly chosen for Queen of Beauty, but, despite his alleged cynicism, to a corner of the king's own box, where sat she who had once been a laughing maid by his side and with whom he had played that diverting pastoral, called "First Love." It was only an instant's return into the farcical but joyous past, and a moment later he was sharply recalled into the arid present by the words of his companion.

"The man the Princess Louise is going to marry is no more Robert, the Duke of Friedwald, than you are!" exclaimed the foreign fool. "He is the bastard of Pfalz-Urfeld, the so-called free baron of Hochfels. His castle commands the

road between the true duke and Francis' domains. He made himself master of all the correspondence, conceived the plan to come here himself and intends to carry off the true lord's bride. Indeed, in private, he has acknowledged it all to me, and, failing to corrupt me to his service, last night set an assassin to kill me."

His listener, with folded arms and attentive mien, kept his eyes fixed steadily upon the narrator, as if he doubted the evidence of his senses. Without, the marshals had taken their places in the lists and another stentorian dissonance greeted these officers of the field from the good-humored gathering, which, basking in the anticipation of the feast they knew would follow the pageantry, clapped their hands and flung up their caps at the least provocation for rejoicing. Upon the two jesters this scene of jubilation was lost, Caillette merely bending closer to the other, with:

"But why have you not denounced him to the king?"

"Because of my foolhardiness in tacitly accepting at first this free-booter as my master."

Caillette shot a keen glance at the other and smiled. His eyes said: "Foolhardiness! Was it not, rather, some other emotion? Had not the princess leaned more than graciously toward her betrothed and—"

"I thought him but some flimsy adventurer," went on the duke's fool, hastily, "and told myself I would see the play played out, holding the key to the situation, and—"

"You underestimated him?"

"Exactly. His plans were cunningly laid, and now—who am I that the king should listen to me? At best, if I denounce him, they would probably consider it a bit of pleasantry, or—madness."

"Yes," reluctantly assented Caillette, Triboulet's words, "a fool in love with the princess!" recurring to him; "it would be undoubtedly even as you say."

The duke's jester looked down thoughtfully. He had only half-expressed to the French plaisant the doubts which had assailed him since his interview with Louis of Hochfels. Who could read the minds of monarchs? The motives actuating them? Should he be able to convince Francis of the deception practised upon him, was it altogether unlikely that the king might not be brought to condone the offense for the sake of an alliance with this bastard of Pfalz-Urfeld and the other unconquerable free barons of the Austrian border against Charles himself? Had not Francis in the past, albeit openly

friendly with the emperor, secretly courted the favor of the powerful German nobles in Charles' own country? Had not his covenant with the infidel, Solyman, been a covert attempt to undermine the emperor's power?

From the day when, as young men, both had been aspirants for the imperial throne of Germany and Francis had suffered defeat, the latter had assiduously devoted himself to the retributory task of gaining the ascendancy over his successful rival. And now, although the tempering years had assuaged their erstwhile passions and each had professed to eschew war and its violence, might not this temptation prove too great for Francis to resist a last blow at the emperor's prestige? How easy to affect disbelief of a fool, to overthrow the fabric of friendship between Charles and himself, and at the same time apparently not violate good faith or conscience!

The voice of Caillette broke in upon his thoughts.

"You will not then attempt to denounce him?"

The fool hesitated. "Alone—out of favor with the king, I like not to risk the outcome—but—if I may depend upon you—"

"Did ever friend refuse such a call?" exclaimed Caillette, promptly. A quick glance of gratitude flashed from the other's eyes.

"There is one flaw in the free baron's position," resumed the duke's fool, more confidently; "a fatal one 'twill prove, if it is possible to carry out my plans. He thinks the emperor is in Austria, and his followers guard the road through the mountains. He tells himself not only are the emperor and the Duke of Friedwald too far distant to hear of the pretender and interfere with the nuptials, but that he obviates even the contingency of their learning of that matter at all by controlling the way through which the messengers must go. Thus rests he in double security—but an imaginary one."

"What mean you?" asked Caillette, attentively, from his manner giving fuller credence to the extraordinary news he had just learned.

"That Charles, the emperor, is not in Austria, but in Aragon at Saragossa, where he can be reached in time to prevent the marriage. Just before my leaving, the emperor, to my certain knowledge, secretly departed for Spain on matters pertaining to the governing of Aragon. Charles plays a deep game in the affairs of Europe, though he works ever silently and unobtrusively. Is he not always beforehand with your king? When Francis was preparing the gorgeous field of the cloth of gold for his English brother, did not Charles quietly leave for the little isle, and there, without beat of drum, arrange his

own affairs before Henry was even seen by your pleasure-loving monarch? Yes; to the impostor and to Francis, Charles is in Austria; to us—for now you share my secret—is he in Spain, where by swift riding he may be found, and yet interdict in this matter."

"Then why—haven't you ere this fled to the emperor with the news?"

"Last night I had determined to get away, when first I was assaulted by an assassin of the impostor, and next detained by his troop and brought back to the castle. I had even left on foot, trusting to excite less suspicion, and hoping to find a horse on the way, but fortune was with the pretender. So here am I, closely watched—and waiting," he added grimly.

The listener's demeanor was imperturbability itself. He knew why the other had taken him into his confidence, and understood the silent appeal as plainly as though words had uttered it. Perhaps he duly weighed the perils of a flight without permission from the court of the exacting and capricious monarch, and considered the hazards of the trip itself through a wild and brigand-infested country. Possibly, the thought of the princess moved him, for despite his irony, it was his mocking fate to entertain in his breast, against his will, a covert sympathy for the gentler sex; or, looking into the passionate face of his companion, he may have been conscious of some bond of brotherhood, a fellow-feeling that could not resist the call upon his good-will and amicable efforts. The indifference faded from Caillette's face and almost a boyish enthusiasm shone in his eyes.

"Mon ami, I'll do it!" he exclaimed, lightly. "I'll ride to the emperor for you."

Silently the jester of the duke wrung his hand. "I've long sighed for an adventure," laughed Caillette. "And here is the opportunity. Caillette, a knight-errant! But"—his face falling—"the emperor will look on me as a madman."

"Nay," replied the duke's plaisant, "here is a letter. When he reads it he will, at least, think the affair worth consideration. He knows me, and trusts my fidelity, and will be assured I would not jest on such a serious matter. Believe me, he will receive you as more than a madman."

"Why, then, 'twill be a rare adventure," commented the other. "Wandering in the country; the beautiful country, where I was reared; away from the madness of courts. Already I hear the wanton breezes sighing in Sapphic softness and the forests' elegiac murmur. Tell me, how shall I ride?"

"As a knight to the border; thence onward as a minstrel. In Spain there's always a welcome for a blithe singer."

"'Tis fortunate I learned some Spanish love songs from a fair señora who was in Charles' retinue the time he visited Francis," added Caillette. "An I should fail?" he continued, more gravely.

"You will not fail," was the confident reply.

"I am of your mind, but things will happen—sometimes—and why do you not speak to the princess herself—to warn her—"

"Speak to her!" repeated the duke's jester, a shadow on his brow. "When he has appealed to her, perhaps—when—" He broke off abruptly. His tone was proud; in his eyes a look which Caillette afterward understood. As it was, the latter nodded his head wisely.

"A woman whose fancy is touched is—what she is," he commented, generally. "Truly it would be a more thankless task, even, than approaching the king. For women were ever creatures of caprice, not to be governed by any court of logic, but by the whimsical, fantastic rules of Marguerite's court. Court!" he exclaimed. "The word suggests law; reason; where merit hath justice. Call it not Love's Court, but love's caprice, or crochet. But look you, there's another channel to the princess' mind—yonder black-browed maid—our ally in motley—when she chooses to wear it—Jacqueline."

"She likes me not," returned the fool. "Would she believe me in such an important matter?"

"I'm afraid not," tranquilly replied Caillette, "in view of the improbability of your tale and the undoubted credentials held by this pretender. For my part, to look at the fellow was almost enough. But to the ladies, his brutality signifieth strength and power; and his uncouthness, originality and genius. Marguerite, even, is prepossessed in his favor and has written a platonic poem in his honor. As for the princess"—pressing the other's arm gently—"do you not know, mon ami, that women are all alike? There is but one they obey—the king—that is as high as their ambitions can reach—and even him they deceive. Why, the Countess d'Etampes—but this is no time for gossip. We are fools, you and I, and love, my friend, is but broad farce at the best."

Even as he spoke thus, however, from the lists came the voices of the well-instructed heralds, secretaries of the occasion, who had delved deeply into the practices of the merry and ancient pastime: "Love of ladies! For you and glory! Chivalry but fights for love. Look down, fair eyes!" a peroration which was answered with many pieces of silver from the galleries above, and which the gorgeously dressed officials readily unbent to gather. Among the fair hands which rewarded this perfunctory apostrophe to the tender passion none was more lavish in offerings than those matrons and maids in the

vicinity of the king. A satirical smile again marred Caillette's face, but he kept his reflections to himself, reverting to the business of the moment.

"I should be off at once!" he cried. "But what can we do? The king hath commanded all the jesters to appear in the tournament to-day, properly armed and armored, the better to make sprightlier sport amid the ponderous pastime of the knights. Here am I bound to shine on horseback, willy-nilly. Yet this matter of yours is pressing. Stay! I have it. I can e'en fall from my horse, by a ruse, retire from the field, and fly southward."

"Then will I wish you Godspeed, now," said the duke's fool. "Never was a stancher heart than thine, Caillette, or a truer friend."

"One word," returned the other, not without a trace of feeling which even his cynicism could not hide. "Beware of the false duke in the arena! It will be his opportunity to—"

"I understand," answered the duke's fool, again warmly pressing Caillette's hand, "but with the knowledge you are fleeing to Spain I have no fear for the future. If we meet not after to-day—"

"Why, life's but a span, and our friendship has been short, but sweet," added the other.

Now without sounded a flourish of trumpets and every glance was expectantly down-turned from the crowded stand, as with a clatter of hoofs and waving of plumes France's young chivalry dashed into the lists, divided into two parties, took their respective places and, at a signal from the musicians, started impetuously against one another.

CHAPTER XII

THE DUKE ENTERS THE LISTS

In that first "joyous and gentle passage of arms," wherein the weapons were those "of courtesy," their points covered with small disks, several knights broke their lances fairly, two horsemen of the side wearing red plumes became unseated, and their opponents, designated as the "white plumes," swept on intact.

"Well done!" commented the king from his high tribunal, as the squires and attendants began to clear the lists, assisting the fallen belligerents to their tents. "We shall have another such memorable field as that of Ashby-de-la-Zouch!"

The following just, reduced to six combatants, three of the red plumes and three of the white, was even yet more spirited than the first tilt, for the former trio couched their lances with the determination to retrieve the day for their party. In this encounter two of the whites were unhorsed, thus placing the contention once more on an equal basis, while in the third conflict the whites again suffered similar disaster, and but one remained to redeem his party's lapse from an advantage gained in the opening combat.

All eyes were now fastened upon this single remnant of the white fellowship in arms, who, to wrest victory from defeat, became obliged to overcome each in turn of the trio of reds, a formidable task for one who had already been successful in three stubborn matches. It was a hero-making opportunity, but, alas! for the last of the little white company. Like many another, he made a brave dash for honor and the "bubble reputation"; the former slipped tantalizingly from his grasp, and the latter burst and all its pretty colors dissolved in thin air. Now he lay still on the sands and the king only remarked:

"Certes, he possessed courage."

And the words sounded like an epitaph, a not inglorious one, although the hand that gripped the lance had failed. The defeated champion was removed; the opportunity had passed; the multitude stoically accepted the lame and impotent conclusion, and the tournament proceeded.

Event followed event, and those court ladies who at first had professed their nerves were weaker than their foremothers' now watched the arena with sparkling eyes, no longer turning away at the thrilling moment of contact. Taking their cue from the king, they were lavish in praise and generous in approval, and at an unusual exhibition of skill the stand grew bright with

waving scarfs and handkerchiefs. Simultaneous with such an animated demonstration from the galleries would come a roar of approval from the peasantry below, crowded where best they could find places, bespeaking for their part, likewise, an increasing lust for the stirring pastime.

In truth, the only dissatisfied onlookers were the quick-fingered spoilers and rovers who, packed as close as dried dates in a basket by the irresistible forward press of the people, found themselves suddenly occupationless, without power to move their arms, or ply their hands. Thus held in a mighty compress, temporary prisoners with their spoils in their pockets, and cheap jewelry shining enticingly all about them, they were obliged for the time to comport themselves like honest citizens. But, although their bodies were in durance vile, their eyes could roam covetously to a showy trinket on the broad bosom of some buxom good-wife, or a gewgaw that hung from the neck of a red-cheeked lass.

"Ha!" muttered the scamp-student to his good spouse, "here are all the jolly boys immersed to their necks, like prisoners buried in the sand by the Arabs."

"Hush!" she whispered, warningly. "See you yonder—the duke's fool; he wears the arms of Charles, the emperor."

"And there's the Duke of Friedwald himself," answered the ragged scholar. "Look! the jesters are going to fight. They have arranged them in two parties. Half of them go with the duke and his knights; the other half with his Lordship's opponents."

"But the duke's fool, by chance, is set against his master," she mumbled, significantly.

"Call you it chance?" he said in a low voice, and Nanette nudged him angrily in the side with her elbow, so that he cried out, and attention would have been called to them but for a ripple of laughter which started on the edge of the crowd and was taken up by the serried ranks.

"Ho! ho! Look at Triboulet!" shouted the delighted populace. "Ah, the droll fellow!"

All eyes were now bent to the arena, where, on a powerful nag, sat perched the misshapen jester. With whip and spur he was vehemently plying a horse that stubbornly stood as motionless as carven stone. Thinking at the last moment of a plan for escape from the dangerous features of the tourney, the hunchback had bribed one of the attendants to fetch him a steed which for sullen obduracy surpassed any charger in the king's stables. Fate, he was

called, because nothing could move or change him, and now, with head pushed forward and ears thrust back, he proved himself beneath the blows and spurring of the seemingly excited rider, worthy of this appellation.

"Go on, Fate; go on!" exclaimed the apparently angry dwarf. "Will you be balky now, when Triboulet has glory within his grasp? Miserable beast! unhappy fate! When bright eyes are watching the great Triboulet!"

If not destined to score success with his lance, the dwarf at least had won a victory through his comical situation and ready wit. Fair ladies forgot his ugliness; the pages his ill-humor; the courtiers his vindictive slyness; the monarch the disappointment of his failure to worst the duke's fool, and all applauded the ludicrous figure, shouting, waving his arms, struggling with inexorable destiny. Finally, in despair, his hands fell to his side.

"Oh, resistless necessity!" he cried. But in his heart he said: "It is well. I am as safe as on a wooden horse. Here I stand. Let others have their heads split or their bodies broken. Triboulet, like the gods, views the carnage from afar."

While this bit of unexpected comedy riveted the attention of the spectators the duke and his followers had slowly ridden to their side of the inclosure. Here hovered the squires, adjusting a stirrup, giving a last turn to a strap, or testing a bridle or girth. Behind stood the heralds, trumpeters and pursuivants in their bright garb of office. At his own solicitation had the duke been assigned an active part in the day's entertainment. The king, fearing for the safety of his guest and the possible postponement of the marriage should any injury befall him, had sought to dissuade him from his purpose, but the other had laughed boisterously at the monarch's fears and sworn he would break a lance for his lady love that day. Francis, too gallant a knight himself to interpose further objection to an announcement so in keeping with the traditions of the lists, thereupon had ordered the best charger in his stables to be placed at the disposal of the princess' betrothed, and again nodded his approbation upon the appearance of the duke in the ring. But at least one person in that vast assemblage was far from sharing the monarch's complaisant mood.

If the mind of the duke's fool had heretofore been filled with bitterness upon witnessing festal honors to a mere presumptuous free baron, what now were his emotions at the reception accorded him? From king to churl was he a gallant noble; he, a swaggerer, ill-born, a terrorist of mountain passes. Even as the irony of the demonstration swept over the jester, from above fell a flower, white as the box from whence it was wafted. Downward it fluttered, a messenger of amity, like a dove to his gauntlet. And with the favor went a smile from the Lady of the Lists. But while Bon Vouloir stood there, the

symbol in his hand and the applause ringing in his ears, into the tenor of his thoughts, the consciousness of partly gratified ambition, there crept an insinuating warning of danger.

"My Lord," said the trooper with the red mustache, riding by the side of his master, "the fool is plotting further mischief."

"What mean you?" asked the free baron, frowning, as he turned toward his side of the field.

"Go slowly, my Lord, and I will tell you. I saw the fool and another jester with their heads together," continued the trooper in a low tone. "They were standing in front of the jesters' tent. You bade me watch him. So I entered their pavilion at the back. Making pretext to be looking for a gusset for an armor joint, I made my way near the entrance. There, bending over barbet pieces, I overheard fragments of their conversation. It even bore on your designs."

"A conversation on my designs! He has then dared—"

"All, my Lord. A scheming knave! After I had heard enough, I gathered up a skirt of tassets—"

"What did you hear?" said the other, impatiently.

"A plan by which he hoped to let the emperor know—"

A loud flourish of trumpets near them interrupted the free baron's informer, and when the clarion tones had ceased it was the master who spoke. "There's time but for a word now. Come to my tent afterward. Meanwhile," he went on, hurriedly, "direct a lance at the fool—"

"But, my Lord," expostulated the man, quickly, "the jesters only are to oppose one another."

"It will pass for an accident. Francis likes him not, and will clear you of unknightly conduct, if—" He finished with a boldly significant look, which was not lost upon his man.

"Even if the leaden disk should fall from my lance and leave the point bare?" said the trooper, hoarsely.

"Even that!" responded the free baron, hastily.

"Laissez-aller!" cried the marshals, giving the signal to begin.

Above, in her white box, the princess turned pale. With bated breath and parted lips, she watched the lines sweep forward, and, like two great waves meeting, collide with a crash. The dust that arose seemed an all-enshrouding mist. Beneath it the figures appeared, vague, undefined, in a maze of uncertainty.

"Oh!" exclaimed Louise, striving to penetrate the cloud; "he is victorious!"

"They have killed him!" said Jacqueline, at the same time staring toward another part of the field.

"Killed him!—what—" began the princess, now rosy with excitement.

"No; he has won," added the maid, in the next breath, as a portion of the obscuring mantle was swept aside.

"Of course! Where are your eyes?" rejoined her mistress triumphantly. "The duke, is one of the emperor's greatest knights."

"In this case, Madam, it is but natural your sight should be better than my own," half-mockingly returned the maid.

And, in truth, the princess was right, for the king's guest, through overwhelming strength and greater momentum, had lightly plucked from his seat a stalwart adversary. Others of his following failed not in the "attaint," and horses and troopers floundered in the sand. Apart from the duke's victory, two especial incidents, one comic, stood out in the confused picture.

That which partook of the humorous aspect, and was seen and appreciated by all, had for its central figure an unwilling actor, the king's hunchback. Like the famous steed builded by the Greeks, Triboulet's "wooden horse" contained unknown elements of danger, and even while the jester was congratulating himself upon absolute immunity from peril the nag started and quivered. At the flourish of the brass instruments his ears, that had lain back, were now pricked forward; he had once, in his palmy, coltish time, been a battle charger, and, perhaps, some memory of those martial days, the waving of plumes and the clashing of arms, reawoke his combative spirit of old. Or, possibly his brute intelligence penetrated the dwarf's knavish pusillanimity, and, changing his tactics that he might still range on the side of perversity, resolved himself from immobility into a rampant agency of motion. Furiously he dashed into the thick of the conflict, and Triboulet, paralyzed with fear and dropping his lance, was borne helplessly onward, execrating the nag and his capricious humor.

Opposed to the hunchback rode Villot, who, upon reaching the dwarf and observing his predicament, good-naturedly turned aside his point, but was unable to avoid striking him with the handle as he rode by. To Triboulet that blow, reëchoing in the hollow depths of his steel shell, sounded like the dissolution of the universe, and, not doubting his last moment had come, mechanically he fell to earth, abandoning to its own resources the equine Fate that had served him so ill. Striking the ground, and, still finding consciousness had not deserted him, instinct prompted him to demonstrate that if his armor was too heavy for him to run away in, as the smithy-valet de chambre had significantly affirmed, yet he possessed the undoubted strength and ability to crawl. Thus, amid the guffaws of the peasantry and the smiles of the nobles, he swiftly scampered from beneath the horses' feet, hurriedly left the scene of strife, and finally reached triumphantly the haven of his tent.

The other incident, witnessed by Jacqueline, was of a more serious nature. As the lines swept together, with the dust rising before, she perceived that the duke's trooper had swerved from his course and was bearing down upon the duke's fool.

"Oh," she whispered to herself, "the master now retaliates on the jester." And held her breath.

Had he, too, observed these sudden perfidious tactics? Apparently. Yet he seemed not to shun the issue.

"Why does he not turn aside?" thought the maid. "He might yet do it. A fool and a knight, forsooth!"

But the fool pricked his horse deeply; it sprang to the struggle madly; crash! like a thunderbolt, steed and rider leaped upon the trooper. Then it was Jacqueline had murmured: "They have killed him!" not doubting for a moment but that he had sped to destruction.

A second swift glance, and through the veil, less obscure, she saw the jester riding, unharmed, his lance unbroken. Had he escaped, after all? And the trooper? He lay among the trampling horses' feet. She saw him now. How had it all come about? Her mind was bewildered, but in spite of the princess' assertion to the contrary, her sight seemed unusually clear.

"Good lance, fool!" cried a voice from the king's box.

"The jester rides well," said another. "The knight's lance even passed over his head, while the fool's struck fairly with terrific force."

"But why did he select the jester as an adversary?" continued the first speaker.

"Mistakes will happen in the confusion of a mêlée—and he has paid for his error," was the answer. And Jacqueline knew that none would be held accountable for the treacherous assault.

Now the fool had dismounted and she observed that he was bending over another jester who had been unhorsed. "Why," she murmured to herself in surprise, "Caillette! As good a soldier as a fool. Who among the jesters could have unseated him?"

But her wonderment would have increased, could she have overheard the conversation between the duke's fool and Caillette, as the former lifted the other from the sands and assisted him to walk, or rather limp, to the jesters' pavilion.

"Did I not tell you to beware of the false duke?" muttered Caillette, not omitting a parenthesis of deceptive groans.

"Ah, if it had only been he, instead," began the fool.

"Why," interrupted the seemingly injured man, "think you to stand up against the boar of Hochfels?"

"I would I might try!" said the other quickly.

"Your success with the trooper has turned your head," laughed Caillette, softly. "One last word. Look to yourself and fear not for me. Mine injuries—which I surmise are internal as they are not visible—will excuse me for the day. Nor shall I tarry at the palace for the physician, but go straight on without bolus, simples or pills, a very Mercury for speed. Danger will I eschew and a pretty maid shall hold me no longer than it takes to give her a kiss in passing. Here leave me at the tent. Turn back to the field, or they will suspect. Trust no one, and—you'll mind it not in a friend, one who would serve you to the end?—forget the princess! Serve her, save her, as you will, but, remember, women are but creatures of the moment. Adieu, mon ami!"

And Caillette turned as one in grievous physical pain to an attendant, bidding him speedily remove the armor, while the duke's fool, more deeply stirred than he cared to show, moved again to the lists.

CHAPTER XIII

A CHAPLET FOR THE DUKE

Loud rang encomium and blessing on the king, as the people that night crowded in the rear courtyard around the great tables set in the open air, and groaning beneath viands, nutritious and succulent. What swain or yokel had not a meed of praise for the monarch when he beheld this burden of good cheer, and, at the end of each board, elevated a little and garlanded with roses, a rotund and portly cask of wine, with a spigot projecting hospitably tablewards?

Forgotten were the tax-lists under which the commonalty labored; it was "Hosanna" for Francis, and not a plowman nor tiller of the soil bethought himself that he had fully paid for the snack and sup that night. How could he, having had no one to think for him; for then Rousseau had not lived, Voltaire was unborn, and the most daring approach to lese-majesty had been Rabelais' jocose: "The wearers of the crown and scepter are born under the same constellation as those of cap and bells."

Upon the green, smoking torches illumined the people and the surroundings; beneath a great oven, the bright coals cast a vivid glow far and near. Close to the broad face of a cask—round and large like that of a full-fed host presiding at the head of the board—sat the Franciscan monk, whose gluttonous eye wandered from quail to partridge, thence onward to pastry or pie, with the spigot at the end of the orbit of observation. Nor as it made this comprehensive survey did his glance omit a casual inventory of the robust charms of a bouncing maid on the opposite side of the table. Scattered amid the honest, good-natured visages of the trusting peasants were the pinched adventurers from Paris, the dwellers of that quarter sacred to themselves. Yonder plump, frisky dame seemed like the lamb; the gaunt knave by her side, the wolf.

At length the company could eat no more, although there yet remained a void for drinking, and as the cups went circling and circling, their laughter mingled with the distant strains of music from the great, gorgeously lighted pavilion, where the king and his guests were assembled to close the tourney fittingly with the celebration of the final event—the awarding of the prize for the day.

"Can you tell me, good sir, to whom the umpires of the field have given their judgment?" said a townsman to his country neighbor.

"Did you not hear the king of arms decide the Duke of Friedwald was the victor?" answered the other.

"A decision of courtesy, perhaps?" insinuated the Parisian.

"Nay; two spears he broke, and overcame three adversaries during the day. Fairly he won the award."

"I wish we might see the presentation," interrupted a maid, pertly, her longing eyes straying to the bright lights afar.

"Presentation!" repeated the countryman. "Did we not witness the sport? A fig for the presentation! Give me the cask and a juicy haunch, with a lass like yourself to dance with after, and the nobles are welcome to the sight of the prize and all the ceremony that goes with it."

Within the king's pavilion, the spectacle alluded to, regretfully by the girl and indifferently by the man, was at that moment being enacted. Upon a throne of honor, the lady of the tournament, attended by two maids, looked down on a brilliant assemblage, through which now approached the king and the princess' betrothed. The latter seemed somewhat thoughtful; his eye had but encountered that of the duke's fool, whose gaze expressed a disdainful confidence the other fain would have fathomed. But for that unfortunate meeting in the lists which had sealed the lips of the only person who had divined the hidden danger, the free baron would now have been master of the plaisant's designs. Above, in the palace, the trooper with the red mustaches lay on his couch unconscious.

For how long? The court physician could not say. The soldier might remain insensible for hours. Thus had the jester served himself with that stroke better than he knew, and he of Hochfels bit his lip and fumed inwardly, but to no purpose. Not that he believed the peril to be great, but the fact he could not grasp it goaded him, and he cursed the trooper for a dolt and a poltroon that a mere fool should have vanquished him. And so he had left him, with a last look of disgust at the silent lips that could not do his bidding, and had proceeded to the royal pavilion, where the final act of the day's drama—more momentous than the king or other spectators realized—was to be performed; an act in which he would have appeared with much complacency, but that his chagrin preyed somewhat on his vanity.

But his splendid self-control and audacity revealed to the courtly assemblage no trace of what was passing in his mind. He walked by the king's side as one not unaccustomed to such exalted company, nor overwhelmed by sudden honors. His courage was superb; his demeanor that of one born to command; in him seemed exemplified a type of brute strength and force denoting a leader—whether of an army or a band of swashbucklers. As the monarch and the free baron drew near, the princess

slowly, gracefully arose, while now grouped around the throne stood the heralds and pursuivants of the lists. In her hand Louise held the gift, covered with a silver veil, an end of which was carried by each of the maids.

"Fair Lady of the Tournament," said the king, "this gallant knight is Bon Vouloir, whom you have even heard proclaimed the victor of the day."

"Approach, Bon Vouloir!" commanded the Queen of Love.

The maids uncovered the gift, the customary chaplet of beaten gold, and, as the free baron bowed his head, the princess with a firm hand fulfilled the functions of her office. Rising, Bon Vouloir, amid the exclamations of the court, claimed the privilege that went with the bauble. A moment he looked at the princess; she seemed to bend beneath his regard; then leaning forward, deliberately rather than ardently, he touched her cheek with his lips. Those who watched the Queen of Love closely observed her face become paler and her form tremble; but in a moment she was again mistress of herself, her features prouder and colder than before.

"Did you notice how he melted the ice of her nature?" whispered Diane, with a malicious little laugh, to the countess.

"And yet 'twas not his—warmth that did it," wisely answered the favorite of the king.

"His coldness, then," laughed the other, as the musicians began to play, and the winner of the chaplet led the princess to the dance. "Is it not so, Sire?" she added, turning to the king, who at that moment approached.

"He, indeed, forgot a part of the ceremony," graciously assented Francis.

"A part of the ceremony, your Majesty?" questioned Diane.

"To kiss the two damsels of the princess; and one of them was worthy of casual courtesy," he added, musingly.

"Which, Sire?" asked the countess, quickly.

"The dark-browed maid," returned the monarch, thoughtfully. "Where did I notice her last?"

And then he remembered. It was she who, he suspected, had laughed that night in Fools' hall. Recalling the circumstance, the king looked around for her, but she had drawn back.

"Is it your pleasure to open the festivities, Sire?" murmured the favorite, and, without further words, Francis acquiesced, proffering his arm to his companion.

Masque, costume ball, ballet, it was all one to the king and the court, who never wearied of the diverting vagaries of the dance. Now studying that pantomimic group of merrymakers, in the rhythmical expression of action and movement could almost be read the influence and relative positions of the fair revelers. The countess, airy and vivacious, perched, as it were, lightly yet securely on the arm of the throne; Diane, fearless, confident of the future through the dauphin; Catharine, proud of her rank, undisturbed in her own exalted place as wife of the dauphin; Marguerite, mixture of saint and sinner, a soft heart that would oft-times turn the king from a hard purpose.

"There! I've danced enough," said a panting voice, and Jacqueline, breathless, paused before the duke's fool, who stood a motionless spectator of the revelry. In his rich costume of blue and white, the figure of the foreign jester presented a fair and striking appearance, but his face, proud and composed, was wanting in that spirit which animated the features of his fellows in motley.

"One more turn, fair Jacqueline?" suggested Marot, her partner in the dance.

"Not one!" she answered.

"Is that a dismissal?" he asked, lightly.

"'Tis for you to determine," retorted the maid.

"Modesty forbids I should interpret it to my desires," he returned, laughing, as he disappeared.

Tall, seeming straighter than usual, upon each cheek a festal rose, she stood before the duke's plaisant, inscrutable, as was her fashion, the scarf about her shoulders just stirring from the effects of the dance, and her lips parted to her hurried breathing.

"How did you like the ceremony?" she asked, quietly. "And did you know," she went on, without noticing the dark look in his eyes or awaiting his response, "the lance turned upon you to-day was not a 'weapon of courtesy'?"

"You mean it was directed by intention?" he asked indifferently.

"Not only that," she answered. "I mean that the disk had been removed and the point left bare."

"A mistake, of course," he said, with a peculiar smile.

A look of impatience crossed her face, but she gazed at him intently and her eyes held his from the floor where they would have strayed.

"Are you stupid, or do you but profess to be?" she demanded. "Before the tilt I noticed the duke and his trooper talking together. When they separated the latter, unobserved as he thought, struck the point of his weapon against his stirrup. The disk fell to the ground."

"Your glance is sharp, Jacqueline," he retorted, slowly. "Thank you for the information."

Her eyes kindled; an angry retort seemed about to spring from her lips. It was with difficulty she controlled herself to answer calmly a moment later.

"You mean it can serve you nothing? Perhaps you are right. To-day you were lucky. To-morrow you may be—what? To-day you defended yourself well and it was a good lance you bore. Had it been any other jester, the king would have praised him. Because it was you, no word has been spoken. If anything, your success has annoyed him. Several of the court spoke of it; he answered not; 'tis the signal to ignore it, and—you!"

"Then are you courageous to brave public opinion and hold converse with me," he replied, with a smile.

"Public opinion!" she exclaimed with flashing eyes. "What would they say of a jestress? Who is she? What is she?"

She ended abruptly; bit her lips, showing her gleaming white teeth. Then some emotion, more profound, swept over her expressive face; she looked at him silently, and when she spoke her voice was more gentle.

"I can not believe," she continued thoughtfully, "that the duke told his trooper to do that. 'Tis too infamous. The man must have acted on his own responsibility. The duke could not, would not, countenance such baseness."

"You have a good opinion of him, gentle mistress," he said in a tone that exasperated her.

"Who has not?" she retorted, sharply. "He is as brave as he is distinguished. Farewell. If you served him better, and yourself less, you—"

"Would serve myself better in the end?" he interrupted, satirically. "Thanks, good Jacqueline. A woman makes an excellent counselor."

Disdainfully she smiled; her face grew cold; her figure looked never more erect and inflexible.

"Why," she remarked, "here am I wasting time talking when the music is playing and every one is dancing. Even now I see a courtier approaching who has thrice importuned me." And the jestress vanished in the throng as abruptly as she had appeared.

Thoughtfully the duke's fool looked, not after her, but toward a far end of the pavilion, where he last had seen the princess and her betrothed.

"Caillette should now be well on his way," he told himself. "No one has yet missed him, or if they do notice his absence they will attribute it to his injuries."

This thought lent him confidence; the implied warnings of the maid passed unheeded from his mind; indeed, he had scarcely listened to them. Amid stronger passions, he felt the excitement of the subtile game he and the free baron were playing; the blind conviction of a gambler that he should yet win seized him, dissipating in a measure more violent thoughts.

He began to calculate other means to make assurance doubly sure; an intricate realm of speculation, considering the safeguards the boar of Hochfels had placed about himself. To offset the triumphs of the king's guest there occurred to the jester the comforting afterthought that the greater the other's successes now the more ignominious would be his downfall. The free baron had not hesitated to use any means to obliterate his one foeman from the scene; and he repeated to himself that he would meet force with cunning, and duplicity with stealth, spinning such a web as lay within his own capacity and resources. But in estimating the moves before him, perhaps in his new-found trust, he overlooked the strongest menace to his success—a hazard couched within himself.

Outspreading from the pavilion's walls were floral bowers with myriad lights that shone through the leaves and foliage, where tiny fragrant fountains tinkled, or diminutive, fairy-like waterfalls fell amid sweet-smelling plants. Green, purple, orange, red, had been the colors chosen in these dainty retreats for such of the votaries of the Court of Love as should, from time to time, care to exchange the merry-making within for the languorous rest without. It was yet too early, however, for the sprightly devotees to abandon the lively pleasures of the dance, so that when the duke's fool abstractedly entered the balmy, crimson nook, at first he thought himself alone.

Around him, carmine, blood-warm flowers exhaled a commingling redolence; near him a toy-like fountain whispered very softly and confidentially. Through the foliage the figures moved and moved; on the air the music fell and rose, thin in orchestration, yet brightly penetrating in sparkling detail. Buoyant were the violins; sportive the flutes; all alive the gitterns; blithesome the tripping arpeggios that crisply fell from the strings of the joyous harps.

The rustling of a gown admonished him he was not alone, and, looking around, amid the crimson flowers, to his startled gaze, appeared the face of her of whom he was thinking; above the broad, white brow shone the radiance of hair, a gold that was almost bronze in that dim light; through the green tangle of shrubbery, a silver slipper.

"Ah, it is you, fool?" she said languidly. It may be, he contrasted the indifference of her tones now with the unconscious softness of her voice when she had addressed him on another occasion—in another garden; for his face flushed, and he would have turned abruptly, when—

"Oh, you may remain," she added, carelessly. "The duke has but left me. He received a message that the man hurt in the lists was most anxious to see him."

Into the whirl of his reflections her words insinuated themselves. Why had the free baron gone to the trooper? What made his presence so imperative at the bedside of the soldier that he had abruptly abandoned the festivities? Surely, more than mere anxiety for the man's welfare. The jester looked at the princess for the answer to these questions; but her face was cold, smiling, unresponsive. In the basin of the fountain tiny fish played and darted, and as his eyes turned from her to them they appeared as swift and illusive as his own surging fancies.

"The—duke, Madam, is most solicitous about his men," he said, in a voice which sounded strangely calm.

"A good leader has always in mind the welfare of his soldiers," she replied, briefly.

Her hand played among the blossoms. Over the flowers she looked at him. Her features and arms were of the sculptured roundness of marble, but the reflection of the roses bathed her in the warm hue of life. As he met her gaze the illumined pages of a book seemed turning before his eyes. Did she remember?

She could not but perceive his emotion; the tribute of a glance beyond control, despite the proud immobility of his features.

"Sit here, fool," she said, not unkindly, "and you may tell me more about the duke. His exploits—of that battle when he saved the life of the emperor."

The jester made no move to obey, but, looking down, answered coldly: "The duke, Madam, likes not to have his poor deeds exploited."

"Poor deeds!" she returned, and seemed about to reply more sharply when something in his face held her silent.

Leaning her head on her hand, she appeared to forget his presence; motionless save for a foot that waved to and fro, betraying her restless mood. The sound of her dress, the swaying of the foot, held his attention. In that little bower the air was almost stifling, laden with the perfume of many flowers. Even the song of the birds grew fainter. Only the tiny fountain, more assertive than ever, became louder and louder. The princess breathed deeply; half-arose; a vine caught in her hair; she stooped to disentangle it; then held herself erect.

"How close it is in here!" she murmured, arranging the tress the plant had disturbed. "Go to the door, fool, and see if you can find your master."

Involuntarily he had stepped toward her, as though to assist her, but now stopped. His face changed; he even laughed. That last word, from her lips, seemed to break the spell of self-control that held him.

"My master!" he said in a hard, scoffing tone. "Whom mean you? The man who left you to go to the soldier? That blusterer, my master! That swaggering trooper!"

Her inertness vanished; the sudden anger and wonderment in her eyes met the passion in his.

"How dare you—dare you—" she began.

"He is neither my master, nor the duke; but a mere free-booter, a mountain terrorist!"

Pride and contempt replaced her surprise, but indignation still remained. His audacity in coming to her with this falsehood; his hardihood in maintaining it, admitted of but one explanation. By her complaisance in the past she had fanned the embers of a passion which now burst beyond control. She realized how more than fair she looked that evening—had she not heard it from many?—had not the eyes of the king's guest told her?—

and she believed that this lie must have sprung to the jester's lips while he was regarding her.

As the solution crossed her mind, revealing the plaisant, a desperate and despicable, as well as lowly wooer, her face relaxed. In the desire to test her conclusion, she laughed quietly, musically. Cruelly kind, smiled the princess.

"You are mad," she breathed softly. "You are mad—because—because you—"

He started, studying her eagerly. He fancied he read relenting softness in her gaze; a flash of memory into a past, where glamour and romance, and the heart-history of the rose made up life's desideratum. Wherein existence was but an allegory of love's quest, and the goal, its consummation. Had she not bent sedulously over the rose of the poet? Had not her breath come quickly, eagerly? Could he not feel it yet, sweet and warm on his cheek? Into the past, having gone so far, he stepped now boldly, as though to grasp again those illusive colors and seize anew the intangible substance. He was but young, when shadows seem solid, when dreams are corporeal stuff, and fantasies, rock-like strata of reality.

So he knelt before her. "Yes," he said, "I love you!"

And thus remained, pale, motionless, all resentment or jealousy succeeded by a stronger emotion, a feeling chivalric that bent itself to a glad thraldom, the desire but to serve her—to save her. His heart beat faster; he raised his head proudly.

"Listen, Princess," he began. "Though I meant it not, I fear I have greatly wronged you. I have much to ask your pardon for; much to tell you. It is I—I—"

The words died on his lips. From the princess' face all softness had suddenly vanished. Her gaze passed him, cold, haughty. Across the illusory positiveness of his world—immaterial, psychological, ghostly—an intermediate orb—a tangible shadow was thrown. Behind him stood the free baron and the king. Quickly the fool sprang to his feet.

"Princess!" exclaimed the hoarse voice of the master of Hochfels.

"My Lord?"

For a moment neither spoke, and then the clear, cold voice of the princess broke the silence.

"Are all the fools in your country so presumptuous, my Lord?" she said.

The king's countenance lightened; he turned his accusing glance upon the fool. As in a dream stood the latter; the words he would have uttered remained unspoken. But briefly the monarch surveyed him, satirically, darkly; then turning, with a gesture, summoned an attendant. Not until the hands of two soldiers fell upon him did the fool betray any emotion. Then his face changed, and the stunned look in his eyes gave way to an expression of such unbridled feeling that involuntarily the king stepped back and the free baron drew his sword. But neither had the monarch need for apprehension, nor the princess' betrothed use for his weapon. Some emotion, deeper than anger, replaced the savage turmoil of the jester's thoughts, as with a last fixed look at the princess he mechanically suffered himself to be led away. Louise's gaze perforce followed him, and when the canvas fell and he had disappeared she passed a hand across her brow.

"Are you satisfied, my Lord?" said the king to the free baron.

"The knave has received his just deserts, Sire," replied the other, and, stepping to the princess' side, raised her hand to his lips.

"Mère de Dieu!" cried the monarch, passing his arm in a friendly manner over the free baron's shoulder and addressing Louise. "You will find Robert of Friedwald worthy of your high trust, cousin."

Without, they were soon whispering it. The attendant, who was the Count of Cross, breathed what he knew to the Duke of Montmorency, who told Du Bellays, who related the story to Diane de Poitiers, who embellished it for Villot, who carried it to Jacqueline.

"Triboulet has his wish," said the poet-fool, half-regretfully. "There is one jester the less."

"Where have they taken him?" asked the girl, steadily.

"Where—but to the keep!"

"That dungeon of the old castle?"

"Well," he returned significantly, "a fool and his jests—alas!—are soon parted. Let us make merry, therefore, while we may. For what would you? Come, mistress—the dance—"

"No! no! no!" she exclaimed, so passionately he gazed at her in surprise.

CHAPTER XIV

AN EARLY-MORNING VISIT

In a mood of contending thought, the free baron left his apartments the next morning and traversed the tapestry-hung corridor leading toward the servants' and soldiers' quarters. He congratulated himself that the incident of the past night had precipitated a favorable climax in one source of possible instability, and that the fool who had opposed him had been summarily removed from the field of action. Confined within the four walls of the castle dungeon, there was scant likelihood he would cause further trouble and annoyance. Francis' strong prison house would effectively curb any more interference with, or dabbling in, the affairs of the master of the Vulture's Nest.

Following the exposure of the jester's weakness, his passion for his mistress, Francis, as Villot told Jacqueline, had immediately ordered the fool into strictest confinement, the donjon of the ancient structure. In that darkened cell he had rested over night and there he would no doubt remain indefinitely. The king's guest had not been greatly concerned with the jester's quixotic love for the princess, being little disposed to jealousy. He was no sighing solicitant for woman's favor; higher allurements than woman's eyes, or admiration for his inamorata, moved him—that edge of appetite for power, conquest hunger, an itching palm for a kingdom. His were the unscrupulous soldier's rather than the eager true-love's dreams.

But to offset his satisfaction that the jester lay under restraint he took in bad part the trooper's continued insensibility which deprived him of the much-desired information. When he had repaired to the bedside of the soldier the night before he had only his trip for his pains, as the man had again sunk into unconsciousness shortly before his coming. Thus the free baron was still in ignorance of the person to whom the fool had betrayed him. The fact that there still roamed an unfettered some one who possessed the knowledge of his identity caused him to knit his brows and look glum.

These jesters were daring fellows; several of them had borne arms, as, for example, Clement Marot, who had been taken prisoner with Francis at the battle of Pavia. Brusquet had been a hanger-on of the camp at Avignon; Villot, a Paris student; Caillette had received the spirited education of a soldier in the household of his benefactor, Diane's father. And as for the others—how varied had been their careers!—lives of hazard and vicissitude; scapegraces and adventurers—existing literally by their wits.

To what careless or wanton head had his secret been confined? What use would the rashling make of it? Daringly attempt to approach the throne with this startling budget of information; impulsively seek the princess; or whisper it over his cups among the femmes de chambre, laundresses or scullery maids?

"If the soldier should never speak?" thought the free baron out of humor, as he drew near the trooper's door. "What a nest of suspicion may be growing! The wasps may be breeding. A whisper may become an ominous threat. Is not the danger even greater than it was before, when I could place my hand on my foeman? The man must speak!—must!"

With a firm step the king's guest entered the chamber of the injured soldier. Upon a narrow bed lay the trooper, his mustachios appearing unusually red and fierce against his now yellow, washed-out complexion. As the free baron drew near the couch a tall figure arose from the side of the bed.

"How is your patient, doctor?" said the visitor, shortly.

"Low," returned the other, laconically. This person wore a black gown; a pair of huge, broad-rimmed glasses rested on the bridge of a thin, long nose, and in his claw-like fingers he held a vial, the contents of which he stirred slowly. His aspect was that of living sorrow and melancholy.

"Has he been conscious again?" asked the caller.

"He has e'en lain as you see him," replied the wearer of the black robe.

"Humph!" commented the free baron, attentively regarding the motionless and silent figure.

"I urged upon him the impropriety of sending for you at the festivities," resumed the man, sniffing at the vial, "but he became excited, swore he would leave the bed and brain me with mine own pestle if I ventured to hinder him. So I consented to convey his request."

"And when I arrived he was still as a log," supplemented the visitor, gloomily.

"Alas, yes; although I tried to keep him up, giving him specifics and carminatives and bleeding him once."

"Bleeding him!" cried the false duke, angrily, glowering upon the impassive and woebegone countenance of the medical attendant. "As if he had not bled enough from his hurts! Quack of an imposter! You have killed him!"

"As for that," retorted the man in a sing-song voice, "no one can tell whether a medicine be antidote or poison, unless as leechcraft and chirurgery point out—"

"His days are numbered," quoth the free baron to himself, staring downward. But as he spoke he imagined he saw the red mustachios move, while one eye certainly glared with intelligent hatred upon the doctor and turned with anxious solicitude upon his master. The latter immediately knelt by the bedside and laid his hand upon the already cold one of the soldier.

"Speak!" he said.

It was the command of an officer to a trooper, an authoritative bidding, and seemed to summon a last rallying energy from the failing heart. The man's gaze showed that he understood. From the free baron's eye flashed a glance of savage power and force.

"Speak!" he repeated, cruelly, imperatively.

The mustachios quivered; the leader bent his head low, so low his face almost touched the soldier's. A voice—was it a voice, so faint it sounded?—breathed a few words:

"The emperor—Spain—Caillette gone!"

Quickly the free baron sprang to his feet. The soldier seemed to fall asleep; his face calm and tranquil as a campaigner's before the bivouac fire at the hour of rest; the ugliness of his features glossed by a new-found dignity; only his mustachios strangely fierce, vivid, formidable, against the peace and pallor of his countenance. The leech looked at him; stopped stirring the drug; leaned over him; straightened himself; took the vial once more from the table and threw the medicine out of the window. Then he methodically began gathering up bottles and other receptacles, which he placed neatly in a handbag. The free baron passed through the door, leaving the cheerless practitioner still gravely engaged in getting together his small belongings.

Soberly the king's guest walked down the echoing stairway out into the open air of the court. The emperor in Spain? It seemed not unlikely. Charles spent much of his time in that country, nor was it improbable he had gone there quietly, without flourish of trumpet, for some purpose of his own. His ways were not always manifest; his personality and mind-workings were characterized by concealment. If the emperor had gone to Spain, a messenger, riding post-haste, could reach Charles in time to enable that monarch to interpose in the nuptials and override the confidence the free

baron had established for himself in the court of Francis. An impediment offered by Charles would be equivalent to the abandonment of the entire marital enterprise.

Pausing before a massive arched doorway that led into a wing of the castle where the free baron knew the jesters and certain of the gentlemen of the chamber lodged, the master of Hochfels, in answer to his inquiries from a servant, learned that Caillette had not been in his apartments since the day before; that he had ridden from the tournament, ostensibly to return to his rooms, but nothing had been heard of him since. And the oddest part of it was, as the old woman volubly explained when the free baron had pushed his way into the tastefully furnished chambers of the absent fool, the jester had been desperately wounded; had groaned much when the duke's plaisant had assisted him from the field, and had been barely able to mount his horse with the assistance of a squire.

Meditatively, while absorbing this prattle, the visitor gazed about him. The bed had been unslept in, and here and there were evidences of a hasty and unpremeditated leave-taking. Upon an open desk lay a half-finished poem, obviously intended for no eyes save the writer's. Several dainty missives and a lace handkerchief, with a monogram, invited the unscrupulous and prying glance of the inquisitive newsmonger.

But as these details offered nothing additional to the one great germ of information embodied in the loquacity of the narrator, the free baron turned silently away, breaking the thread of her volubility by unceremoniously disappearing. No further doubt remained in his mind that the duke's plaisant had sent a comrade in motley to the emperor, and, as he would not have inspired a mere fool's errand, Charles without question was in Spain, several days nearer to the court of the French monarch than the princess' betrothed had presumed. Caillette had now been four-and-twenty hours on his journey; it would be useless to attempt pursuit, as the jester was a gallant horseman, trained to the hunt. Such a man would be indefatigable in the saddle, and the other realized that, strive as he might, he could never overcome the handicap.

Then of what avail was one fool in the dungeon, with a second—on the road? Should he abandon his quest, be driven from his purpose by a nest of motley meddlers? The idea never seriously entered his mind; he would fight it out doggedly upon the field of deception. But how? As surely as the sun rose and set, before many days had come and gone the hand of Charles would be thrust between him and his projects. Circumspect, suspicious, was the emperor; he would investigate, and investigation meant the downfall of the structure of falsehood that had been erected with such skill and

painstaking by the subtile architect. The maker had pride in his work, and, to see it totter and tumble, was a misfortune he would avert with his life—or fall with it.

As he had no intention, however, of being buried beneath the wreckage of his endeavors, he sought to prop the weakening fabric of invention and mendacity by new shuffling or pretense. Should a disgraced fool be his undoing? From that living entombment should his foeman in cap and bells yet indirectly summon the force to bend him to the dust, or send him to the hangman's knot?

Step by step the king's guest had left the palace behind him, until the surrounding shrubbery shut it from view, but the path, sweeping onward with graceful curve, brought him suddenly to a beautiful château. Lost in thought, he gazed within the flowering ground, at the ornate architecture, the marble statues and the little lake, in whose pellucid depths were mirrored a thousand beauties of that chosen spot—an improved Eden of the landscape gardener wherein resided the Countess d'Etampes.

"Why," thought the free baron, brightening abruptly, "that chance which served me last night, which forced the trooper to speak to-day, now has led my stupid feet to the soothsayer."

Within a much begilt and gorgeous bower, he soon found himself awaiting patiently the coming of the favorite. Upon a tiny chair of gold, too fragile for his bulk, the caller meanwhile inspected the ceilings and walls of this dainty domicile, mechanically striving to decipher a painted allegory of Venus and Mars, or Helen and Paris, or the countess and Francis—he could not decide precisely its purport—when she who had succeeded Châteaubriant floated into the room, dressed in some diaphanous stuff, a natural accompaniment to the other decorations; her dishabille a positive note of modesty amid the vivid colorings and graceful poses of those tributes to love with which Primaticcio and other Italian artists had adorned this bower.

"How charming of you!" vaguely murmured the lady, sinking lightly upon a settee. "What an early riser you must be, Duke."

Although it was then but two hours from noon, the visitor confessed himself open to criticism in this regard. "And you, as well, Madam," he added, "must plead guilty of the same fault. One can easily see you have been out in the garden, and," he blundered on, "stolen the tints from the roses."

Sharply the countess looked at him, but read only an honest attempt at a compliment.

"Why," she said, "you are becoming as great a flatterer as the rest of them. But confess now, you did not call to tell me that?"

The free baron looked from her through the folding doors into a retiring apartment, set with arabesque designs, and adorned with inlaid tables bearing statues of alabaster and enamel. Purposely he waited before he replied, and was gratified to see how curiously she regarded him when again his glance returned to her.

"No, Madam," he answered, taking credit to himself for his diplomacy, "it is not necessary that truth should be premeditated. I had a serious purpose in seeking you. Of all the court you alone can assist me; it is to you, only, I can look for aid. Knowing you generous, I have ventured to come."

"What a serious preamble," smiled the lady. "How grave must be the matter behind it!"

"The service I ask must be from the king," he went on, with seeming embarrassment.

"Then why not go to his Majesty?" she interrupted, with the suggestion of a frown.

"Because I should fail," he retorted, frankly. "The case is one wherein a messenger—like yourself—a friend—may I so call you?—would win, while I, a rough soldier, should but make myself ridiculous, the laughing stock of the court."

"You interest me," she laughed. "It must be a pressing emergency when you honor me—so early in the day."

"It is, Madam," he replied. "Very pressing to me. I want the wedding day changed."

"Changed!" she exclaimed, staring at him. "Deferred?"

"No; hastened, Madam. It is too long to wait. Go to the king; ask him to shorten the interval; to set the day sooner. I beg of you, Madam!"

His voice was hard and harsh. It seemed almost a demand he laid upon her. Had he been less blunt or coercive, had he employed a more honeyed appeal, she would not have felt so moved in his behalf. In the atmosphere of adulation and blandishment to which she was accustomed, the free baron offered a marked contrast to the fine-spoken courtiers, and she leaned back and surveyed him as though he were a type of the lords of creation she had not yet investigated.

"Oh, this is delicious!" purred the countess. "Samson in the toils! His locks shorn by our fair Delilah!"

The thick-set soldier arose; muscular, well-knit, virile. "I fear I am detaining you, Madam," he said, coldly.

"No; you're not," she answered, merrily. "Won't you be seated—please! I should have known," she could not resist adding, "that love is as sensitive as impatient."

"I see, Madam, that you have your mind made up to refuse me, and therefore—"

"Refuse," repeated the favorite, surveying this unique petitioner with rising amusement. "How do you read my mind so well?"

"Then you haven't determined to refuse me?" And he stepped toward her quickly.

"No, I haven't," she answered, throwing back her head, like a spoiled child. "On the contrary, I will be your messenger, your advocate, and will plead your cause, and will win your case, and the king shall say 'yes,' and you shall have your princess whene'er you list. All this I promise faithfully to do and perform. And now, if you want to leave me so sullenly, go!"

But the free baron dropped awkwardly to his knee, took her little hand in his massive one and raised it to his lips. "Madam, you overwhelm me," he murmured.

"That is all very well," she commented, reflectively, "but what about the princess? What will she say when—"

"It shall be my task to persuade her. I am sure she will consent," returned the suitor.

"Oh, you're sure of that?" observed the lady. "You have some faith in your own powers of persuasion—in certain quarters!"

"Not in my powers, Madam, but in the princess' amiability."

"Perhaps you have spoken to her already?" asked the countess.

"No, Madam; without your assistance, of what use would be her willingness?"

"What a responsibility you place on my weak shoulders!" cried the other. "However, I will not shift the burden. I will go to his Majesty at once. And do you"—gaily—"go to the princess."

"At your command!" he replied, and took his departure.

Without the inclosure of the château gardens, the free baron began to review the events of the morning with complacency and satisfaction, but, as he took up the threads of his case and examined them more narrowly, his peace of mind was darkened with the shadow of a new disquietude. What if Francis, less easily cozened than the countess, should find his suspicions aroused? What if the princess, who had immediately dismissed the fool's denouncement of the free baron as an ebullition of blind jealousy—after informing her betrothed of the mad accusation—should see in his request equivocal circumstances? Or, was the countess—like many of her sisters—given to second thoughts, and would this after-reverie dampen the ardor of her impetuous promise?

"But," thought the king's guest, banishing these assailing doubts, "there never yet was victory assured before the battle had been fought, and, with renewed precautions, defeat is most unlikely."

By the time he had reached this conclusion he had arrived at the princess' door.

CHAPTER XV

A NEW DISCOVERY

The dim rays of a candle glimmered within a cubical space, whereof the sides consisted of four stone walls, and a ceiling and floor of the same substantial material. For furnishings were provided a three-legged stool, a bundle of straw and—the tallow dip. One of the walls was pierced by a window, placed almost beyond the range of vision; the outlook limited by day to a bit of blue sky or a patch of verdant field, with the depressing suggestion of a barrier to this outer world, three feet in thickness, massively built of stone and mortar, hardened through the centuries. At night these pictures faded and the Egyptian darkness within became partly dispelled through the brave efforts of the small wick; or when this half-light failed, a far star without, struggling in the depths of the palpable obscure, appeared the sole relief.

But now the few inches of candle had only begun to eke out its brief period of transition and the solitary occupant of the cell could for some time find such poor solace as lay in the companionship of the tiny yellow flame. With his arms behind him, the duke's fool moved as best he might to and fro within the narrow confines of his jail; the events which had led to his incarceration were so recent he had hardly yet brought himself to realize their full significance. Neither Francis' anger nor the free baron's covert satisfaction during the scene following their abrupt appearance in the bower of roses had greatly weighed upon him; but not so the attitude of the princess.

How vividly all the details stood out in his brain! The sudden transitions of her manner; her seeming interest in his passionate words; her eyes, friendly, tender, as he had once known them; then portentous silence, frozen disdain. What latent energy in the free baron's look had invested her words with his spirit? Had the adduction of his mind compelled hers to his bidding, or had she but spoken from herself? Into the marble-like pallor of her face a faint flush had seemed to insinuate itself, but the words had dropped easily from her lips: "Are all the fools of your country so presumptuous, my Lord?"

Above the other distinctive features of that tragic night, to the plaisant this question had reiterated itself persistently in the solitude of his cell. True, he had forgotten he was only a jester; but had it not been the memory of her soft glances that had hurried him on to the avowal? She had no fault to be condoned; the fool was the sole culprit. From her height, could she not have spared him the scorn and contempt of her question? Over and over, through the long hours he had asked himself that, and, as he brooded, the

idealization with which he had adorned her fell like an enshrouding drapery to the dust; of the vestment of fancy nothing but tatters remained.

A voice without, harsh, abrupt, broke in upon the jester's thoughts. The prisoner started, listened intently, a gleam of fierce satisfaction momentarily creeping into his eyes. If love was dead, a less exalted feeling still remained.

"How does the fool take his imprisonment?" asked the arrogant voice.

"Quietly, my Lord," was the jailer's reply.

"He is inclined to talk over much?"

"Not at all," answered the man.

A brief command followed; a key was inserted in the lock, and, with a creaking of bolts and groaning of hinges, the warder swung back the iron barrier. Upon the threshold stood the commanding figure of the free baron. A moment he remained thus, and then, with an authoritative gesture to the man, stepped inside. The turnkey withdrew to a discreet distance, where he remained within call, yet beyond the range of ordinary conversation. Immovably the king's guest gazed upon the jester, who, unabashed, calmly endured the scrutiny.

"Well, fool," began the free baron, bluntly, "how like you your quarters? You fought me well; in truth very well. But you labored under a disadvantage, for one thing is certain: a jester in love is doubly—a fool."

"Is that what you have come to say?" asked the plaisant, his bright glance fastened on the other's confident face.

"I came—to return the visit you once made me," easily retorted the master of Hochfels. "By this time you have probably learned I am an opponent to be feared."

"As one fears the assassin's knife, or a treacherous onslaught," said the fool.

"Did I not say, when you left that night, the truce was over?" returned the king's guest, frowning.

"True," was the ironical answer. "Forewarned; forearmed. And that sort of warfare was to be expected from the bastard of Pfalz-Urfeld."

"Well," unreservedly replied the free baron, who for reasons of his own chose not to challenge the affront, "in those two instances you were not worsted. And as for the trooper who attacked you—I know not whether your lance or

the doctor's lancet is responsible for his taking off. But you met him with true attaint. You would have made a good soldier. It is to be regretted you did not place your fortune with mine—but it is too late now."

"Yes," answered the plaisant, "it is too late."

Louis of Hochfels gave him a sharp look. "You cling yet to some forlorn hope?"

To the fool came the vision of a brother jester speeding southward, ever southward. The free baron smiled.

"Caillette, perhaps?" he suggested. For a moment he enjoyed his triumph, watching the expression of the fool's countenance, whereon he fancied he read dismay and astonishment.

"You know then?" said the plaisant finally.

"That you sent him to the emperor? Yes."

In the fool's countenance, or his manner, the king's guest sought confirmation of the dying trooper's words. Also, was he fencing for such additional information as he might glean, and for this purpose had he come. Had the emperor really gone to Spain? The soldier's assurance had been so faint, sometimes the free baron wondered if he had heard aright, or if he had correctly interpreted the meager message.

"And you—of course—detained Caillette?" remarked the prisoner, with an effort at indifference, his heart beating violently the while.

"No," slowly returned the other. "He got away."

Into his eyes the fool gazed closely, as if to read and test this unexpected statement.

"Got away!" he repeated. "How, since you knew?"

"Because I learned too late," quietly replied the free baron. "He was four-and-twenty hours gone when I found out. Too great a start to be overcome."

"Why should you tell me this—unless it is a lie?" coolly asked the jester.

"A lie!" exclaimed the visitor, frowning.

"Yes, like your very presence in Francis' court," added the fool, fearlessly.

In the silence ensuing the passion slowly faded from the countenance of the king's guest. He remembered he had not yet ascertained what he wished to know.

"Such recriminations from you remind me of a bird beating its wings against the bars of its cage," at length came the unruffled response. "Why should I lie? There is no need for it. You sent Caillette; he is on his way now, for all of me. For"—leading to the thread of what he sought—"why should I have stopped him? He embarked on a hopeless chase. How can he reach Austria and the emperor in time to prevent the marriage?"

The jester's swift questioning glance was not lost upon the speaker, who, after a pause, continued. "Had I known, I am not sure I would have prevented his departure. What better way to dispose of him than to let him go on a mad-cap journey? Besides, you must have forgotten about the passes. How could you expect him to get by my sentinels? It will attract less attention to have him stopped there than here."

All this, spoken brusquely, was accompanied by frank, insolent looks which beneath their seeming openness concealed an intentness of purpose and a shrewd penetration. Only the first abrupt change in the fool's look, a slight one though it was, betrayed the jester to his caller. In that swiftly passing gleam, as the free baron spoke of Austria, and not of Spain, the other read full confirmation of what he desired to know.

"He will do his best," commented the jester, carelessly.

"And man can do no more," retorted the king's guest. "Many a battle has been thus bravely lost."

He had hoped to provoke from the plaisant some further expression of self-content in his plans for the future, but the other had become guarded.

What if he offered the fool clemency? asked the princess' betrothed of himself. If the jester had confidence in the future he would naturally rather remain in the narrow confines of his dark chamber than consider proposals from one whom he believed he would yet overcome. The free baron began to enjoy this strategic duplicity of language; the environing dangers lent zest to equivocation; the seduction of finding himself more potent than forces antagonistic became intoxicating to his egotism.

"Why," he said, patronizingly, surveying the slender figure of the fool, "a good man should die by the sword rather than go to the scaffold. What if I were to overlook Caillette and the rest? He is harmless,"—more shrewdly; "let him go. As for the princess—well, you're young; in the heyday for such

nonsense. I have never yet quarreled seriously with man for woman's sake. There are many graver causes for contention—a purse, or a few acres of land; right royal warfare. If I get the king to forgive you, and the princess to overlook your offense, will you well and truthfully serve me?"

"Never!" answered the fool, promptly.

"He is sure the message will reach Charles in Spain," mentally concluded the king's guest. "Yet," he continued aloud in a tone of mockery, "you did not hesitate to betray your master yourself. Why, then, will you not betray him to me?"

"To him I will answer, not to you," returned the jester, calmly.

A contemptuous smile crossed the free baron's face.

"And tell him how you dared look up to his mistress? That you sought to save her from another, while you yourself poured your own burning tale into her ear? Two things I most admire in nature," went on the free baron, with emphasis. "A dare-devil who stops not for man or Satan, and—an honest man. You take but a compromising middle course; and will hang, a hybrid, from some convenient limb."

"But not without first knowing that you, too, in all likelihood, will adorn an equally suitable branch, my Lord of the thieves' rookery," said the jester, smiling.

Louis of Hochfels responded with an ugly look. His bloodshot eyes took fire beneath the provocation.

"Fool, you expect your duke will intervene!" he exclaimed. "Not when he has been told all by the king, or the princess," he sneered. "Do you think she cares? You, a motley fool; a theme for jest between us."

"But when she learns about you?" retorted the plaisant, significantly.

"She will e'en be mistress of my castle."

"Castle?" laughed the Jester. "A robber's aery! a footpad's retreat! A rifler of the roads become a great lord? You of royal blood! Then was your father a king of thieves!"

The free baron's face worked fearfully; the kingly part of him had been a matter of fanatical pride; through it did he believe he was destined to power and honors. But before the cutting irony of the plaisant, that which is

heaven-born—self-control—dropped from him; the mad, brutal rage of the peasant surged in his veins.

Infuriate his hand sought his sword, but before he could draw it the fool, anticipating his purpose, had rushed upon him with such impetuosity and suddenness that the king's guest, in spite of his bulk and strength, was thrust against the wall. Like a grip of iron, the jester's fingers were buried in his opponent's throat. For one so youthful and slender in build, his power was remarkable, and, strive as he might, the princess' betrothed could not shake him off. Although his arms pressed with crushing force about the figure of the fool, the hand at his throat never relaxed. He endeavored to thrust the plaisant from him, but, like a tiger, the jester clung; to and fro they swayed; to the free baron, suffocated by that gauntlet of steel, the room was already going around; black spots danced before his eyes. He strove to reach for the dagger that hung from his girdle, but it was held between them. Perhaps the muscles of the king's guest had been weakened by the excesses of Francis' court, yet was he still a mighty tower of strength, and, mad with rage, by a last supreme effort he finally managed to tear himself loose, hurling the fool violently from him into the arms of the jailer, who, attracted by the sound of the struggle, at that moment rushed into the cell. This keeper, himself a burly, herculean soldier, promptly closed with the prisoner.

Breathless, exhausted, the free baron marked the conflict now transferred to the turnkey and the jester. The former held the fool at a decided disadvantage, as he had sprung upon the back of the jester and was also unweakened by previous efforts. But still the fool contended fiercely, striving to turn so as to grapple with his assailant, and wonderingly the free baron for a moment watched that exhibition of virility and endurance. During the wrestling the jester's doublet had been torn open and suddenly the gaze of the king's guest fell, as if fascinated, upon an object which hung from his neck.

Bending forward, he scrutinized more closely that which had attracted his attention and then started back. Harshly he laughed, as though a new train of thought had suddenly assailed him, and looked earnestly into the now pale face of the nearly helpless fool.

"Why," he cried, "here's a different complication!"

And stooping suddenly, he grasped the stool from the floor and brought it down with crushing force upon the plaisant's head. A cowardly, brutal blow; and at once the prisoner's grasp relaxed, and he lay motionless in the arms of the warder, who placed him on the straw.

"I think the knave's dead, my Lord," remarked the man, panting from his exertion.

"That makes the comedy only the stronger," replied the free baron curtly, as he knelt by the side of the prostrate figure and thrust his hand under the torn doublet. Having procured possession of the object which chance had revealed to him, he arose and, without further word, left the cell.

CHAPTER XVI

TIDINGS FROM THE COURT

When Brusquet, the jester, fled from the camp at Avignon, where he had presumed to practise medicine, to the detriment of the army, some one said: "Fools and cats have nine lives," and the revised proverb had been accepted at court. It was this saying the turnkey muttered when he bent over the prostrate figure of the duke's plaisant after the free baron had departed. Thus one of the fabled sources of existence was left the fool, and again it seemed the proverb would be realized.

Day after day passed, and still the vital spark burned; perhaps it wavered, but in this extremity the jester had not been entirely neglected; but who had befriended him, assisting the spirit and the flesh to maintain their unification, he did not learn until some time later. Youth and a strong constitution were also a shield against the final change, and when he began to mend, and his heart-beats grew stronger, even the jailer, his erstwhile assailant, the most callous of his several keepers, exhibited a stony interest in this unusual convalescence.

The touch of a hand was the plaisant's first impression of returning consciousness, and then into his throbbing brain crept the outlines of the prison walls and the small window that grudgingly admitted the light. To his confused thoughts these surroundings recalled the struggle with the free baron and the jailer. As across a dark chasm, he saw the face of the false duke, whereon wonder and conviction had given way to brutal rage, and, with the memory of that treacherous blow, the fool half-started from his couch.

A low voice carried him back from the past to a vague cognizance of a woman's form, standing at the head of the bed, and two grave, dark eyes looking down upon him which he strove in vain to interrogate with his own. He would have spoken, but the soothing pressure of the hand upon his forehead restrained him, and, turning to the wall, sleep overcame him; a slumber long, sound and restorative. Motionless the figure remained, listening for some time to his deep breathing and then stole away as silently as she had come.

Amid a solitude like that of a catacomb the hours ran their course; the day grew old, and eventide replaced the waning flush in the west. The shadows deepened into night, and the first kisses of morn again merged into the brighter prime. Near the cell the only sound had been the footstep of the warder, or the scampering of a rat, but now from afar seemed to come a

faint whispering, like the murmur of the ocean. It was the voice of awakened nature; the wind and the trees; the whir of birds' wings, or the sound of other living creatures in the forest hard by. A song of life and buoyancy, it breathed just audibly its cheering intonation about the prison bars, when the captive once more stirred and gazed around him. As he did so, the figure of the woman, who had again noiselessly entered the cell, stepped forward and stood near the couch.

"Are you better?" she asked.

He raised himself on his elbow, surprised at the unexpected appearance of his visitor.

"Jacqueline!" he said, wonderingly, recognizing the features of the joculatrix. "I must have been unconscious all night." And he stared from her toward the window.

"Yes," she returned with a peculiar smile; "all night." And bending over him, she held a receptacle to his lips from which he mechanically drank a broth, warm and refreshing, the while he endeavored to account for the strangeness of her presence in the cell. She placed the bowl on the floor and then, straightening her slim figure, again regarded him.

"You are improving fast," she commented, reflectively.

"Thanks to your sovereign mixture," he answered, lifting a hand to his bandaged head, and striving to collect his scattered ideas which already seemed to flow more consecutively. The pain which had racked his brow had grown perceptibly less since his last deep slumber, and a grateful warmth diffused itself in his veins with a growing assurance of physical relief. "But may I ask how you came here?" he continued, perplexity mingling with the sense of temporary languor that stole over him.

"I heard the duke tell the king you had attacked him and he had struck you down," she replied, after a pause.

His face darkened; his head throbbed once more; with his fingers he idly picked at the straw.

"And the king, of course, believed," he said. "Oh, credulous king!" he added scornfully. "Was ever a monarch so easily befooled? A judge of men? No; a ruler who trusts rather to fortune and blind destiny. Unlike Charles, he looks not through men, but at them."

"Think no more of it," she broke in, hastily, seeing the effect of her words.

"Nay, good Jacqueline," quickly retorted the jester; "the truth, I pray you. Believe me, I shall mend the sooner for it. What said the duke—as he calls himself?"

"Why, he shook his head ruefully," answered the girl, not noticing his reservation. "'Your Majesty,' he said, 'for the memory of bygone quibbles I sought him, but found him not—alack!—on the stool of repentance.'"

About the fool's mouth quivered the grim suggestion of a half-smile.

"He is the best jester of us all," he muttered. "And then?" fastening his eyes upon hers.

"'No sooner, Sire,' went on the duke, 'had I entered the cell than he rushed upon me, and, it grieves me, I used the wit-snapper roughly.' So"—folding her hands before her and gazing at the plaisant—"I e'en came to see if you were killed."

"You came," he said. "Yes; but how?"

"What matters it?" she answered. "Perhaps it was magic, and the cell-doors flew open at my touch."

"I can almost believe it," he returned.

And his glance fell thoughtfully from her to the couch. Before the assault he had lain at night upon the straw on the floor, and this unhoped-for immunity from the dampness of the stones or the scampering of occasional rats suggested another starting point for mental inquiry. She smiled, reading the interrogation on his face.

"One of the turnkeys furnished the bed," she remarked, shrewdly. "Do you like it?"

"It is a better couch than I have been accustomed to," he replied, in no wise misled by her response, and surmising that her solicitation had procured him this luxury. "Nevertheless, the night has seemed strangely long."

"It has been long," she returned, moving toward the window. "A week and more."

Surprise, incredulity, were now written upon his features. That such an interval should have elapsed since the evening of the free baron's visit appeared incredible. He could not see her countenance as she spoke; only her figure; the upper portion bright, the lower fading into the deep shadows beneath the aperture in the wall.

"You tell me I have lain here a week?" he asked finally, recalling obscure memories of faintly-seen faces and voices heard as from afar.

"And more," she repeated.

For some moments he remained silent, passing from introspection to a current of thought of which she could know nothing; the means he had taken to thwart the ambitious projects of the king's guest.

"Has Caillette returned?" he continued, with ill-disguised eagerness.

"Caillette?" she answered, lifting her brows at the abruptness of the inquiry. "Has he been away? I had not noticed. I do not know."

"Then is he still absent," said the jester, decisively. "Had he come back, you would have heard."

Quickly she looked at him. Caillette!—Spain!—these were the words he had often uttered in his delirium. Although he seemed much better and the hot flush had left his cheeks, his fantasy evidently remained.

"A week and over!" resumed the fool, more to himself than to his companion. "But he still may return before the duke is wedded."

"And if he did return?" she asked, wishing to humor him.

"Then the duke is not like to marry the princess," he burst out.

"Not like—to marry!" she replied, suddenly, and moved toward him. Her clear eyes were full upon him; closely she studied his worn features. "Not like—but he has married her!"

The jester strove to spring to his feet, but his legs seemed as relaxed as his brain was dazed.

"Has married!—impossible!" he exclaimed fiercely.

"They were wedded two days since," she went on quietly, possibly regretting that surprise, or she knew not what, had made her speak.

"Wedded two days since!"

He repeated it to himself, striving to realize what it meant. Did it mean anything? He remembered how mockingly the jestress' face had shone before him in the past; how derisive was her irony. From Fools' hall to the pavilion of the tournament had she flouted him.

"Wedded two days since!"

"You must have your drollery," he said, unsteadily, at length.

She did not reply, and he continued to question her with his eyes. Quite still she remained, save for an almost imperceptible movement of breathing. Against the dull beams from the aperture above, her hair darkly framed her face, pale, dim with half-lights, illusory. When he again spoke his voice sounded new to his own ears.

"How could the princess have been married? Even if I have lain here as long as you say, the day for the wedding was set for at least a week from now."

"But changed!" she responded, unexpectedly.

"Changed!" he cried, sitting on the edge of the couch, and regarding her as though he doubted he had heard aright. "Why should it have been changed?"

"Because the duke became a most impatient suitor," she answered. "Daily he grew more eager. Finally, to attain his end, he importuned the countess. She laughed, but good-naturedly acceded to his request, and, in turn importuned the king—who generously yielded. It has been a rare laughing matter at court—that the duke, who appeared the least passionate adorer, should really have been such a restless one."

"Dolt that I have been!" exclaimed the jester, with more anger, it seemed to the girl, than jealousy. "He knew about Caillette, but professed to be ignorant that the emperor was in Spain. And I believed his words; thought I was holding something from him; let myself imagine he could not penetrate my designs. While all the time he was intriguing with the king's favorite and felt the sense of his own security. What a cat's paw he made of me! And so he—they are gone, Jacqueline?"

"Yes," she returned, surprised at his language, and, for the first time, wondering if the duke's wooing admitted of other complications than she had suspected. "They are on their way to the duke's kingdom."

"His kingdom!" said the fool, with derision. "But go on. Tell me about it, Jacqueline. Their parting with the court? How they set out on their journey. All, Jacqueline; all!"

"They were married in the Chapelle de la Trinité," responded the girl, hesitating. Then with an odd side look, she went on rapidly: "The bridal party made an imposing cavalcade: the princess in her litter, behind a

number of maids on horseback. At the castle gates several pages, dressed as Cupids, sent silver arrows after the bridal train. 'Hymen; Io Hymen!' cried the throng. 'Godspeed!' exclaimed Queen Marguerite, and threw a parchment, tied with a golden ribbon, into the princess' litter; an epithalamium, in verse, written in her own fair hand. 'Esto perpetua!' murmured the red cardinal. Besides the groom's own men, the king sent a strong escort to the border, and thus it was a numerous company that rode from the castle, with colors flying and the princess' handkerchief fluttering from her litter a last farewell."

"A last farewell!" repeated the fool. "A splendent picture, Jacqueline. They all shouted Te Deum, and none stood there to warn her."

"To warn!" retorted the jestress. "Not a maid but envied her that spectacle; the magnificence and splendor!"

"But not what will follow," he said, and, lying back on his couch, closed his eyes.

Rapidly the scene passed before him; the false duke at the head of the cavalcade, elate, triumphant; the princess in her litter, brilliant, dazzling; the laughter, the hurried adieus; tears and smiles; the smart sayings of the jesters, a bride their legitimate prey, her blushes the delight of the facetious nobles; the complacency of the pleasure-loving king—all floated before his eyes like the figment of a dream. How mocking the pomp and glitter! For the princess, what an awakening was to ensue! The free baron must have known the emperor was in Spain, and had met the fool's stratagem with a final masterly manoeuver. The bout was over; the first great bout; but in the next—would there be a next? Jacqueline's words now implied a doubt.

"You are soon to leave here," she said. "For Paris."

Seated on the stool, her hands crossed over her knees, Jacqueline seemed no longer a creature of indefinite or ambiguous purpose. On the contrary, her profile was rimmed in light, and very matter-of-fact and serious it seemed.

"Why am I to leave for Paris?" he remarked, absently.

"Because they are going to take you there," she returned, "to be tried as a heretic." He started and again sat up. "In your room was found a book by Calvin. Of course," she went on, "you will deny it belonged to you?"

"What would that avail?" he said, indifferently. "But have the followers of Luther, or Calvin, no friends in Francis' court?"

"Have they in Charles' domains?" she asked quickly.

"The Protestants in Germany are a powerful body; the emperor is forced to bear with them."

"Here they have no friends—openly," she went on. "Secretly—Marguerite, Marot; others perhaps. But these will not serve you; could not, if they would. Besides, this heresy of which you are accused is but a pretext to get rid of you."

"And how, good Jacqueline, has the king treated the new sect?"

She held her hand suddenly to her throat; her face went paler, as from some tragic recollection.

"Oh," she answered, "do not speak of it!"

"They burned them?" he persisted.

"Before Notre Dame!"

Her voice was low; her eyes shone deep and gleaming.

"You are sorry, then, for those vile heretics?" asked the fool, curiously.

She raised her head, half-resentfully. "Their souls need no one's pity," she retorted, proudly.

"And you think mine is soon like to be beyond earthly caring?"

Her glance became impatient. "Most like," she returned, curtly.

"But what excuse does the king give for his cruelty?" he continued, musingly.

"They threw down the sacred images in one of the churches. Now a heretic need expect no mercy. They are placed in cages—hung from beams—over the fire. The court was commanded to witness the spectacle—the king jested—the countess laughed, but her features were white—" Here the girl buried her face in her hands. Soon, however, she looked up, brushing back the hair from her brow. "Marguerite has interposed, but she is only a feather in the balance." Abruptly she arose. "Would you escape such a fate?" she said.

He remained silent, thinking that if the mission to the emperor miscarried, his own position might, indeed, be past mending. If the exposure of the free baron were long delayed, the fool's assurance in his own ultimate release

might prove but vain expectation. In Paris the trial would doubtless not be protracted. From the swift tribunal to the slow fire constituted no complicated legal process, and appeal there was none, save to the king, from whom might be expected little mercy, less justice.

"Escape!" the jester answered, dwelling on these matters. "But how?"

"By leaving this prison," she answered, lowering her voice.

He glanced significantly at the walls, the windows and the door, beyond which could be heard the tread of the jailer and the clanking of the keys hanging from his girdle.

"I would have done that long since, Jacqueline, if I had had my will," he replied.

"Are you strong enough to attempt it?" she remarked, doubtfully, scanning the thin face before her.

"Your words shall make me so," he retorted, and looking into his glittering eyes, she almost believed him.

"Not to-day, but to-morrow," the girl added, thoughtfully. "Perhaps then—"

"I shall be ready," he broke in impatiently. "What must I do?"

"Not drink this wine I have brought, but give it to the turnkey in the morning. Invite him to share it, but take none yourself, feigning sudden illness. He will not refuse, being always sharp-set for a cup. Nothing can be done with the other jailers, but this one is a thirsty soul, ever ready to bargain for a dram. Your couch cost I know not how many flagons. Although he drinks many tankards and pitchers every day, yet will this small bottle make him drowsy. You will leave while he is sleeping."

"In the daylight, mistress?" he asked, eagerly. "Why not wait—"

"No," she said, decisively; "there is no other way. This turnkey is only a day watchman. It is dangerous, but the best plan that suggested itself. I know many unfrequented corridors and passages through the old part of the castle the king has not rebuilt, and a road at the back, now little used, that runs through the wood and thicket down the hill. It is a desperate chance, but—"

"The danger of remaining is more desperate," he interrupted, quickly. "Besides, we shall not fail. It is in the book of fate." His expression changed;

became fierce, eager. "Are you, indeed, the arbiter of that fate; the sorceress Triboulet feared?"

"You are thinking of the duke," she answered, with a frown, "and that if you escape—"

"Truly, you are a sorceress," he replied, with a smile. "I confess life has grown sweet."

She moved abruptly toward the door. "Nay, I meant not to offend you," he spoke up, more gently.

"It is your own fortunes you ever injure," she retorted, gazing coldly back at him.

"One moment, sweet Jacqueline. Why did you not go with the princess?"

Her face changed; grew dark; from eyes, deep and gloomy, she shot a quick glance upon him.

"Perhaps—because I like the court too well to leave it," she answered mockingly, and, vouchsafing no further word, quickly vanished. It was only when she had gone the jester suddenly remembered he had forgotten to thank her for what she had done in the past or what she proposed doing on the morrow.

CHAPTER XVII

JACQUELINE'S QUEST

"Truly, are you a right proper fool; for a man, merry in adversity, is as wise as Master Rabelais. Many the time have I heard him say a fit of laughter drives away the devil, while the groans of flagellating saints seem as music to Beelzebub's ears. Thus, a wit-cracker is the demon's enemy, and the band of Pantagruel, an evangelical brotherhood, that with tankard and pot sends the arch-fiend back to the bottomless pit."

And the fool's jailer, seated on the stool within the cell, stretched out his legs and uplifted the bottle to his lips, while, judging from the draft he took and assuming the verity of the theory he advanced, the prince of darkness at that moment must have fled a considerable distance into his chosen realms.

"Ah, you know the great philosopher, then?" commented the jester from the couch, closely watching the sottish, intemperate face of his keeper, and running his glance over the unwieldy form which bade fair to outrival one of the wine butts in the castle cellar.

"Know him!" exclaimed this lowly votary. "I have e'en been admitted to his table—at the foot, 'tis true—when the brave fellows of Pantagruel were at it. Not for my wit was I thus honored"—the plaisant made a dissenting gesture, the irony of which passed over the head of the speaker—"but because a giant flagon appeared but a child's toy in my hands. The followers of Pantagruel fell on both sides, like wheat before the blade of the reaper, until Doctor Rabelais and myself only were left. From the head to the foot of the table the great man looked. How my heart swelled with pride! 'Swine of Epicurus, are you still there?' he said. And then—and then—"

With a crash the bottle fell from the hand of the keeper to the stone floor. The massive body swayed on the small stool; his eyes stupidly shut and opened.

"Swine of Epicurus," he repeated. "Swine—" and followed the bottle, rolling gently from the stool. He made but one motion, to extend his huge bulk more comfortably, and then was still.

"Why," thought the fool, "if Jacqueline fails me not, all may yet be well."

But even as he thus reflected the door of the cell opened, and a face white as a lily, looked in. Her glance passed hastily to the motionless figure and an expression of satisfaction crossed her features.

"The keys!" she said, and the jester, bending over the prostrate jailer, detached them from his girdle.

"Lock the door when we leave," she continued. "The other keeper does not come to relieve him for six hours."

"It would be an offset for the many times he has locked me in," answered the fool. "A scurvy trick; yet, as Master Rabelais says, Pantagruelians select not their bed."

"Is this a time for jesting?" exclaimed the girl, impatiently.

"He has been treating me to Gargantuan discourse, Jacqueline," said the fool, humbly. "I was but answering him in kind."

"And by delay increasing our danger!"

"Our danger!" He started.

Since she had first broached the subject of escape but one sweet and all-absorbing idea had possessed him—retaliation. Liberty was the means to that end, and every other thought and consideration had given way to this desire. He had fallen asleep with the free baron's dark features imaged on his fevered brain; when he had awakened the morbid fantasy had not left him. But now, at her words, in her presence, a new light was suddenly shed upon the enterprise, and he paused abruptly, even as he turned to leave the cell. With growing wonder she watched his altered features.

"Well," she exclaimed, impatiently, "why do you stand there?"

"Should I escape, you, Jacqueline, would remain to bear the brunt," he said, reflectively. "The jailer, when he awakes, will tell the story: who brought the wine; who succored the prisoner. To go, but one course is open." And he glanced down upon the prostrate man. "To silence him forever!"

She started and half-shrank from him. "Could you do it?"

He shook his head. "In fair contest, I would have slain him. But now—it is not he, but I, who am helpless. And yet what is such a sot's life worth? Nothing. Everything. Farewell, sweet jestress; I must trust to other means, and—thank you."

The outstretched hand she seemed not to see, but tapped the floor of the cell yet more impatiently with her foot, as was her fashion when angered. Here was the prison door open, and the captive enamored of confinement; at the culminating point conjuring reasons why he should not flee. To have gone

thus far; to have eliminated the jailer, and then to draw back, with the keys in his hand—truly no scene in a comedy could be more extravagant. The girl laughed nervously.

"What egotists men are!" she said. "Good Sir Jester, in offering you liberty I am serving myself; myself, you understand!" she repeated. "Let us hasten on, lest in defeating your own purpose, you defeat mine."

"What will you answer when he"—indicating the drugged turnkey—"accuses you?"

"Was ever such perversity!" was all she deigned to reply, biting her lip.

"You are somewhat wilful yourself, Jacqueline," he retorted, with that smile which so exasperated her.

"Listen," she said at length, slowly, impressively. "You need have no fear for me when you go. I tell you that more danger remains to me by your staying than in your going; that your obstinacy leaves me unprotected; that your compliance would be a boon to me. By the memory of my mother, by the truth of this holy book"—drawing a little volume passionately from her bosom—"I swear to what I have told you." Eagerly her eyes met his searching gaze, and he read in their depths only truth and candor. "I have a quest for you. It concerns my life, my happiness. All I have done for you has been for this end."

Her eyes fell, but she raised them again quickly. "Will you accept a mission from one who is not—a princess?"

"Name her not!" exclaimed the jester sharply. And then, recovering himself, added, less brusquely: "What is it you want, mistress?"

"This is no time nor place to tell it," she went on rapidly, seeing by his face that his dogged humor had melted before her appeal, "but soon, before we part, you shall know all; what it is I wish to intrust in your hands."

A moment she waited. "Your argument is unanswerable, Jacqueline," he said finally. "I own myself puzzled, but I believe you, so—have your way."

"This cloak then"—handing him a garment she had brought with her—"throw it over you," she continued hurriedly. "If we meet any one it may serve as a disguise. And here is a sword," bringing forth a weapon that she had carried concealed beneath a flowing mantle. "Can you use it?"

"I can but try, Jacqueline," he replied, fastening the girdle about his waist and half-drawing and then thrusting the blade back into the scabbard. "It

seems a priceless weapon," he added, his eye lingering on the richly inlaid hilt, "and has doubtless been wielded by a gallant hand."

"Speak not of that," she retorted, sharply, a strange flash in her eyes. "He who handled it was the bravest, noblest—" She broke off abruptly, and they left the cell, he locking the door behind him.

Down the dimly lighted passage she walked rapidly, while the jester tractably and silently followed. His strength, he found, had come back to him; the joys of freedom imparted new elasticity to his limbs; that narrow, cheerless way looked brighter than a royal gallery, or Francis' Salle des Fêtes. Before him floated the light figure of the jestress, moving faster and ever faster down the dark corridor, now veering to the right or left, again ascending or descending well-worn steps; a tortuous route through the heart of the ancient fortress, whose mystery seemed dread and covert as that of a prison house. Confidently, knowing well the puzzling interior plan of the old pile, she traversed the labyrinth that was to lead them without, finally pausing before a small door, which she tried.

"Usually it is unlocked," she said, in surprise. "I never knew it fastened before."

"Is that our only way out?"

"The only safe way. Perhaps one of the keys—"

But he had already knelt before the door and the young girl watched him with obvious anxiety. He vainly essayed all the keys, save one, and that he now strove to fit to the lock. It slipped in snugly and the stubborn bolt shot back.

Entering, he closed the door behind them and hastily looked around, discovering that they stood in a crypt, the central part of which was occupied by a burial vault. In the crypt chapels were a number of statues, in marble and bronze, most of them rude, antique, yet not of indifferent workmanship, especially one before which the jestress, in spite of the exigency of the moment, stopped as if impelled by an irresistible impulse. This monument, so read the inscription, had been erected by the renowned Constable of Dubrois to his young and faithful consort, Anne.

But a part of a minute the girl gazed, with a new and softened expression, upon the marble likeness of the last fair mistress of the castle, and then hurriedly crossed the old mosaic pavement, reaching a narrow flight of stairs, which she swiftly ascended. A door that yielded to the fool's shoulder led into a deserted court, on one side of which were the crumbling walls of

the chapel. Here several dark birds perched uncannily on the dead branch of a massive oak that had been shattered by lightning. In its desolation the oak might have been typical of the proud family, once rulers of the castle, whose corporeal strength had long since mingled with the elements.

This open space the two fugitives quickly traversed, passing through a high-arched entrance to an olden bridge that spanned a moat. Long ago had the feudal gates been overthrown by Francis; yet above the keystone appeared, not the salamander, the king's heraldic emblem, but the almost illegible device of the old constable. Beyond the great ditch outstretched a rolling country on which the jester gazed with eager eyes, while his companion swiftly led the way to a clump of willow and aspen on the other side of the moat. Beneath the spreading branches were tethered two horses, saddled and bridled. Wonderingly he glanced from them to her.

"From whence did you conjure them, gentle mistress?" asked the fool.

"Some one I knew placed them there."

"But why—two horses, good Jacqueline?"

"Because I am minded to show you the path through the wood," she replied. "You might mistake it and then my purpose would not be served. Give me your hand, sir. I am wont to have my own way." And as he reluctantly extended his palm she placed her foot upon it, springing lightly to the saddle. "'Tis but a canter through the forest. The day is glorious, and 'twill be rare sport."

Already had she gathered in the reins and turned her horse, galloping down a road that swept through a grove of poplar and birch, and he, after a moment's hesitation, rode after her. Like one born to the chase, she kept her seat, her lithe figure swaying to the movements of the steed. Soon the brighter green of her gown fluttered amid the somber-tinted pines and elms, as the younger forest growth merged into a stern array of primeval monarchs. Here reigned an austere silence—a stillness that now became the more startlingly broken.

"Jacqueline!" said the fool, spurring toward her. "Do you hear?"

"The hunters? Yes," she replied.

"They are coming this way."

"Perhaps it were better to draw back from the road," she suggested, calmly.

"Do you draw back to the castle!" he returned, quickly, his brow overcast.

"And miss the hunt? Not I, Monsieur Spoil-Sport."

"But if they find you with me?"

She only tossed her head wilfully and did not answer.

Nearer came the hue and cry of the chase. A heavy-horned buck sprang into the road and vanished like a flash into the timber on the other side. Shortly afterward, in a compact bunch, with heads downbent and stiffened tails, the pack, a howling, discordant mass, swept across the narrow, open space.

"Quick!" exclaimed the jester, and they turned their horses into the underbrush.

Scarcely had they done so when, closely following the dogs, appeared the first of the hunters, mounted on a splendid charger, with housings of rose-velvet.

"Pardieu!" muttered the plaisant, "I owe the king no thanks, but he rides well. Do you not think so, Jacqueline?"

Her answering gaze was puzzling. After Francis rode many lords and ladies, a stream of color crossing the road; riding habits faced with gold; satin doublets covered with rivières of diamonds; torsades wherein gold became the foil to precious stones. So near was the gorgeous cavalcade—the grand falconer, whippers-in, and the bearers of hooded birds mingling with the courtiers immediately behind the king—the escaped prisoner and the jestress could hear the panting of horses. Fleeting, transient, it passed; fainter sounded the din of hounds and horn; now it almost died away in the distance. The last couple had scarcely vanished before the fool and his companion left their ambush.

"You ride farther, Jacqueline?" he said.

"A little farther."

"It will be far to return," he protested.

"I have no fear," she answered, tranquilly.

Again he let her have her way, as one would yield to a wilful child. On and on they sped; past the place where the deer-run crossed the broader path; through an ever-varying forest; now on one side, a rocky basin overrun with trees and shrubs; again, on the other hand, a great gorge, in whose depths flowed a whispering stream. Yonder appeared the gray walls of an ancient monastery, one part only of which was habitable; a turn in the road

swallowed it up as though abruptly to complete the demolition time was slowly to bring about. On and on, until the way became wilder and the wood more overgrown with bushes and tangled shrubbery, when she suddenly stopped her horse.

He understood; at last they were to part. And, remembering what he owed to her, the Jester suddenly found himself regretting that here their paths separated forever. Swiftly his mind flew back to their first meeting; when she had flouted him in Fools' hall. A perverse, capricious maid. How she had ever crossed him, and yet—nursed him.

Attentively he regarded her. The customary pallor of her face had given way to a faint tint; her eyes were humid, dewy-bright; beneath the little cap, the curling tresses would have been the despair of those later-day reformers, the successors of Calvinists and Lutherans.

"A will-o'-the-wisp," he thought. "A man might follow and never grasp her."

Did she read what he felt? That mingled gratitude and perplexity? Her clear eyes certainly seemed to have a peculiar mastery over the thoughts of others. Now they expressed only mockery.

"The greater danger is over," she said, quietly. "From now on there is less fear of your being taken."

"Thanks to you!" he answered, searching her with his glance.

Here he doubted not she would make known the quest of which she had spoken. Whatever it might be, he would faithfully requite her; even to making his own purpose subservient to it.

"It is now time," she said, demurely, "to acquaint you with the mission. Of course, you will accept it?"

"Can you ask?" he answered, earnestly.

"You promise?"

"To serve you with my life."

"Then we had better go on," she continued.

"But, Mademoiselle, I thought—"

"That we were to part here? Not at all. I am not yet ready to leave you. In fact, good Master Jester, I am going with you. I am the quest; I am the mission. Are you sorry you promised?"

CHAPTER XVIII

THE SECRET OF THE JESTRESS

She, the quest, the mission! With growing amazement he gazed at her, but she returned his look, as though enjoying his surprise.

"You do not seem overpleased with the prospect of my company?" she observed. "Or perhaps you fear I may encumber you?" With mock irony. "Confess, the service is more onerous than you expected?"

Beneath her flushed, yet smiling face lay a nervous earnestness he could divine, but not fathom.

"Different, certainly," he answered, brusquely.

Her eyes flashed. "How complimentary you are!"

"For your own sake—"

"My sake!" she exclaimed, passionately. Her little hand closed fiercely; proudly her eyes burned into his. "Think you I have taken this step idly? That it is but the caprice of a moment? Oh, no; no! It was necessary to flee from the court. But to whom could a woman turn? Not to any of the court—tools of the king. One person only was there; he whose life was as good as forfeited. Do you understand?"

"That my life belongs to you? Yes. But that you should leave the court—where you have influence, friends—"

"Influence! friends!"

He was startled by the bitterness of her voice.

"Tell me, Jacqueline—why do you wish to go?" he said, wonderingly.

"Because I wish to," she returned, briefly, and stroked the shining neck of her horse.

Indeed, how could she apprise him of events which were now the talk of the court? How Francis, evincing a sudden interest as strong as it was unexpected, had exchanged Triboulet for herself, and the princess, at the king's request, had taken the buffoon with her, and left the girl behind. The jestress' welcome to the household of the Queen of Navarre; a subsequent bewildering shower of gifts; the complacent, although respectful, attentions

of the king. How she had endured these advances until no course remained save the one she had taken. No; she could not tell the duke's fool all this.

Between folle and fugitive fell a mutual reserve. Did he divine some portion of the truth? Are there moments when the mind, tuned to a tension, may almost feel what another experiences? Why had the girl not gone with her mistress? He remembered she had evaded this question when he had asked it. Looking at her, for the first time it crossed his mind she would be held beautiful; an odd, strange beauty, imperious yet girlish, and the conviction crept over him there might be more than a shadow of excuse for her mad flight.

Beneath his scrutiny her face grew cold, disdainful. "Like all men," she said, sharply, as though to stay the trend of his thoughts, "you are prodigal in promises, but chary in fulfilment."

"Where is it your pleasure to go?" he asked quietly.

"That we shall speak of hereafter," she answered, haughtily.

"Forward then."

"I can ride on alone," she demurred, "if—"

"Nay; 'tis I who crave the quest," he returned, gravely.

Her face broke into smiles, "What a devoted cavalier!" she exclaimed. "Come, then. Let us ride out into the world. At least, it is bright and shining—to-day. Do you fear to follow me, sir? Or do you believe with the hunchback that I am an enchantress and cast over whom I will the spell of diablerie?"

"You may be an enchantress, mistress, but the spell you cast is not diablerie," he answered in the same tone.

"Fine words!" she said, mockingly. "But it remains to be seen into what a world I am going to lead you!" And rode on.

The rush of air, the swift motion, the changing aspect of nature were apparently not without their effect on her spirits, for as they galloped along she appeared to forget their danger, the certainty of pursuit and the possibility of capture. Blithesome she continued; called his attention to a startled hare; pointed with her whip to a red-eyed boar that sullenly retreated at their approach; laughed when an overhanging branch swept her little cap from her head and merrily thanked him when he hastily dismounted and returned it to her.

"You see, fool, what a burden I am like to prove!" she said, readjusting the cap, and, ere he could answer, had passed on, as if challenging him to a test of speed.

"Have a care!" he cried warningly, as they came to a rough stretch of ancient highway, but she seemed not to hear him.

That she could ride in such madcap fashion, seemingly oblivious of the gravity of their desperate fortunes, was not ill-pleasing to the jester; no timorous companion, shrinking from phantoms, he surmised she would prove. Thus mile after mile they covered and the shadows had reached their minimum length, when, coming to a clear pool of water, they drew rein to refresh themselves from the provisions in the saddle-bags. Bread and wine—sumptuous fare for poor fugitives—they ate and drank with keen relish. Dreamily she watched the green insects skimming over the surface of the shimmering water. On the bank swayed the rushes, as though making obeisance to a single gorgeous lily, set like a queen in the center of this little shining kingdom.

"Was the repast to your liking?" she asked, suddenly looking from the pool to him.

"Entirely, fair Jacqueline. The wine was excellent. Hunger gave it bouquet, and appetite aged it. Never did bread taste so wholesome, and as for the service—"

"It was perfect—lacking grand master, grand chamberlain, grand marshals, grand everybody," she laughed.

In the reflected glow from pool and shining leaves, her eyes were so full of light he could but wonder if this were the same person who had so gravely stood by his bedside in the cell. That she should thus seem carelessly to dismiss all thought of danger appeared the more surprising, because he knew she was not one to lull herself with the assurance of a false security. To him her bright eyes said: "I am in your care. Be yours the task now." And thus interpreting, he broke in upon her thoughts.

"Having dined and wined so well, shall we go on, Jacqueline?"

To which she at once assented by rising, and soon they had left the principality of the lily far in the distance. Now the road so narrowed he fell behind. The character of the country had changed; some time ago they had passed out of the wild forest, and had begun to traverse a great, level plain, broken with stubble. As far as the eye could reach, no other human figures were visible; the land outstretched, apparently without end; no habitations

dotted the landscape, and, the sole signs of life, wheeling birds of prey, languidly floated in the air. At length she glanced around. Was it to reassure herself the jester rode near; that she had not, unattended, entered that forbidding territory? Then she paused abruptly and the fool approached.

"By this time the turnkey should be relieved," she said.

"But not released," he answered, holding up the keys which he yet wore at his girdle. "They will have to come a long distance to find them," he continued, and threw the keys far away upon the sward.

"They may not think of following on this road at all," she returned. "It is the old castle thoroughfare, long since disused."

"And leads where?"

"Southward, to the main road."

"How came you to know it?" he asked, quickly.

"How—because I lived in the castle before the king built the palace and the new thoroughfare," she answered slowly.

"You lived in the castle, then, when it was the residence of the proud Constable of Dubrois? You must have been but a child," he added, reflectively.

"Yes; but children may have long memories."

"In your case, certainly. How well you knew all the passages and corridors of the castle!"

She responded carelessly and changed the conversation. The thoroughfare broadening, for the remainder of the day they pressed forward side by side. But a single human figure, during all those hours, they encountered, and that when the afternoon had fairly worn away. For some time they had pursued their journey silently, when at a turn in the road the horse of the jester shied and started back.

At the same time an unclean, offensive-looking monk in Franciscan attire arose suddenly out of the stubble by the wayside. In his hand he held a heavy staff, newly cut from the forest, a stock which in his brawny arms seemed better adapted for a weapon than as a prop for his sturdy frame. From the rope girdle about his waist depended a rosary whose great beads would have served the fingers of a Cyclops, and a most diminutive, leathern-bound prayer-book. At the appearance of the fool and his companion, he

opened an enormous mouth, and in a voice proportionately large began to whine right vigorously:

"Charity, good people, for the Mother Church! Charity in the name of the Holy Mother! In the name of the saints, the apostles and the evangelists! St. John, St. Peter, St.—" Then broke off suddenly, staring stupidly at the jester.

"The duke's fool!" he exclaimed. "What are you doing here? A plague upon it! You have as many lives as a monk."

"Call you yourself a monk, rascal?" asked the jester, contemptuously.

"At times. Charity, good fool!" the canting rogue again began to whine, edging nearer. "Charity, mistress! For the sake of the prophets and the disciples! The seven sacraments, the feast of the Pentecost and the Passover! In the name of the holy Fathers! St. Sebastian! St. Michael! St.—"

But the fugitives had already sped on, and the unregenerate knave turned his pious eloquence into an unhallowed channel of oaths, waving his staff menacingly after them.

"I fear me," said the jester, when they had put a goodly distance between themselves and the solitary figure, "yonder brother craves almsgiving with his voice, and enforces the bounty with his staff. Woe betide the good Samaritan who falls within reach of his pilgrim's prop."

"You knew him?" she asked.

"I had the doubtful pleasure," he answered. "He was hired to kill me."

"Why?" in surprise.

"Because the—duke wanted me out of the way."

She asked no further questions, although he could see by her brow she was thinking deeply. Was the duke then no better than a common assassin? She frowned, then gave an impatient exclamation.

"It is inexplicable," she said, and rode the faster.

The jester, too, was silent, but his mind dwelt upon the future and its hazards. He little liked their meeting with the false monk. Why was the Franciscan traveling in their direction? Had others of that band of pillagers, street-fools and knave-minstrels, formerly infesting the neighborhood of the palace, gone that way? He did not believe the monk would long pursue a

solitary pilgrimage, for varlets of that kind have common haunts and byways. The encounter suggested hazard ahead as well as the danger of pursuit from the palace. But this apprehension of a new source of peril he kept from his companion; since go on they must, there was no need to disquiet her further.

The mystic silver light of the day had now become golden; the sky, brilliant, many-colored, overdomed the vast, sullen earth; between two roseate streamers a whitish crescent unobtrusively was set. Seemingly misplaced in a sanguinary sea, passionless it lay, but as the ocean of light grew dull the crescent kindled. Over a thick patch of pine trees in the distance myriads of dark birds hovered and screamed in chorus. Now they circled restlessly above that shaded spot; then darted off, a cloud against the sky, and returned with renewed cawing and discord. As the riders approached the din abruptly ceased, the creatures mysteriously and suddenly vanishing into the depths of the thicket below.

In the fading light, fool and jestress drew rein, and, moved by the same purpose, looked about them. On the one hand was the deserted, desolate plain over which lay a sullen, gathering mist; on the other, the sombrous obscurity of the wood. Everywhere, an ominous silence, and overhead the crescent growing in luster.

"Do you see any sign of house or inn?" said the girl, peering afar down the road, which soon lost itself in the general monotony of the landscape.

"None, mistress; the country seems alike barren of farmhouse or tavern."

"What shall we do? I am full weary," she confessed.

"The forest offers the best protection," he reluctantly suggested. Little as he favored delay, he realized the wisdom of sparing their horses. Moreover, her appeal was irresistible.

She gazed half-dubiously into that woody depth. "Why not rest by the wayside—in the moonlight?"

"I like not the open road," he answered. "But if you fear the darkness—"

For answer she guided her horse to the verge of the forest and lightly sprang to the ground. Upon a grassy knoll, but a little way within, he spread his cloak.

"There, Jacqueline, is your couch," he said.

"But you?" she asked. "To rob you thus of your cloak seems ill-comradeship."

"The cloak is yours," he returned. "As it is, you will find it but a hard bed."

"It will seem soft as down," she replied, and seated herself on the hillock. In the gloom he could just distinguish the outline of her figure, with her elbow on her knee, and her hair blacker than the shadows themselves. A long-drawn, moaning sound, coming without warning behind her, caused the girl to turn.

"What is that?" she said, quickly.

"The wind, Jacqueline. It is rising."

As he spoke, like a monster it entered the forest; about them branches waved and tossed: a friendly star seen through the boughs lost itself behind a cloud. Yet no rain fell and the air seemed hot and dry, despite the mists which clung to the ground. A crash of thunder or a flash of lightning would have relieved that sighing dolor which filled the little patch of timber with its melancholy sounds.

Suddenly, above the plaint and murmur of wind and forest, the low, clear voice of the girl arose; the melody was no ballad, arietta or pastoral, such as he had before heard from her lips, but a simple hymn, the setting by Calvin. The jester started. How came she to know that forbidden music? Not only to know, but to sing it as he had never heard it sung before. Sweetly it vibrated, her waywardness sunk in its swelling rhythm; its melody freighted with the treasure of her trust. As he listened he felt she was betraying to him the hidden well of her faith; the secret of her religion; that she, his companion, was proclaiming herself a heretic, and, therefore, doubly an outcast.

A stanza, and the melody died away on the wings of the tempest. His heart was beating violently; he looked expectantly toward her. Even more gently, like a lullaby to the turbulent night, the full-measured cadence of the majestic psalm was again heard. Then another voice, deeper, fuller, blended with that of the first singer. Unwavering, she continued the song, as though it had been the most natural matter he should join his voice with hers. Fainter fell the harmony; then ceased altogether—a hymn destined to become interwoven with terrible memories, the tragic massacre of the Huguenots on the ill-fated night of St. Bartholomew. Again prevailed the tristful dirge of the pines.

"You sing well, mistress," said the jester, softly. "Is it true you are one of a hated sect?"

"As true as that you did not deny the heretic volume found in your room," she replied.

A silence ensued between them. "It was Marot placed the horses there for us," she said, at length. "He, too, is a heretic, and would have saved you."

Thereafter the silence remained unbroken for some moments, and then—

"God keep you, mistress," he said.

"God keep you," she answered, softly.

Soon her deep breathing told him she was sleeping, and, as he listened, in fancy he could hear the faint echoes of her voice, accompanied by the sighing wind. How intrepid had she seemed; how helpless was she now; and, as he bent over her, divining yet not seeing, he asked himself whence had come this faith in him, that like a child she slumbered amid the unrest of nature? What had her life been, who her friends, that she should thus have chosen a jester as comrade? What had driven her forth from the court to nameless hazards? Had he surmised correctly? Was it—

"The king," she murmured, with sudden restlessness in her sleep.

"The king," she repeated, with aversion.

In the jester's breast upleaped a fierce anger. This was the art-loving monarch who burned the fathers and brothers of the new faith; this, the righteous ruler who condemned men to death for psalm-singing or for listening to grave discourse; this the Christian king, the brilliant patron of science and learning.

The storm had sighed itself to rest, the stars had come out, but leaning with his back against a tree, the fool still kept vigil.

CHAPTER XIX

A FIGURE IN THE MOONLIGHT

Experiencing no further inconvenience than the ordinary vicissitudes of traveling without litter or cavalcade, several days of wandering slowly passed. Few people they met, and those, for the most part, various types of vagabonds and nomads; some wild and savage, roaming like beasts from place to place; others, harmless, mere bedraggled birds of passage. In this latter class were the vagrant-entertainers, with dancing rooster or singing dog, who stopped at every peasant's door. To the shrill piping of the flageolet, these merry stragglers added a step of their own, and won a crust for themselves, a bone for the dog or a handful of grain for the performing fowl.

In those days when court ladies rode in carved and gilded coaches, and their escorts on horses covered with silken, jeweled nets, the modest appearance of the jestress and her companion was not calculated to attract especial attention from the yokels and honest peasantry; although their steeds, notwithstanding their unpretentious housings, might still excite the cupidity of highway rogues. As it minimized their risk from this latter class, the young girl was content to wear the cap of the jestress, piquantly perched upon her dark curls, thereby suggesting an indefinable affinity with vagrancy and the itinerant fraternity.

Not only had she donned the symbol of her office, but she endeavored to act up to it, accepting the sweet with the sour, with ever a jest at discomfort and concealing weariness with a smile. Often the fool wondered at her endurance and her calm courage in the face of peril, for although they met with no misadventures, each day seemed fraught with jeopardy. Perhaps it was fortunate their attire, somewhat travel-stained, appeared better suited to the character of poor, migratory wearers of the cap and bells than to the more magnificent roles of fou du roi or folle de la reine. But although they had gone far, the jester knew they had not yet traveled beyond the reach of Francis' arm, and that, while the king might reconcile himself to the escape of the plaisant, he would not so easily tire in seeking the maid.

Once they slept in the fields; again, beside an old ruined shrine, in the shadow of an ancient cross; the third night, on the bank of a stream, when it rained, and she shivered until dawn with no word of complaint. Fortunately the sun arose, bright and warm, drying the garments that clung to her slender figure, At the peasants' houses they paused no longer than necessary to procure food and drink, and, not to awaken suspicion, she

preferred paying them with a song of the people rather than from the well-filled purse she had brought with her.

And as the fool listened to a sprightly, contagious carol and noted its effect on clod and hind, he wondered if this could be the same voice he had heard, uplifted in one of Master Calvin's psalms in the solitude of the forest. She had the gift of music, and, sometimes on the journey, would break out with a catch or madrigal by Marot, Caillette, or herself. It appeared a brave effort to bear up under continued hardship—insufficient rest and sharp riding—and the jester reproached himself for thus taxing her strength; but often, when he suggested a pause, she would shake her head wilfully, assert she was not tired, and ride but the faster.

"No, no!" she would say; "if we would escape, we must keep on. We can rest afterward."

"Where do you wish to go?" he asked her once.

"There is time enough yet to speak of that," she returned, evasively.

"You have some plan, mistress?"

"Perhaps."

This answer forbade his further questioning; offended, possibly, his sense of that confidence which is due comrade to comrade, but she became immediately so propitiative and sweetly dependent—the antithesis to that self-reliance her response implied—he thought no more of it, but remained content with her reticence. Half-shyly, she looked at him beneath her dark lashes, as if to read how deeply he was annoyed, and, seeing his face clear, laughed lightly.

"What are you laughing at, mistress?" he said.

"If I knew I could tell," she replied.

Toward sundown on the fourth day they came to a lonely inn, set in a clearing on the verge of a forest. They had ridden late in the moonlight the night before, and all that morning and afternoon almost without resting, and the first sight of the solitary hostelry was not unwelcome to the weary fugitives. A second inspection of the place, however, awakened misgivings. The building seemed the better adapted for a fortress than a tavern, being heavily constructed with massive doors and blinds, and loopholes above. A brightly painted sign, The Rooks' Haunt, waved cheerily, it is true, above the door, as though to disarm suspicion, but the isolated situation of the inn,

and the depressing sense of the surrounding wilderness, might well cause the wayfarer to hesitate whether to tarry there or continue his journey.

A glance at the pale face and unnaturally bright eyes of the girl brought the jester, however, to a quick decision. Springing from his horse, he held out his hand to assist her, but, overcome by weakness, or fatigue, she would have fallen had he not sustained her. Quickly she recovered, and with a faint flush mantling her white cheek, withdrew from his grasp, while at the same time the landlord of the tavern came forward to welcome his guests.

In appearance mine host was round and jovial; his bulk bespoke hearty living; his rosy face reflected good cheer; his stentorian voice, free-and-easy hospitality. His eyes constituted the only setback to this general impression of friendliness and fellow-feeling; they were small, twinkling, glassy.

"Good even to you, gentle folk," he said. "You tarry for the night, I take it?"

"If you have suitable accommodations," answered the jester, reassured by the man's aspect and manner.

"The Rooks' Haunt never yet turned away a weary traveler," answered the landlord. "You come from the palace?"

"Yes," briefly, as a lad led away their horses.

"And have done well? Reaped a harvest from the merry lords and ladies?"

"There were many others there for that purpose," returned the jester, following the proprietor to the door of the hostelry.

"True. Still I'll warrant your fair companion cozened the silver pieces from the pockets of the gentry." And, smiling knowingly, he ushered them into the principal living room of the tavern.

It was a smoke-begrimed apartment, with tables next to the wall, and rough chairs and benches for the guests. Heavy pine rafters spanned the ceiling; the floor was sprinkled with sand; from a chain hung a wrought-iron frame for candles. Upon a shelf a row of battered tankards, suggesting many a bout, shone dully, like a line of war-worn troopers, while a great pewter pitcher, the worse for wear, commanded the disreputable array.

In this room was gathered a nondescript company: mountebanks and buffoons; rogues unclassified, drinking and dicing; a robust vagrant, at whose feet slept a performing boar, with a ring—badge of servitude—through its nose; a black-bearded, shaggy-haired Spanish troubadour, with attire so ragged and worn as to have lost its erstwhile picturesque characteristics.

This last far from prepossessing worthy half-started from his seat upon the appearance of fool and jestress; stared at them, and then resumed his place and the ballad he had been singing:

"Within the garden of Beaucaire

He met her by a secret stair,

Said Aucassin, 'My love, my pet,

These old confessors vex me so!

They threaten all the pains of hell

Unless I give you up, ma belle,'—

Said Aucassin to Nicolette."

Watching the nimble fingers of the shabby minstrel with pitiably childish expression of amusement, a half-imbecile morio leaned upon the table. His huge form, for he was a giant among stalwart men, and his great moon-shaped head made him at once an object hideous and miserable to contemplate. But the poor creature seemed unaware of his own deformities, and smiled contentedly and patted the table caressingly to the sprightly rhythm.

Gazing upon this choice assemblage, the plaisant was vaguely conscious that some of the curious and uncommon faces seemed familiar, and the picture of the Franciscan monk whom they had overtaken on the road recurred to him, together with the misgivings he had experienced upon parting from that canting knave. He half-expected to see Nanette; to hear her voice, and was relieved that the gipsy on this occasion did not make one of the unwonted gathering. The landlord, observing the fool's discriminating gaze, and reading something of what was passing in his mind, reassuringly motioned the new-comers to an unoccupied corner, and by his manner sought to allay such mistrust as the appearance of his guests was calculated to inspire.

"We have to take those that come," he said, deprecatorily. "The rascals have money. It is as good as any lord's. Besides, whate'er they do without, here must they behave. And—for their credit—they are docile as children; ruled by the cook's ladle. You will find that, though there be ill company, you will partake of good fare. If I say it myself, there's no better master of the flesh pots outside of Paris than at this hostelry. The rogues eat as well as the king's gentlemen. Feasting, then fasting, is their precept."

"At present we have a leaning for the former, good host," carelessly answered the fool. "Though the latter will, no doubt, come later."

"For which reason it behooves a man to eat, drink and be merry while he may," retorted the other. "What say you to a carp on the spit, with shallots, and a ham boiled with pistachios?"

"The ham, if it be ready. Our appetites are too sharp to wait for the fish."

"Then shall you have with it a cold teal from the marshes, and I'll warrant such a repast as you have not tasted this many a day. Because a man lives in a retired spot, it does not follow he may not be an epicure," he went on, "and in my town days I was considered a good fellow among gourmands." His eyes twinkled; he studied the new-comers a moment, and then vanished kitchenward.

His self-praise as a provider of creature comforts proved not ill deserved; the viands, well prepared, were soon set before them; a serving lad filled their glasses from a skin of young but sound wine he bore beneath his arm, and, under the influence of this cheer, the young girl's cheek soon lost its pallor. In the past she had become accustomed to rough as well as gentle company; so now it was disdain, not fear, she experienced in that uncouth gathering; the same sort of contempt she had once so openly expressed for Master Rabelais, whipper-in for all gluttons, wine-bibbers and free-livers.

As the darkness gathered without, the merriment increased within. Over the scene the dim light cast an uncertain luster. Indefatigably the dicers pursued their pastime, with now and then an audible oath, or muttered imprecation, which belied that docility mine host had boasted of. The troubadour played and the morio yet listened. Several of a group who had been singing now sat in sullen silence. Suddenly one of them muttered a broken sentence and his fellows immediately turned their eyes toward the corner where were fool and jestress. This ripple of interest did not escape the young girl's attention, who said uneasily:

"Why do those men look at us?"

"One of them spoke to the others," replied the jester. "He called attention to something."

"What do you suppose it was?" she asked curiously.

"Gladius gemmatus!" ["The jeweled sword."]

Whence came the voice? Near the couple, in a shadow, sat a woebegone looking man who had been holding a book so close to his eyes as to conceal his face. Now he permitted the volume to fall and the jester uttered an exclamation of surprise, as he looked upon those pinched, worn, but well-remembered features.

"The scamp-student!" he said.

Immediately the reader buried his head once more behind the book and spoke aloud in Latin as though quoting some passage which he followed with his finger; "Did you understand?"

"Yes," answered the plaisant, apparently speaking to the jestress, whose face wore a puzzled expression.

The scamp-student laid the volume on the table. "These men are outlaws and intend to kill you for your jeweled sword," he continued in the language of Horace.

"Why do you tell me this?" asked the fool in the same tongue, now addressing directly the scholar.

"Because you spared my life once; I would serve you now."

"What's all this monk's gibberish about?" cried an angry voice, as the master of the boar stepped toward them.

"A discussion between two scholars," readily answered the scamp-student.

"Why don't you talk in a language we understand?" grumbled the man.

"Latin is the tongue of learning," was the humble response.

"I like not the sound of it," retorted the other, as he retired. From a distance, however, he continued to cast suspicious glances in their direction. Bewildered, the girl looked from one of the alleged controverters to the other. Who was this starveling the jester seemed to know? Again were they conversing in the language of the monastery, and their colloquy led to a conclusion as unexpected as it was startling.

"What if we leave the inn now?" asked the jester.

"They would prevent you."

"Who is the leader?"

"The man with the boar," answered the scamp-student. "But it is the morio who usually kills their victims."

The jester glanced at the colossal monster, repugnant in deformity, and then at the girl, who was tapping impatiently on the table with her white fingers. The fool's color came and went; what human strength might stand against that frightful prodigy of nature?

"Is there no way to escape?" he asked.

"Alas! I can but warn; not advise," said the scholar. "Already the leader suspects me."

A half-shiver ran through him. In the presence of actual and seemingly assured death he had appeared calm, resigned, a Socrates in temperament; before the mere prospect of danger the apprehensive thief-and-fugitive elements of his nature uprose. He would meet, when need be, the grim-visaged monster of dissolution with the dignity of a stoic, but by habit disdained not to dodge the shadow with the practised agility of a filcher and scamp. So the lower part of his moral being began to cower; he glanced furtively at the company.

"Yes; I am sure I have put my own neck in it," he muttered. "I must devise a way to save it. I have it. We must seem to quarrel." And rising, he closed his book deliberately.

"Fool!" he said in a sharp voice. "Your argument is as scurvy as your Latin. Thou, a philosopher! A bookless, shallow dabbler! So I treat you and your reasonings!"

Whereupon, with a quick gesture, he threw the dregs of his glass in the face of the jester. So suddenly and unexpectedly was it done, the other sprang angrily from his seat and half drew his sword. A moment they stood thus, the fool with his hand menacingly upon the hilt; the scamp-scholar continuing to confront him with undiminished volubility.

He threw the dregs of his glass in the face of the jester.

He threw the dregs of his glass in the face of the jester.

"A smatterer! an ignoramus! a dunce!" he repeated in high-pitched tones to the amusement of the company.

"Make a ring for the two monks, my masters," cried the man with the boar. "Then let each state his case with bludgeon or dagger."

"With bludgeon or dagger!" echoed the excited voice of the morio, whose appearance had undergone a transformation. The indescribable vacancy with which he had listened to the minstrel was replaced by an expression of revolting malignity.

The jestress half-arose, her face once more white, her dark eyes fastened on the fool. But the latter, realizing the purpose of the affront, and the actual service the scamp-student had rendered him, unexpectedly thrust back his blade.

"I'll not fight a puny bookworm," he said, and resumed his seat, although his cheek was flushed.

"You bear a brave sword, fool, for one so loath to draw," sneered the master of the boar.

Disappointed at this tame outcome of an affair which had so spirited a beginning, the company, with derisive scoffing and muttered sarcasm, resumed their places; all save the morio, who stood glaring upon the jester.

"Stab! stab!" he muttered through his dry lips, and at that moment the troubadour played a few chords on his instrument. The passion faded from the creature's face; quietly he turned and sought the chair nearest to the minstrel.

"Sing, master," he said.

"Diable, thou art an insatiable monster!" grumbled the troubadour.

"Insatiable," smilingly repeated the strange being.

"If you went also, ma douce miette!

The joys of heaven I'd forego

To have you with me there below,'—

Said Aucassin to Nicolette."

softly sang the troubadour.

Over the gathering a marked constraint appeared to fall. More soberly the men shook their dice; the scamp-student took up his book, but even Horace seemed not to absorb his undivided attention; a mountebank attempted several tricks, but failed to amuse his spectators. The candles, burning low, began to drip, and the servant silently replaced them. Beneath lowering

brows the master of the boar moodily regarded the young girl, whose face seemed cold and disdainful in the flickering light. The plaisant addressed a remark to her, but she did not answer, and silently he watched the shadow on the floor, of the chandelier swinging to and fro, like a waving sword.

"Will you have something more, good fool?" said the insinuating and unexpected voice of the host at the plaisant's elbow.

"Nothing."

"You were right not to draw," continued the boniface with a sharp look. "What could a jester do with the blade? I'll warrant you do not know how to use it?"

"Nay," answered the fool; "I know how to use it not—and save my neck."

Mine host nodded approvingly. "Ha! a merry fellow," he said. "Come; drink again. 'Twill make you sleep."

"I have better medicine than that," retorted the jester, and yawned.

"Ah, weariness. I'll warrant you'll rest like a log," he added, as he moved away.

At that some one who had been listening laughed, but the fool did not look up. A great clock began to strike with harsh clangor and Jacqueline suddenly arose. At the same time the minstrel, stretching his arms, strolled to the door and out into the open air.

"Good-night, mistress," said the harsh voice of the master of the boar, as his glittering eyes dwelt upon her graceful figure.

The girl responded coldly, and, amid a hush from the company, made her way to the stairs, which she slowly mounted, preceded by the lad who had waited upon them, and followed by the jester.

"A craven fellow for so trim a maid," continued he of the boar, as they disappeared. "She has eyes like friar's lanterns. What a decoy she'd make for the lords in Paris!"

"Yes," assented the landlord, "a pitfall to pill 'em and poll 'em."

At the end of the passage the guide of jestress and fool paused before a door. "Your room, mistress," he said. "And yonder is yours, Master Jester." Then placing the candle on a stand and vouchsafing no further words, he shuffled off in the darkness, leaving the two standing there.

"Lock your door this night, Jacqueline," whispered the fool.

"You submit over-easily to an affront," was her scornful retort, turning upon the jester.

"Perhaps," he replied, phlegmatically. "Yet forget not the bolt."

"It were more protection than you are apt to prove," she answered, and, quickly entering the room closed hard the door.

A moment he stood in indecision; then rapped lightly.

"Jacqueline," he said, in a low voice.

There was no answer.

"Jacqueline!"

The bolt shot sharply into place, fastening the door. No other response would she make, and the jester, after waiting in vain for her to speak, turned and made his way to his own chamber, adjoining hers.

Weary as the young girl was, she did not retire at once, but going to the window, threw wide open the blinds. Bright shone the moon, and, leaning forth, she gazed upon clearing and forest sleeping beneath the soft glamour. A beautiful, yet desolate scene, with not a living object visible—yes, one, and she suddenly drew back, for there, motionless in the full light, and gazing steadfastly toward her room, stood a figure in whom she recognized the Spanish troubadour.

CHAPTER XX

AN UNEQUAL CONFLICT

Surveying his room carefully in the dim light of a candle, the fool discovered he stood in a small apartment, with a single window, whose barren furnishings consisted of a narrow couch, a chair and a massive wardrobe. Unlike the chamber assigned to Jacqueline, the door was without key or bolt; a significant fact to the jester, in view of the warning he had received. Nor was it possible to move wardrobe or bed, the first being too heavy and the last being screwed to the floor, had the occupant desired to barricade himself from the anticipated danger without. A number of suspicious stains enhanced the gruesome character of the room, and as these appeared to lead to the wardrobe, the jester carried his investigation to a more careful survey of that imposing piece of furniture. Opening the door, although he could not find the secret of the mechanism, the fool concluded that the floor of this ponderous wooden receptacle was a trap through which the body of the victim could be secretly lowered.

This brief exploration of his surroundings occupied but a few moments, and then, after blowing out the candle and heaping the clothes together on the bed into some resemblance of a human figure lying there, the jester drew his sword and softly crept down the passage toward the stairs, at the head of which he paused and listened. He could hear the voices and see the shadows of the men below, and, with beating heart, descended a few steps that he might catch what they were saying. Crouching against the wall, with bated breath, he heard first the landlord's tones.

"Well, rogues, what say you to another sack of wine?" asked the host, cheerily.

"It will serve—while we wait," ominously answered the master of the boar.

"Haven't we waited long enough?" said an impatient voice.

"Tut! tut! young blood," growled another, reprovingly. "Would you disturb him at his prayers?"

"The landlord is right," spoke up the leader. "We have the night before us. Bring the wine."

In stentorian tones the host called the serving-man, and soon from the clinking of cups, the clearing of throats, and the exclamations of satisfaction, foully expressed, the listening jester knew that the skin had been circulated and the tankards filled. One man even began to sing again

an equivocal song, but was stopped by a warning imprecation to which he ill-naturedly responded with a half-defiant curse.

"Knaves! knaves!" cried the reproachful voice of the landlord. "Can you not drink together like honest men?"

This mild expostulation of the host seemed not without its effect, for the impending quarrel passed harmlessly away.

"Where, think you, he got the sword?" asked one of the gathering, reverting to the enterprise in hand.

"Stole it, most likely," replied the leader. "It is booty from the palace."

"And therefore is doubly fair spoils," laughed another.

"Remember, rogues," interrupted the host, "one-third is my allotted portion. Else we fall out."

"Art so solicitous, thou corpulent scrimp!" grumbled he of the boar. "Have you not always had the hulking share? Pass the wine!"

"Foul names break no bones," laughed the host. "You were always a churlish, ungentle knave. There's the wine, an it's not better than your temper, beshrew me for the enemy of true hospitality. But to show I am none such, here's something to sup withal; prime head of calf. Bolt and swig, as ye will."

The rattle of dishes and the play of forks succeeded this good-natured suggestion. It was truly evident mine host commanded the good will and the services of the band by appealing to their appetites. An esculent roast or pungent stew was his cure for uprising or rebellion; a high-seasoned ragout or fricassee became a sovereign remedy against treachery or defection. He could do without them, for knaves were plentiful, but they could not so easily dispense with this fat master of the board who had a knack in turning his hand at marvelous and savory messes, for which he charged such full reckoning that his third of the spoils, augmented by subsequent additions, was like to become all.

A wave of anger against this unwieldy hypocrite and well-fed malefactor swept over the jester. The man's assumed heartiness, his manner of joviality and good-fellowship, were only the mask of moral turpitude and blackest purpose. But for the lawless scholar, the fool would probably have retired to his bed with full confidence in the probity and honesty of the greatest delinquent of them all.

"What shall we do with the girl?" asked one of the outlaws, interrupting this trend of thought in the listener's mind.

"Serve her the same as the fool," answered the landlord, carelessly.

"But she's a handsome wench," retorted the leader, thoughtfully. "Straight as a poplar; eyes like a sloe. With the boar and the jade, I should do well, when I become tired resting here."

"If she's as easily tamed as the boar?" suggested the host, significantly.

"Devil take me, if her nails are as long as his tusks," retorted the follow, with a coarse laugh.

"An I had a hostelry in town, she could bait the nobles thither," commented the host, thoughtfully.

"Give her to the scamp-student," remarked the fellow who had first spoken.

"Nay, since Nanette ran off with a street singer and left me spouseless, I have made a vow of celibacy," hastily answered the piping voice of the lank scholar.

A series of loud guffaws greeted the scamp-student's declaration, while the subsequent rough humor of the knaves made the listener's cheek burn with indignation. Yet forced to listen he was, knowing that the slightest movement on his part would quickly seal the fate of himself and the young girl. But every fiber of his being revoked against that ribald talk; he bit his lip hard, hearing her name bandied about by miscreants and wretches of the lowest type, and even welcomed a startling change in the discourse, occasioned by the leader.

"Enough, rogues. We must settle with the jester first. Afterward, it will be time enough to deal with the maid. Hast done feeding and tippling yet, morio?"

"Yes, master," said the suspiciously muffled voice of the imbecile.

"Here's the knife then. You shall have another tankard when you come back."

"Another tankard!" muttered the creature.

At these significant words, knowing that the crucial moment had come, the jester retreated rapidly, and, making his way down the passage, stood in a dark corner near his room. As of one accord the voices ceased below; a

heavy creaking announced the approach of the morio; nearer and nearer, first on the stairs, then in the upper corridor. From where he remained concealed the fool dimly discerned the figure of the would-be assassin.

At the door of the jestress' room it paused. The fool lifted his blade; the form passed on. Before the chamber of the plaisant its movements became more stealthy; it bent and listened. Should the jester spring upon it now? A strange loathing made him hesitate, and, before he had time to carry his purpose into execution, the creature, throwing aside further pretense of caution, swung back the door and launched himself across the apartment. A heavy blow, swiftly followed by another; afterward, the stillness of death.

Every moment the jester expected an outcry; the announcement of the fruitlessness of the attack, but the morio made no sound. The silence became oppressive; the plaisant felt almost irresistibly impelled toward that terrible chamber, when with heavy, lumbering step, the creature reappeared, traversed the hall like a huge automaton and mechanically descended the stairs. Recovering from his surprise, the fool again resumed his position commanding the scene below, and breathlessly awaited the sequel to the singular pantomime he had witnessed.

"Well, is it done?" asked the harsh voice of the master of the boar.

"Yes; done!" was the submissive answer.

"Good! Now to get the sword."

"Not so fast," broke in the landlord. "Do you kill, morio, without drawing blood? Look at his dagger."

The leader took the blade, examined it, and then began to call down curses on the head of the imbecile monster. "Clean, save for a thread of cotton," he cried angrily. "You never went near him."

"Yes, yes, master!" replied the creature, eagerly.

"Then, perhaps, you strangled him?" suggested the man.

"No; stab! stab!" reiterated the morio, in an almost imploring tone, shrinking from the glances cast upon him.

"Bah! You stabbed the bed, fool; not the man," roughly returned the other. "The rogue has guessed our purpose and left the room," he continued, addressing the others. "But he's skulking somewhere. Well, knaves, here's a little coursing for us all. Up with you, morio, and find him. Perhaps, though,

he may prefer to come down." And the leader called out: "Give yourself up, rascal, or it will be the worse for you."

To this paradoxical threat no answer was returned. Standing in the shadow at the head of the stairs, the jester only gripped tighter the hilt of the coveted sword, while across his vision flashed the picture of the young girl, left helpless, alone! What mercy would they show? The coarse words of the master of the boar and the gibing, loose responses of the company recurred to him, and, setting his jaw firmer, the plaisant peered, with gleaming eyes, down into the semi-gloom.

"You won't answer?" cried the leader, after a short interval. "Smell him out then, rogues."

Knife in hand, the others at his heels, the morio slowly made his way up the stairs. Goaded by the taunts of the outlaws, his face was distorted with ferocity; through his lips came a fierce, sibilant breathing; in the dim light his colossal figure and enormous head seemed in no wise human, but rather a murderous phantasm. With head rolling from side to side, stabbing in the air with his knife, he continued to approach,—an object calculated to strike terror into any breast.

"Oh! oh!" murmured a voice behind the jester, and, turning, he saw Jacqueline. Disturbed by the tumult and the loud voices, the jestress had left her room to learn the cause of the unusual din, and now, with her dark hair a cloud around her, stood gazing fearfully over the fool's shoulder.

At the sound of the young girl's voice, so near, the plaisant's hand, which for the moment had been unsteady, became suddenly steel. Almost impatiently he awaited the coming of the morio; at last he drew near, but, as if instinctively realizing the presence of danger, paused, his arm ceasing to strike, but remaining stationary in the air.

"Go on!" impatiently shouted those behind him.

At the command the creature sprang forward furiously, when the sword of the jester shot out; once, twice! From the morio's grip fell the dagger; over his face the lust for killing was replaced by a look of surprise; with a single moan, he threw both arms on high, and, tottering like an oak, the monster fell backward with a crash, carrying with him the rogues behind. Imprecations, threats and cries of pain ensued; several knaves went limping away from the struggling group; one lay prostrate as the morio himself; the master of the boar rubbed his shoulder, anathematizing roundly the cause of the disaster.

"I think my arm's put out!" he said. "Is the creature dead?" he added, viciously.

"Dead as a herring," answered the landlord, bending over the motionless figure.

"Beshrew me, I thought the jester was a craven," growled he of the boar. "What does it mean?"

"That he saw the snare and spread another," replied the host.

"Go back to your room, mistress," whispered the plaisant to the young girl, "and lock yourself in."

"Nay; I'll not leave you," she replied. "Do you think they will return?" she added in a voice she strove to make firm.

"I am certain of it. Go, I beg you—to your window and call out. It is a slender hope, but the best we have. Fear not; I can hold the stairs yet a while."

A moment she hesitated, then glided away. At the same time he of the boar grasped a sword in his left hand, and, with his right hanging useless, rushed up the stairs.

"Oh, there you are, my nimble wit-cracker!" he cried, as the jester stepped boldly out. "'Twas a pretty piece of foolery you played on the monster and us, but quip for quirk, my merry wag!" And, so speaking, he directed a violent thrust which, had it taken effect, would, indeed, have made good the leader's threat.

But the plaisant stepped aside, the blow grazed his shoulder, while his own blade, by a rapid counter, passed through the throat of his antagonist. With a shriek, the blood gushing from the wound, the master of the boar fell lifeless on the stairs, his sword clattering downward. At that gruesome sight, his fellows paused irresolute, and, seeing their indecision, the jester rushed headlong upon them, striking fiercely, when their hesitation turned into panic and the knaves fairly fled. Below, the irate landlord stamped and fumed, cuffing and striking as he moved among them with threats and abuse.

"White-livered varlets! Pigeon-hearted rogues! Unmanned by a motley fool! A witling the lords beat with their slippers! Because of a chance blow against an imbecile, or a disabled man, you hesitate. A fig for them! What if they be dead? The spoil will be the greater for the rest."

Thus exhorted, the knaves once more took heart and gathered for the attack. Glaves were provided for those in front, and the plaisant waited, grimly determined, yet liking little the aspect of those terrible weapons and feeling the end of the unequal contest was not far distant, when a light hand was laid on his arm.

"Follow me quickly," said Jacqueline. "We may yet escape. Don't question me, but come!" she went on hurriedly.

Impressed by her earnestness, the jester, after a moment's hesitation, obeyed. She led him to her room, closed and locked the door—but not before a scampering of feet and sound of voices told them the rogues had gained the upper passage—and drew him hastily to the window.

"See," she said eagerly. "A ladder!"

"And at the foot of the ladder, our horses!" he exclaimed, in surprise. "Who has done this?"

Her response was interrupted by a hand at their door and a clamor without, followed by heavy blows.

"Quick, Jacqueline!" he cried, and helped her to the long ladder, set, as it seemed, providentially against the wall.

"Can you do it?" he asked, yet holding her hand. Her eyes gave him answer, and he released her, watching her descend.

The door quivered beneath the general onslaught of the now exultant outlaws, and, as a glave shattered the panel the jester threw himself over the casement. A deafening hubbub ensued; the door suddenly gave way, and the band rushed into the room. At the same time the plaisant ran down the ladder and sprang to the ground at the young girl's side. From above came exclamations of wonder and amazement, mingled with invective.

"They're gone!" cried one.

"Here they are!" exclaimed another, looking down from the window.

The jester at once seized the means of descent, but not before the man who had discovered them was on the upper rounds; a quick effort on the fool's part, and ladder and rogue toppled over together. The enterprising knave lay motionless where he fell.

"Vrai Dieu! He wanted to come down," said an approving voice.

Turning, the jester beheld the Spanish troubadour, who was composedly engaged in placing bundles of straw against the wall of the inn.

"I don't think he'll bother you any more," continued the minstrel in his deep tones. "If you'll ride down the road, I'll join you in a moment."

So saying, he knelt before the combustible accumulation he had been diligently heaping together and struck a spark which, seizing on the dry material, immediately kindled into a great flame.

"What are you doing, villain?" roared the landlord from the window, discovering the forks of fire, already leaping and crackling about the tavern.

"Only making a bonfire of a foul nest," lightly answered the minstrel, standing back as though to admire his handiwork. "Your vile hostelry burns well, my dissembling host."

"Hell-dog! varlet!" screamed the proprietor, overwhelmed with consternation.

"Is it thus you greet your guests?" replied the troubadour, throwing another bundle of straw upon the already formidable conflagration. "You were not wont to be so discourteous, my prince of bonifaces."

But recovering from his temporary stupor, the landlord, without reply, disappeared from the window.

"Now may we safely leave the flames to the wind," commented the minstrel, as he sprang upon a small nag which had been fastened to a shed near by. "As we have burned the roof over our heads," he continued, addressing the wondering jester and his companion, who had already mounted and were waiting, "let us seek another hostelry."

Swiftly the trio rode forth from the tavern yard, out into the moonlit road.

"Not so quickly, my friends," commented the troubadour. "As I fastened the doors and blinds without, we may proceed leisurely, for it will be some time before mine host and his friends can batter their way from the inn. Besides, it goes against the grain to run so precipitously from my fire. Such a beautiful auto da fé, as we say in Spain."

"Who are you, sir?" asked the fool.

The minstrel laughed, and answered in his natural voice.

"Don't you know me, mon ami?" he said, gaily. "What a jest this will be at court? How it will amuse the king—"

"Caillette!" exclaimed the plaisant, loudly. "Caillette!"

CHAPTER XXI

THE DESERTED HUT

"Himself!" laughed the minstrel. "Did I not tell you I should become a Spanish troubadour?" Then, reaching out his hand, he added seriously: "Right pleased am I to meet you. But how came you here?"

"I have fled from the keep of the old castle, where I lay charged with heresy," answered the jester, returning the hearty grip.

"The keep!" exclaimed Caillette in surprise. "You are fortunate not to have been brought to trial," he added, thoughtfully. "Few get through that seine, and his Holiness, the pope, I understand, has ordered the meshes made yet smaller."

They had paused on the brow of a hill, commanding the view of road and tavern. Dazed, the young girl had listened to the greeting between the two men. This ragged, beard-begrown troubadour, the graceful, elegant Caillette of Francis' court? It seemed incredible. At the same time, through her mind passed the memory of the plaisant's reiterated exclamation in prison: "Caillette—in Spain!"—words she had attributed to fever, not imagining they had any foundation in fact.

But now this unexpected encounter abruptly dispelled her first supposition and opened a new field for speculation. Certainly had he been on a mission of some kind, somewhere, but what his errand she could not divine. A diplomat in tatters, serving a fellow-jester. Fools had oft intruded themselves in great events ere this, but not those who wore the motley; heretofore had the latter been content with the posts of entertainers, leaving to others the more precarious offices of intrigant.

But if she was surprised at Caillette's unexpected presence and disguise, that counterfeit troubadour had been no less amazed to see her, the joculatrix of the princess, in the mean garb of a wayside ministralissa, wandering over the country like one born to the nomadic existence. That she had a nature as free as air and the spirit of a gipsy he well believed, but that she would forego the security of the royal household for the discomforts and dangers of a vagrant life he could not reconcile to that other part of her character which he knew must shrink from the actualities of the straggler's lot. He had watched her at the inn; how she held herself; how she was a part of, and yet apart from, that migratory company; and what he had seen had but added to his curiosity.

"Have you left the court, mistress?" he now asked abruptly.

"Yes," she answered, curtly.

Caillette gazed at her and her eyes fell. Then put out with herself and him, she looked up boldly.

"Why not?" she demanded.

"Why not, indeed?" he repeated, gently, although obviously wondering.

The constraint that ensued between them was broken by a new aspect of the distant conflagration. Fanned by the breeze, the flames had ignited the thatched roof of the hostelry and fiery forks shot up into the sky, casting a fierce glow over the surrounding scene. Through the glare, many birds, unceremoniously routed from their nests beneath the eaves, flew distractedly. Before the tavern, now burning on all sides, could be distinguished a number of figures, frantically running hither and thither, while above the crackling of the flames and the clamorous cries of the birds was heard the voice of the proprietor, alternately pleading with the knaves to save the tavern and execrating him who had applied the torch.

"Cap de Dieu! the landlord will snare no more travelers," said Caillette. "My horse had become road-worn and perforce I had tarried there sufficient while to know the company and the host. When you walked in with this fair maid, I could hardly believe my eyes. 'Twas a nice trap, and the landlord an unctuous fellow for a villain. Assured that you could not go out as you came, I e'en prepared a less conventional means of exit."

He had scarcely finished this explanation when, with a shower of sparks and a mighty crash, the heavy roof fell. A lambent flame burst from the furnace; grew brighter, until the clouds became rose-tinted; a glory as brilliant as short-lived, for soon the blaze subsided, the glow swiftly faded, and the sky again darkened.

"It is over," murmured Caillette; and, as they touched their horses, leaving the smoldering ruins behind them, he added: "But how came the scamp-student to serve you? I was watching closely, and listening, too; so caught how 'twas done."

"I spared his life once," answered the jester.

"And he remembered? 'Tis passing strange from such a rogue. A clever device, to warn you in Latin that his friends intended to kill one or both of you for the jeweled sword."

"Why," spoke up the young girl, her attention sharply arrested, "was it not a mere discussion of some kind? And—the quarrel?"

"A pretense on the rogue's part to avert the suspicion of the master of the boar. I could but marvel"—to the jester—"at your forbearance."

"I fear me Jacqueline had the right to a poor opinion of her squire," replied the duke's fool. "Nor do I blame her," he laughed, "in esteeming a stout bolt more protection than a craven blade."

But the girl did not answer. Through her brain flashed the recollection of her cold disdain; her scornful words; her abrupt dismissal of the jester at her door. Weighing what she had said and done with what he had not said and done, she turned to him quickly, impulsively. Through the semi-darkness she saw the smile around his mouth and the quizzical look with which he was regarding her. Whereupon her courage failed. She bit her lip and remained silent. They had now passed the brow of the hill; on each side of the highway the forests parted wider and wider, and the thoroughfare was bathed in a white light.

As they rode along on this clearly illumined highway, Caillette glanced interrogatively at the plaisant. The outcome of his journey—should he speak now? Or later—when they were alone? Heretofore neither had made reference to it; Caillette, perhaps, because his mind had been surprised into another train of thought by this unexpected encounter; the duke's fool because the result of the journey was no longer momentous. Since the other had left, conditions were different. The good-natured scoffing and warnings of his fellow-jester had proved not unwarranted.

The answer of the duke's fool to his companion's glance was a direct inquiry.

"You found the emperor?" he said.

"Yes; and presented your message with some misgiving."

"And did he treat it with the scant consideration you expected?"

"On the contrary. His Majesty read it not once, but twice, and changed color."

"And then?"

The narrator paused and furtively surveyed the jestress. Her face was pale, emotionless; as they sped on, she seemed riding through no volition of her own, the while she was vaguely conscious of the dialogue of her companions.

"Whatever magic your letter contained," resumed Caillette, "it seemed convincing to Charles. 'My brother Francis must be strangely credulous to be so cozened by an impostor,' quoth he, with a gleam of humor in his gaze."

"Impostor!" It was the young girl who spoke, interrupting, in her surprise, the troubadour's story.

"You did not know, mistress?" said Caillette.

"No," she answered, and listened the closer.

"When I left, two messages the emperor gave me," went on the other; "one for the king, the other for you." And taking from his doublet a document, weighted with a ponderous disk, the speaker handed it to the duke's fool, who silently thrust it in his breast. "Moreover, unexpectedly, but as good fortune would have it, his Majesty was even then completing preparations for a journey through France to the Netherlands, owing to unlooked-for troubles in that part of his domains, and had already despatched his envoys to the king. Charles assured me that he would still further hasten his intended visit to the Low Countries and come at once. Meanwhile his communication to the king"—tapping his breast—"will at least delay the nuptials, and, with the promise of the emperor's immediate arrival, the marriage can not occur."

"It has occurred," said the jester.

The other uttered a quick exclamation. "Then have I failed in my errand," he muttered, blankly. "But the king—had he no suspicion?"

"It was through the Countess d'Etampes the monarch was led to change the time for the festivities," spoke up Jacqueline, involuntarily.

"She!" exclaimed the poet, with a gesture of half-aversion. For some time they went on without further words; then suddenly Caillette drew rein.

"This news makes it the more necessary I should hasten to the king," he said. "The emperor's message—Francis should receive it at once. Here, therefore, must I leave you. Or, why do you not return with me?"—addressing the jester. "The letter from Charles will exonerate you and Francis will reward you in proportion to the injuries you have suffered. What say you, mistress?"

"That I will never go back," she answered, briefly, and looked away.

Caillette's perplexity was relieved by the plaisant. "Farewell, if you must leave," said the latter. "We meet again, I trust."

"The fates willing," returned the poet. "Farewell, and good fortune go with you both." And wheeling abruptly, he rode slowly back. The jester and the girl watched him disappear over the road they had come.

"A true friend," said the plaisant, as Caillette vanished in the gloom.

"You regret not returning with him, perhaps?" she observed quickly. "Honors and offices of preferment are not plentiful."

"I want none of them from Francis," he returned, as they started slowly on their way.

The road before them descending gradually, passed through a gulch, where the darkness was greater, and such light as sifted through the larch and poplar trees rested in variable spots on the earth. Overhead the somber obscurity appeared touched with a veil of shimmer or sheen like diamond dust floating through the mask of night. Their horses but crept along; the girl bent forward wearily; heretofore the excitement and danger had sustained her, but now the reaction from all she had endured bore down upon her. She thought of calling to the fool; of craving the rest she so needed; but a feeling of pride, or constraint, held her silent. Before her the shadows danced illusively; the film of brightness changed and shifted; then all glimmering and partial shade were swallowed up in a black chasm.

Riding near, the jester observed her form sway from side to side, and spurred forward. In a moment he had clasped her waist, then lifted her from the saddle and held her before him.

"Jacqueline!" he cried.

She offered no resistance; her head remained motionless on his breast. Sedulously he bent over her; the warm breath reassured him; tired nature had simply succumbed. Irresolute he paused, little liking the sequestered gulch for a resting-place; divining the prickly thicket and almost impenetrable brushwood that lined the road. An unhealthy miasma seemed to ascend from below and clog the air; through the tangle of forest, phosphorus gleamed and glowworms flitted here and there.

Gathering the young form gently to him, the jester rode slowly on, and the horse of his companion followed. So he went, he knew not how long; listening to her breathing that came, full and deep; half-fearing, half-wondering at that relaxation. For the first time he forgot about the emperor and his purpose; the free baron and the desires of sweet avengement. He thought only of her he held; how courageous yet alone she was in the world; how she had planned the service which won her the right to his protection;

her flight from Francis—but where? To whom could she go? To whom could she turn? Unconscious she lay in his arms in that deep sleep, or heavy inertia following exhaustion, her pale face against his shoulder; and as the young plaisant bent over her his heart thrilled with protecting tenderness.

"Why, what other maid," he thought, "would ride on until she dropped? Would meet discomfort at every turn with a jest or a merry stave?"

And, but for him, whom else had she? This young girl, had she not become his burden of responsibility; his moral obligation? For the first time he seemed to realize how the fine tendrils of her nature had touched his; touched and clung, ever so gently but fast. Her fine scorn for dissimulation; her answering integrity; the true adjustment of her instinct—all had been revealed to him under the test of untoward circumstances.

He saw her, too, secretly and silently cherishing a new faith in her bosom, amid a throng, lax and infirm of purpose, and wonderment gave way to another emotion, as his mind leaped from that past, with its covert, inner life, to the untrammeled moment when she had thrown off the mask in the solitude of the forest. Had some deeper chord of his nature been struck then? Their aspirations of a kindred hope had mingled in the majestic psalm; a larger harmony, remote from roundelay, or sparkling cadenza, that drew him to this Calvin maid. A solemn earnestness fell upon his spirits; the starlight bathed his brow, and he found the mystery of the night and nature inexplicably beautiful.

Afar the bell of some wanderer from the herd tinkled drowsily, arousing him from his reverie. The horses were ascending; the road emerged into a plain, set with bracken and gorse, with here and there a single tree, whose inclining trunk told of storms braved for many seasons. Near the highway, in the shadow of a poplar, stood a shepherd's hut, apparently deserted and isolated from human kind. The fool reined the horse, which for some time had been moving painfully, and at that abrupt cessation of motion the jestress looked up with a start.

Meeting his eyes, at first she did not withdraw her own; questioningly, her bewildered gaze encountered his; then, with a quick movement, she released herself from his arm and sprang to the ground. He, too, immediately dismounted. She felt very wide-awake now, as though the sudden consciousness of that encircling grasp, or something in his glance before she slipped from him, had startled away the torpor of somnolence.

"You fainted, or fell asleep, mistress," he said, quietly.

"Yes—I remember—in the gorge."

"It was impossible to stop there, so—I rode on. But here, in this shepherd's hut, we may find shelter."

And turning the horses, he would have led them to the door, but the animals held back; then stood stock-still. Striding to the hut, the jester stepped in, but quickly sprang to one side, and as he did so some creature shot out of the door and disappeared in the gloom.

"A wolf!" exclaimed the plaisant.

Entering the hut once more, he struck a light. In a corner lay furze and firewood, and from this store he drew, heaping the combustible material on the hearth, until a cheering blaze fairly illumined the worn and dilapidated interior. Near the fireplace were a pot and kettle, whose rusted appearance bespoke long disuse; but a trencher and porridge spoon on a stool near by seemed waiting the coming of the master. A couch of straw had been the lonely shepherd's bed—and later the lodgment of his enemy, the wolf. Above it, on the wall, hung a small crucifix of wood. For the fugitives this mean abode appeared no indifferent shelter, and it was with satisfaction the jester arranged a couch for the girl, before the fire, a rude pallet, yet—

"Here you may rest, Jacqueline, without fear of being disturbed again this night," he said.

She sank wearily upon the straw; then gave him her hand gratefully. Her face looked rosy in the reflection from the hearth; a comforting sense of warmth crept over her as she lay in front of the blaze; her eyes were languorous with the luxury of the heat after a chilling ride. Drawing the cloak to her chin, she smiled faintly. Was it at his solicitude? He noticed how her hair swept from the saddle pillowing her head, to the earth; and, sitting there on the stool, wondering, perhaps, at its abundance, or half-dreaming, he forgot he yet held her hand. Gently she withdrew it, and he started; then, realizing how he had been staring at her, with somewhat vacant gaze, perhaps, but fixedly, he made a motion to rise, when her voice detained him.

"Why did you not tell me it was not a discussion with the scamp-student?" she asked. "Why did you let me imagine that you—" Her eyes said the rest. "You should not have permitted me to—to think it," she reiterated.

He was silent. She closed her eyes; but in a moment her lashes uplifted. Her glance flashed once more upon him.

"And I should not have thought it," she said.

"Jacqueline!" he cried, starting up.

She did not answer; indeed, seemed sleeping; her face turned from him.

Through the open doorway a streak of red in the east heralded the coming glory of the morn. "Peep, peep," twittered a bird on the roof of the hovel. From the poplar it was answered by a more melodious phrase, a song of welcome to the radiant dawn. A moment the jester listened, his head raised to the growing splendor of the heavens, then threw himself on the earthen floor of the hut and was at once overcome with sleep.

CHAPTER XXII

THE TALE OF THE SWORD

The slanting rays of the sinking sun shot athwart the valley, glanced from the tile roofs of the homes of the peasantry, and illumined the lofty towers of a great manorial château. To the rider, approaching by the road that crossed the smiling pasture and meadow lands, the edifice set on a mount—another of Francis' transformations from the gloomy fortress home—appeared regal and splendid, compared with the humbler houses of the people lying prostrate before it. Viewed from afar, the town seemed to abase itself in the presence of the architectural preëminence of that monarch of buildings. Even the sun, when it withdrew its rays from the miscellaneous rabble of shops and dwellings, yet lingered proudly upon the noble structure above, caressing its imposing and august outlines and surrounding it with the glamour of the afterglow, when the sun sank to rest.

Into the little town, at the foot of the big house, rode shortly before nightfall the jester and his companion. During the day the young girl had seemed diffident and constrained; she who had been all vivacity and life, on a sudden kept silence, or when she did speak, her tongue had lost its sharpness. The weapons of her office, bright sarcasm and irony, or laughing persiflage, were sheathed; her fine features were thoughtful; her dark eyes introspective. In the dazzling sunshine, the memory of their ride through the gorge; the awakening at the shepherd's hut; something in his look then, something in his accents later, when he spoke her name while she professed to sleep—seemed, perhaps, unreal, dream-like.

His first greeting that morning had been a swift, almost questioning, glance, before which she had looked away. In her face was the freshness of dawn; the grace of spring-tide. Overhead sang a lark; at their feet a brook whispered; around them solitude, vast, infinite. He spoke and she answered; her reserve became infectious; they ate their oaten cakes and drank their wine, each strongly conscious of the presence of the other. Then he rose, saddled their horses, and assisted her to mount. She appeared over-anxious to leave the shepherd's hut; the jester, on the other hand, cast a backward glance at the poplar, the hovel, the brook. A crisp, clear caroling of birds followed them as they turned from the lonely spot.

So they rode, pausing betimes to rest, and even then she had little to say, save once when they stopped at a rustic bridge which spanned a stream. Both were silent, regarding the horses splashing in the water and clouding its clear depths with the yellow mud from its bed. From the cool shadows beneath the planks where she was standing, tiny fish, disturbed by this

unwonted invasion, shot forth like darts and vanished into the opaque patches. Half-dreamily watching this exodus of flashing life from covert nook and hole, she said unexpectedly:

"Who is it that has wedded the princess?"

For a moment he did not answer; then briefly related the story.

"And why did you not tell me this before?" she asked when he had finished.

"Would you have credited me—then?" he replied, with a smile.

Quickly she looked at him. Was there that in her eyes which to him robbed memory of its sting? At their feet the water leaped and laughed; curled around the stones, and ran on with dancing bubbles. Perhaps he returned her glance too readily; perhaps the recollection of the ride the night before recurred over-vividly to her, for she gazed suddenly away, and he wondered in what direction her thoughts tended, when she said with some reserve:

"Shall we go on?"

They had not long left the brook and the bridge, when from afar they caught sight of the regal château and the clustering progeny of red-roofed houses at its base. At once they drew rein.

"Shall we enter the town, or avoid it by riding over the mead?" said the plaisant.

"What danger would there be in going on?" she asked. "Whom might we meet?"

Thoughtfully he regarded the shining towers of the royal residence. "No one, I think," he at length replied, and they went on.

Around the town ran a great wall, with watch-towers and a deep moat, but no person questioned their right to the freedom of the place; a sleepy soldier at the gate merely glancing indifferently at them as they passed beneath the heavy archway. Gabled houses, with a tendency to incline from the perpendicular, overlooked the winding street; dull, round panes of glass stared at them, fraught with mystery and the possibility of spying eyes behind; but the thoroughfare in that vicinity appeared deserted, save for an old woman seated in a doorway. Before this grandam, whose lack-luster eyes were fastened steadfastly before her, the fool paused and asked the direction of the inn.

"Follow your nose, if nature gave you a straight one," cried a jeering voice from the other side of the thoroughfare. "If it be crooked, a blind man and a dog were a better guide."

The speaker, a squat, misshapen figure, had emerged from a passage turning into the street, and now stood, twirling a fool's head on a stick and gazing impudently at the new-comers. The crone whom the plaisant had addressed remained motionless as a statue.

"Ha! ha!" laughed the oddity who had volunteered this malapert response to the jester's inquiry, "yonder sign-post"—pointing to the aged dame—"has lost its fingers—or rather its ears. Better trust to your nose."

"Triboulet!" exclaimed Jacqueline.

"Is it you, lady-bird?" said the surprised dwarf, recognizing in turn the maid. "And with the plaisant," staring hard at the fool. Then a cunning look gradually replaced the wonder depicted on his features. "You are fleeing from the court; I, toward it," he remarked, jocosely.

"What mean you, fool?" demanded the horseman, sternly.

"That I have run away from the duke, fool," answered the hunchback. "The foreign lord dared to beat me—Triboulet—who has only been beaten by the king. Sooner or later must I have fled, in any event, for what is Triboulet without the court; or the court, without Triboulet?" his indignation merging into arrogant vainglory.

"When did you leave the—duke?" asked the other, slowly.

"Several days ago," replied the dwarf, gazing narrowly at his questioner. "Down the road. He should be far away by this time."

Suspiciously the duke's jester regarded the hunchback and then glanced dubiously toward the gate through which they had entered the town. He had experienced Triboulet's duplicity and malice, yet in this instance was disposed to give credence to his story, because he doubted not that Louis of Hochfels would make all haste out of Francis' kingdom. Nor did it appear unreasonable that Triboulet should pine for the excitement of his former life; the pleasures and gaiety which prevailed at Fools' hall. If the hunchback's information were true, they need now have little fear of overtaking the free baron and his following, as not far beyond the château-town the main road broke into two parts, the one continuing southward and the other branching off to the east.

While the horseman was thus reflecting, Triboulet, like an imp, began to dance before them, slapping his crooked knees with his enormous hands.

"A good joke, my master and mistress in motley," he cried. "The king was weak enough to exchange his dwarf for a demoiselle; the latter has fled; the monarch has neither one nor the other; therefore is he, himself, the fool. And thou, mistress, art also worthy of the madcap bells," he added, his distorted face upturned to the jestress.

"How so?" she asked, not concealing the repugnance he inspired.

"Because you prefer a fool's cap to a king's crown," he answered, looking significantly at her companion. "Wherein you but followed the royal preference for head-coverings. Ho! ho! I saw which way the wind blew; how the monarch's eyes kindled when they rested on you; how the wings of Madame d'Etampes's coif fluttered like an angry butterfly. Know you what was whispered at court? The reason the countess pleaded for an earlier marriage for the duke? That the princess might leave the sooner—and take the jestress, her maid, with her. But the king met her manoeuver with another. He granted the favorite's request—but kept the jestress."

"Silence, rogue!" commanded the duke's fool, wheeling his horse toward the dwarf.

"And then for her to turn from a throne-room to a dungeon," went on Triboulet, satirically, as he retreated. "As Brusquet wrote; 'twas:

"'Morbleu! A merry monarch and a jestress fair;

A jestress fair, I ween!'—"

But ere the hunchback could finish this scurrilous doggerel of the court, over which, doubtless, many loose witlings had laughed, the girl's companion placed his hand on his sword and started toward the dwarf. The words died on Triboulet's lips; hastily he dodged into a narrow space between two houses, where he was safe from pursuit. Jacqueline's face had become flushed; her lips were compressed; the countenance of the duke's plaisant seemed paler than its wont.

"Little monster!" he muttered.

But the hunchback, in his retreat, was now regarding neither the horseman nor the young girl. His glittering eyes, as if fascinated, rested on the weapon of the plaisant.

"What a fine blade you've got there!" he said curiously. "Much better than a wooden sword. Jeweled, too, by the holy bagpipe! And a coat of arms!"—more excitedly—"yes, the coat of arms of the great Constable of Dubrois. As proud a sword as that of the king. Where did you get it?" And in his sudden interest, the dwarf half-ventured from his place of refuge.

"Answer him not!" said the girl, hastily.

"Was it you, mistress, gave it him?" he asked, with a sudden, sharp look.

Her contemptuous gaze was her only reply.

"By the dust of kings, when last I saw it, the haughty constable himself it was who wore it," continued Triboulet. "Aye, when he defied Francis to his face. I can see him now, a rich surcoat over his gilded armor; the queen-mother, an amorous Dulcinea, gazing at him, with all her soul in her eyes; the brilliant company startled; even the king overawed. 'Twas I broke the spell, while the monarch and the court were silent, not daring to speak."

"You!" From the young woman's eyes flashed a flame of deepest hatred.

The hunchback shrank back; then laughed. "I, Triboulet!" he boasted. "'Ha!' said I, 'he's greater than the king!' whereupon Francis frowned, started, and answered the constable, refusing his claim. Not long thereafter the constable died in Spain, and I completed the jest. 'So,' said I, 'he is less than a man.' And the king, who remembered, laughed."

"Let us go," said the jestress, very white.

Silently the plaisant obeyed, and Triboulet once more ventured forth. "Momus go with you!" he called out after them. And then:

"'Morbleu! A merry monarch and a jestress fair;'"

More quickly they rode on. Furtively, with suppressed rage in his heart, the duke's fool regarded his companion. Her face was cold and set, and as his glance rested on its pale, pure outline, beneath his breath he cursed Brusquet, Triboulet and all their kind. He understood now—too well—the secret of her flight. What he had heretofore been fairly assured of was unmistakably confirmed. The sight of the tavern which they came suddenly upon and the appearance of the innkeeper interrupted this dark trend of thought, and, springing from his horse, the jester helped the girl to dismount.

The house, being situated in the immediate proximity of the grand château, received a certain patronage from noble lords and ladies. This trade had

given the proprietor such an opinion of his hostelry that common folk were not wont to be overwhelmed with welcome. In the present instance the man showed a disposition to scrutinize too closely the modest attire of the new-comers and the plain housings of their chargers, when the curt voice of the jester recalled him sharply from this forward occupation.

With a shade less of disrespect, the proprietor bade them follow him; rooms were given them, and, in the larger of the two chambers, the plaisant, desiring to avoid the publicity of the dining and tap-room, ordered their supper to be served.

During the repast the girl scarcely spoke; the capon she hardly touched; the claret she merely sipped. Once when she held the glass to her lips, he noticed her hand trembled just a little, and then, when she set down the goblet, how it closed, almost fiercely. Beneath her eyes shadows seemed to gather; above them her glance shone ominously.

"Oh," she said at length, as though giving utterance to some thought, which, pent-up, she could no longer control; "the irony; the tragedy of it!"

"What, Jacqueline?" he asked, gently, although he felt the blood surging in his head.

"'Morbleu! A merry monarch'—"

she began, and broke off abruptly, rising to her feet, with a gesture of aversion, and moving restlessly across the room. "After all these years! After all that had gone before!"

"What has gone before, Jacqueline?"

"Nothing," she answered; "nothing."

For some time he sat with his sword across his knees, thinking deeply. She went to the window and looked out. When she spoke again her voice had regained its self-command.

"A dark night," she said, mechanically.

"Jacqueline," he asked, glancing up from the blade, "why in the crypt that day we escaped did you pause at that monument?"

Quickly she turned, gazing at him from the half-darkness in which she stood.

"Did you see to whom the monument was erected?" she asked in a low voice.

"To the wife of the constable. But what was Anne, Duchess of Dubrois, to you?"

"She was the last lady of the castle," said the girl softly.

Again he surveyed the jeweled emblem on the sword, mocking reminder of a glory gone beyond recall.

"And how was it, mistress, the castle was confiscated by the king?" he continued, after a pause.

"Shall I tell you the story?" she asked, her voice hardening.

"If you will," he answered.

"Triboulet's description of the scene where the constable braved the king, insisting on his rights, was true," she observed, proudly.

"But why had the noble wearer of this sword been deprived of his feudality and tenure?"

"Because he was strong and great, and the king feared him; because he was noble and handsome, and the queen-regent loved him. It was not her hand only, Louise of Savoy, Francis' mother, offered, but—the throne."

"The throne!" said the wondering fool.

Quickly she crossed the room and leaned upon the table. In the glimmer of the candles her face was soft and tender. He thought he had never seen a sweeter or more womanly expression.

"But he refused it," she continued, "for he loved only the memory of his wife, Lady Anne. She, a perfect being. The other—what?"

On her features shone a fine contempt.

"Then followed the endless persecution and spite of a woman scorned," she continued, rapidly. "One by one, his honors were wrested from him. He who had borne the flag triumphantly through Italy was deprived of the government of Milan and replaced by a brother of Madame de Châteaubriant, then favorite of the king. His castle, lands, were confiscated, until, driven to despair, he fled and allied himself with the emperor. 'Traitor,' they called him. He, a Bayard."

A moment she stood, an exalted look on her features; tall, erect; then stepped toward him and took the sword. With a bright and radiant glance

she surveyed it; pressed the hilt to her lips, and with both hands held it to her bosom. As if fascinated, the fool watched her. Her countenance was upturned; a moment, and it fell; a dark shadow crossed it; beneath her lashes her eyes were like night.

"But he failed because Charles, the emperor, failed him," she said, almost mechanically, "and broken in spirit, met his death miserably in exile. Yet his cause was just; his memory is dearer than that of a conqueror. She, the queen-mother, is dead; God alone may deal with her."

More composed, she resumed her place in the chair on the other side of the table, the sword across her arm.

"And how came you, mistress," he asked, regarding her closely, "in the pleasure palace built by Francis?"

"When the castle was taken, all who had not fled were a gamekeeper and his little girl—myself. The latter"—ironically—"pleased some of the court ladies. They commended her wit, and gradually was she advanced to the high position she occupied when you arrived," with a strange glance across the board at her listener.

"And the gamekeeper—your father—is dead?"

"Long since."

"The constable had no children?"

"Yes; a girl who, it is believed, died with him in Spain."

The entrance of the servant to remove the dishes interrupted their further conversation. As the door opened, from below came the voices of new-comers, the impatient call of tipplers for ale, the rattle of dishes in the kitchen. Wrapped in the recollections the conversation had evoked, to Jacqueline the din passed unnoticed, and when the rosy-cheeked lass had gone—it was the jester who first spoke.

"What a commentary on the mockery of fate that the sword of such a man, so illustrious, so unfortunate, should be intrusted to a fool!"

"Why," she said, looking at him, her arms on the table, "you drew it bravely, and—once—more bravely—kept it sheathed."

His face flushed. She half smiled; then placed the blade on the board before him.

"There it is."

Above the sword he reached over, as if to place his hand on hers, but she quickly rose. Absently he returned the weapon to his girdle. She took a step or two from him, nervously; lifted her hand to her brow and breathed deeply.

"How tired I feel!" she said.

Immediately he got up. "You are worn out from the journey," he observed, quickly.

But he knew it was not the journey that had most affected her.

"I will leave you," he went on. "Have you everything you need?"

"Everything," she answered carelessly.

He walked to the door. The light was on his face; hers remained shaded.

"Good-night," she said.

"Good-night, Jacqueline, Duchess of Dubrois," he answered, and, turning, disappeared down the corridor.

CHAPTER XXIII

THE DWARF MAKES AN EARLY CALL

From one of the watch-towers of the town rang the clear note of a trumpet, a tribute of melody, occasioned by the awakening in the east. As the last clarion tones reëchoed over the sleeping village, a crimson rim appeared above the horizon and soon the entire wheel of the chariot of the sun-god rolled up out of the illimitable abyss and began its daily race across the sky. The stolid bugler yawned, tucked his trumpet under his arm, and, having perfunctorily performed the duties of his office, tramped downward with more alacrity than he had toiled upward.

About the same time the sleepy guard at the town gate was relieved by an equally drowsy-appearing trooper; here and there windows were flung open, and around the well in the small public square the maids began to congregate. In the tap-room of the tavern the landlord moved about, setting to rights the tables and chairs, or sprinkling fresh sand on the floor. The place had a stale, close odor, as though not long since vacated by an inabstinent company, a supposition further borne out by the disorder of the furniture, and the evidence the gathering had not been over-nice about spilling the contents of their toss-pots. The host had but opened the front door, permitting the fresh, invigorating air from without to enter, when the duke's plaisant, his cloak over his arm, descended the stairs, and, addressing the landlord, asked when he and his companion could be provided with breakfast.

"Breakfast!" grumbled the proprietor. "The maids are hardly up and the fires must yet be started. It will be an hour or more before you can be served."

The jester appeared somewhat dissatisfied, but contented himself with requesting the other to set about the meal at once.

"You ride forth early," answered the man, in an aggrieved tone.

The plaisant made no reply as he strode to the door and looked out; noted sundry signs of awakening life down the narrow street, and then returned to the tap-room.

"You had a noisy company here last night, landlord?" he vouchsafed, glancing around the room and recalling the laughter and shouts he had heard below until a late hour.

"Noisy company!" retorted the innkeeper. "A goodly company that ate and drank freely. Distinguished company that paid freely. The king's own guards

who are acting as escort to Robert, the Duke of Friedwald, and his bride, the princess. Noisy company, forsooth."

The young man started. "The king's guards!" he said. "What are they doing here?"

The other vigorously rubbed the top of a table with a damp cloth. "Acting as escort to the duke, as I told you," he replied.

"The duke is here, also?"

"Yes; at the château. The princess had become weary of travel; besides, had sprained her ankle, I heard, and would have it the cavalcade should tarry a few days. They e'en stopped at my door," he went on ostentatiously, "and called for a glass of wine for the princess. 'Tis true she took it with a frown, but the hardships of journeying do not agree with grand folks."

These last words the jester, absorbed in thought, did not hear. With his back to the man, he stood gazing through the high window, apparently across the street. But between the two houses on the other side of the thoroughfare was a considerable open space, and through this, far away, on the mount, could be seen the château. The sunlight shone bright on turret and spire; its walls were white and glistening; its outlines, graceful and airy as a fabric of imagination.

"And yet it was a handsome cavalcade," continued the proprietor, his predilection for pomp overcoming his churlishness. "The princess on a steed with velvet housings, set with precious stones. Her ladies attired in eastern silks. Behind the men of arms; Francis' troops in rich armor; the duke's soldiers more simply arrayed. At the head of the procession rode—"

"Have the horses brought out at once."

Thus brusquely interrupted, the innkeeper stared blankly at his guest, who had left the window and now stood in the center of the room confronting him. "And the breakfast?" asked the man.

"I have changed my mind and do not want it," was the curt response.

The host shrugged his shoulders disagreeably, as the plaisant turned and ascended the stairs. "Unprofitable travelers," muttered the landlord, following with his gaze the retreating figure.

Hastily making his way to the room of the young girl, the jester knocked on the door.

"Are you awake, Jacqueline?"

"Yes," answered a voice within.

"We must ride forth as soon as possible. The duke is at the château."

"At the château!" she exclaimed in surprise. Then after a pause: "And Triboulet saw us. He will tell that you are here. I will come down at once. Wait," she added, as an afterthought seized her.

He heard her step to the window. "I think the gates of the château are open," she said. "I am not sure; it is so far."

"Do you see any one on the road leading down?"

"No," came the answer.

"Nor could I. But perhaps they have already passed."

Again the jester returned to the tap-room, where he found the landlord polishing the pewter tankards.

"The horses?" said the fool sharply.

"The stable boy will bring them to the door," was the response, and the innkeeper held a pot in the air and leisurely surveyed the shining surface.

"The reckoning?"

Deliberately the man replaced the receptacle on the table, and, pressing his thumbs together, began slowly to calculate: "Bottle of wine, ten sous; capon, twenty sous; two rooms—" when the jester took from his coat the purse the young girl had given him, and, selecting a coin, threw it on the board. At the sight of the purse and its golden contents the countenance of the proprietor mollified; his price forthwith varied with his changed estimate of his guest's condition. "Two rooms, fifty sous; fodder, forty sous"—he went on. "That would make—"

"Keep the coin," said the plaisant, "and have the stable boy make haste."

With new alacrity, the innkeeper thrust the pistole into a leathern pouch he carried at his girdle. A guest who paid so well could afford to be eccentric, and if he and the young lady chose to travel without breakfast, it was obviously not for the purpose of economy. Therefore, exclaiming something about "a lazy rascal that needed stirring up," the now interested landlord was about to go to the barn himself, when, with a loud clattering, a party of

horsemen rode up to the tavern; the door burst open and Triboulet, followed by a tall, rugged-looking man and a party of troopers, entered the hall.

Swiftly the jester glanced around him; the room had no other door than that before which the troopers were crowded; he was fairly caught in a trap. Remorsefully his thoughts flew to the young girl and the trust she had imposed in him. How had he rewarded that confidence? By a temerity which made this treachery on the part of the hunchback possible. Even now before him stood Triboulet, bowing ironically.

"I trust you are well?" jeered the dwarf, and with a light, dancing step began to survey the other from side to side. "And the lady—is she also well this morning? How pleased you both were to see me yesterday!" assuming an insolent, albeit watchful, pose. "So you believed I had run away from the duke? As if he could get on without me. What would be a honeymoon without Triboulet! The maids of honor would die of ennui. One day they trick me out with true-lovers' knots! the next, give me a Cupid's head for a wand. Leave the duke!" he repeated, bombastically. "Triboulet could not be so unkind."

"Enough of this buffoonery!" said a decisive voice, and the dwarf drew back, not without a grimace, to make room for a person of soldierly mien, who now pushed his way to the front. Over his doublet this gentleman wore a somewhat frayed, but embroidered, cloak; his broad hat was fringed with gold that had lost its luster; his countenance, deeply burned, seemed that of an old campaigner. He regarded the fool courteously, yet haughtily.

"Your sword, sir!" he commanded, in the tone of one accustomed to being obeyed.

"To whom should I give it?" asked the duke's jester.

"To the Vicomte de Gruise, commandant of the town. I have a writ for your arrest as a heretic."

"Who has lodged this information against me?"

"Triboulet. That is, he procured the duke's signature to the writ."

"And you think the duke a party to this farce, my Lord?" said the fool, with assumed composure. "It has not occurred to you that before the day is over all the village will be laughing at the spectacle of their commandant—pardon me—being led by the nose by a jester?"

The officer's sun-burned face became yet redder; he frowned, then glanced suspiciously at Triboulet, whose reputation was France-wide.

"This man was the duke's fool," screamed the dwarf, "and was imprisoned by order of the king. His companion who is here with him was formerly jestress to the princess. She is a sorceress and bewitched the monarch. Then her fancy seized upon the heretic, and, by her dark art, she opened the door of the cell for him. Together they fled; she from the court, he from prison."

The commandant looked curiously from the hunchback to the accused. If this were acting, the dwarf was indeed a master of the art.

"Besides, his haste to leave the village," eagerly went on Triboulet. "Why was he dressed at this hour? Ask the landlord if he did not seem unduly hurried?"

At this appeal the innkeeper, who had been an interested spectator, now became a not unwilling witness.

"It is true he seemed hurried," he answered. "When he first came down he ordered breakfast. I happened to mention the duke was at the château, whereupon he lost his appetite with suspicious suddenness, called for his horses, and was for riding off with all haste."

From the commandant's expression this testimony apparently removed any doubts he may have entertained. Above the heads of the troopers massed in the doorway the duke's plaisant saw Jacqueline, standing on the stairs, with wide-open, dark eyes fastened upon him. Involuntarily he lifted his hand to his heart; across the brief space glance melted into glance.

Persecuted Calvin maid—had not her fate been untoward enough without this new disaster? Had not the king wrought sufficient ill to her and hers in the past? Would she be sent back to the court; the monarch? For himself he had no thought, but for her, who was nobler even than her birthright. He had been thrice a fool who had not heeded portentous warnings—the sight of Triboulet, the clamor of the troopers—and had failed to flee during the night. As he realized the penalty of his negligence would fall so heavily upon her, a cry of rage burst from the fool's lips and he sprang toward his aggressors. The young girl became yet whiter; a moment she clung to the baluster; then started to descend the stairs. A dozen swords flashed before her eyes.

She drew in her breath sharply, when as if by some magic, the anger faded from the face of the duke's fool; the hand he had raised to his breast fell to his side; his blade remained sheathed.

"Your pardon, my Lord," he said to the commandant. "I have no intention of resisting the authority of the law, but if you will grant me a few moments' private audience in this room, I promise to convince you the Duke of Friedwald never signed that writ."

"Let him convince the council that examines heretics," laughed Triboulet. "I'll warrant they'll make short work of his arguments."

"I will give you my sword, sir," went on the jester. "Afterward, if you are satisfied, you shall return it to me. If you are not, on my word as a man of honor, I will go with you without more ado."

"A Calvinist, a jester, a man of honor!" cried the dwarf.

But narrowly the vicomte regarded the speaker. "Pardieu!" he exclaimed gruffly. "Keep your sword! I promise you I can look to my own safety." And in spite of Triboulet's remonstrance, he waved back the troopers and closed the door upon the plaisant and himself.

Outside the dwarf stormed and stamped. "The jester is desperate. It is the noble count who is a nonny. Open, fool-soldiers!"

This command not being obeyed by the men who guarded the entrance, the dwarf began to abuse them. A considerable interval elapsed; the hunchback, who dared not go into the room himself, compromised by kneeling before the keyhole; at the foot of the stairs stood the girl, her strained gaze fastened upon the door.

"They must be near the window," muttered Triboulet in a disappointed tone, rising. "What can they be about? Surely will he try to kill the commandant."

But even as he spoke the door was suddenly thrown open and the vicomte appeared on the threshold.

"Clear the hall!" he commanded sharply to the surprised soldiers. "If I mistake not," he went on, addressing the duke's jester, "your horses are at the door."

"You are going to let them go?" burst forth Triboulet.

"I trust you and this fair lady"—turning to the wondering girl, who now stood expectantly at the side of the foreign fool—"will not harbor this incident against our hospitality," went on the vicomte, without heeding the dwarf.

"The king will hang you!" exclaimed Triboulet, his face black with disappointment and rage, as he witnessed the plaisant and the jestress leave the tavern together. "Let them go and you must answer to the king. One is a heretic who threw down a cross; the other I charge with being a sorceress."

A terrible arraignment in those days, yet the vicomte was apparently deaf. Hat in hand, he waved them adieu; the steeds sprang forward, past the soldiers, and down the street.

"After them!" cried the dwarf to the troopers, "Dolts! Joltheads!"

Whereupon one of the men, angered at this baiting, reaching out with his iron boot, caught the dwarf such a sharp blow he staggered and fell, striking his head so violently he lay motionless on the walk. At the same time, far above, a body of troopers might have been seen issuing from the gates of the château and leisurely wending their way downward.

CHAPTER XXIV

AN ENCOUNTER AT THE BRIDGE

Some part of the interview with the commandant which had resulted in their release the jester told his companion as they sped down the sloping plain in the early silvery light which transformed the dew-drops and grassy moisture into veils of mist. Behind them the château was slowly fading from view; the town had already disappeared. Around them the singing of the birds, the cooing of the cushat doves and the buzzing of the bees, mingled in dreamy cadence. On each side stretched the plain which, washed by recent heavy rains, was now spangled with new-grown flowers; here, far apart in sequestered beauty; there, clustering companionably in a mass of color.

"Upon the strength of the letter from the emperor, the vicomte took the responsibility of allowing us to depart," explained the fool. "In it his Majesty referred to his message to the king, to the part played by him who took the place of the duke, and what he was pleased to term my services to Francis and himself."

So much the plaisant related, but he did not add that the commandant, with Triboulet's words in mind, had at first demurred about permitting the jestress to go. "Vrai Dieu!" that person had exclaimed. "If what the dwarf said be true? To cross the king!—and yet," he had added cynically, "it sounds most unlike. Did Aladdin flee from the genii of the lamp? Such a magician is Francis. Châteaux, gardens—'tis clearly an invention of Triboulet's!" And the fallacy of this conclusion the duke's plaisant had not sought to demonstrate.

Without question, the young girl listened, but when he had finished her features hardened. Intuitively she divined a gap in the narrative; herself! From the dwarf's slur to Caillette's gentle look of surprise constituted a natural span for reflection. And the duke's fool, seeing her face turn cold, attributed it, perhaps, to another reason. Her story recurred to him; she was no longer a nameless jestress; an immeasurable distance separated a mere plaisant from the survivor of one of the noblest, if most unfortunate, families of France. She had not answered the night before when he had addressed her as the daughter of the constable; motionless as a statue had she gazed after him; and, remembering the manner of their parting, he now looked at her curiously.

"All's well that ends well," he said, "but I must crave indulgence, Lady Jacqueline, for having brought you into such peril."

She flushed. "Do you persist in that foolishness?" she returned quickly.

"Do you deny the right to be so called?"

"Did I not tell you—the constable's daughter is dead?"

"To the world! But to the fool—may he not serve her?"

His face was expectant; his voice, light yet earnest. Her answer was half-sad, half-bright, as though her tragedy, like those acted dramas, had its less somber lines. And in the stage versions of those dark, mournful pieces were not the softer bits introduced with cap and bell? The fool's stick and the solemn march of irresistible and lowering destiny went hand in hand. Everywhere the tinkle of the tiny bells.

"Poor service!" she retorted. "A discredited mistress!"

"One I am minded for," he replied, a sudden flash in his eyes.

She looked away; her lips curved.

"For how long?" she said, half-mockingly, and touched her horse before he could reply.

What words had her action checked on his lips? A moment was he disconcerted, then riding after her, he smiled, thinking how once he had carelessly passed her by; how he had looked upon her but as a wilful child.

A child, forsooth! His pulses throbbed fast. Life had grown strangely sweet, as though from her look, when she had stood on the stairs, he had drawn new zest. To serve her seemed a happiness that drowned all other ills; a selfish bond of subordination. Her misfortunes dignified her; her worn gown was dearer in his eyes than courtly splendor; the disorder of her hair more becoming than nets of gold and coifs of jewels. He forgot their danger; the broad plain lay like a pleasure garden before them; fairer in natural beauty than Francis' conventional parks.

And she, too, had ceased to remember the dwarf's words, for the joy of youth is strong, and the sunshine and air were rarely intoxicating. There was a stirring rhythm in the movement of the steeds; noiselessly their hoofs beat upon the soft earth and tender mosses. The rains which elsewhere had flooded the lowlands here but enlivened the vernal freshness of the scene. The air was full of floating thistle-down; a cloud of insects dancing in the light, parted to let them pass.

At the sight of a bush, white with flowers, she uttered an exclamation of pleasure, and broke off a branch covered with fragrant blossoms, as they rode by. Out of the depths of this store-house of sweets a plundering

humming-bird flashed and vanished, a jewel from nature's crown! She held the branch to her face and he glanced at her covertly; she was all jestress again. The cadence of that measured motion shaped itself to an ancient lyric in keeping with the song of birds, the blue sky, and the wild roses.

"Hark! hark!

Pretty lark!

Little heedest thou my pain."

He bent his head listening; he could scarcely hear the words. Was it a sense of new security that moved her; the reaction of their narrow escape; the knowledge they were leaving the château and all danger behind them?

"Hark! hark!

Pretty lark!—"

Boom! Far in the distance sounded the discharge of a cannon—its iron voice the antithesis to the poet's dainty pastoral. As the report reverberated over the valley, from the grass innumerable insects arose; the din died away; the disturbed earth-dwellers sank back to earth again. The song ceased from the young girl's lips, and, gazing quickly back, she could just distinguish, above one of the parapets of the château, a wreath, already nearly dissolved in the blue of the sky. The jester, who had also turned in his saddle, met her look of inquiry.

"It sounds like a signal of some kind—a salute, perhaps," he said.

"Or a call to arms?" she suggested, and he made no answer. "It means—pursuit!"

Silent they rode on, but more rapidly. With pale face and composed mien she kept by his side; her resolute expression reassured him, while her glance said: "Do not fear for me." Gradually had they been descending from the higher slopes of the country of which the château-mount was the loftiest point and now were passing through the lower stretches of land.

Here, the highway ran above fields, inundated by recent rains, and marshes converted into shining lakes. Out of the water uprose a grove of trees, spectral-like; screaming wild-fowl skimmed the surface, or circled above. The pastoral peace of the meadows, garden of the wild flower and home of the song-bird, was replaced by a waste of desolation and wilderness. Long they dashed on through the loneliness of that land; a depressing flight—but more depressing than the abandoned and forlorn aspect of the scene was

the consciousness that their steeds had become road-worn and were unable to respond. Long, long, they continued this pace, a strained period of suspense, and then the fool drew rein.

"Look, Jacqueline," he said. "The river!"

Before them, fed by the rivulets from the distant hills, the foaming current threatened to overflow its banks. Already the rising waters touched the flimsy wooden structure that spanned the torrent. Contemplatively he regarded it, and then placing his hand for a moment on hers, said encouragingly:

"Perhaps, after all, we are borrowing trouble?"

She shook her head. "If I could but think it," she answered. Something seemed to rise in her throat. "A moment I forgot, and—was not unhappy! But now I feel as though the end was closing about us."

He tightened his grasp. "You are worn with fatigue; fanciful!" he replied.

"The end!" she repeated, passionately. "Yes; the end!" And threw off his hand. "Look!"

He followed her eyes. "Waving plumes!" he cried. "And drawing nearer! Come, Jacqueline! let us ride on!"

"How?" she answered, in a lifeless tone. "The bridge will not hold."

For answer he turned his horse to it; proceeded slowly across. It wavered and bent; her wide-opened eyes followed him; once she lifted her hand to her breast, and then became conscious he stood on the opposite bank, calling her to follow. She started; a strange smile was on her lips, and touching her horse sharply, she obeyed.

"Is it to death he has called me?" she asked herself.

In her ears sounded the swash and eddying of the current; she closed her eyes to keep from falling, when she felt a hand on the bridle, and in a moment had reached the opposite shore. The jester made no motion to remount, but remained at her horse's head, closely surveying the road they had traveled.

"Must we go on?" she said, mechanically.

"Only one of them can cross at a time," he answered, without stirring. "It is better to meet them here."

"Oh," she spoke up, "if the waters would only rise a little more and carry away the bridge."

He glanced quickly around him, weighing the slender chance for success if he made that last desperate stand, and then, grasping a loose plank, began using it as a lever against one of the weakened supports of the bridge. Soon the beam gave way, and the structure, now held but at the middle and one side, had already begun to sag, when from around the curve of the highway appeared Louis of Hochfels, and a dozen of his followers.

The free baron rode to the brim of the torrent, regarded the flood and the bridge, and stopped. He was mounted on a black Spanish barb whose glistening sides were flecked with foam; a cloak of cloth of gold fell from his brawny shoulders; his heavy, red face looked out from beneath a sombrero, fringed with the same metal. A gleam of grim recollection shone from his bloodshot eyes as they rested on the fool.

"Oh, there you are!" he shouted, with savage satisfaction. "Out of the frying-pan into the fire! Or rather—for you escaped the fagots at Notre Dame—out of the fire into the frying-pan!"

Above the tumult of the torrent his stentorian tones were plainly heard. Without response, the jester inserted the plank between the structure and the middle support. The other, perceiving his purpose, uttered an execration that was drowned by the current, and irresolutely regarded the means of communication between the two shores, obviously undetermined about trusting his great bulk to that fragile intermedium. Here was a temporary check on which he had not calculated. But if he demurred about crossing himself, the free baron did not long display the same infirmity of purpose regarding his followers.

"Over with you!" he cried angrily to them. "The lightest first! Fifty pistoles to the first across!" And then, calling out to the fool: "In half an hour, you, my fine wit-cracker, shall be hanging from a branch. As for the maid, she is a witch, I am told—we will test her with drowning."

Tempted by their leader's offer, one of the troopers, a lank, muscular-looking fellow, at once drove the spurs into his horse. Back and forth moved the lever in the hands of the jester; the soldier was midway on the bridge, when it sank suddenly to one side. A moment it acted as a dam, then bridge, horse and rider were swept away with a crash and carried downward with the driving flood. Vainly the trooper sought to turn his steed toward the shore; the debris from the structure soon swept him from his saddle. Striking out strongly, he succeeded in catching a trailing branch from a tree

on the bank, but the torrent gripped his body fiercely, and, after a desperate struggle, tore him away.

As his helpless follower disappeared, the free baron gave a brief command, and he and his troops posted rapidly down the bank. The young girl breathed a sigh of relief; her eyes were yet full of awe from the death struggle she had witnessed. Fascinated, her gaze had rested on the drowning wretch; the pale face, the look of terror; but now she was called to a realization of their own situation by the abrupt departure of the squad on the opposite shore.

"They have gone," she cried, in surprise, as the party vanished among the trees.

"But not far." The jester's glance was bent down the stream. "See, where the torrent broadens. They expect to find a fording place."

Once more they set forth; he knowing full well that the free baron and his men, accustomed to the mountain torrents, unbridled by the melting snows, would, in all likelihood, soon find a way to cross the freshet. His mind misgave him that he had loosened the bridge at all. Would it not have been better to force the conflict there, when he had the advantage of position? But right or wrong, he had made his choice and must abide by it.

To add to his discomfiture, his horse, which at first had lagged, now began to limp, and, as they proceeded, this lameness became more apparent. With a twinge of heart, he plied the spur more strongly, and the willing but broken creature responded as best it could. Again it hastened its pace, seeming in a measure to recover strength and endurance, then, without warning, lurched, fell to its knees and quickly rolled over on its side. Jacqueline glanced back; the animal lay motionless; the rider was vainly endeavoring to rise. Pale with apprehension she returned, and, dismounting, stood at the head of the prostrate animal. Determinedly the jester struggled, the perspiration standing on his brow in beads. At length, breathing hard, he rested his head on his elbow.

"Here am I caught to stay, Jacqueline!" he said. "The horse is dead. But you—you must still go on."

With clasped hands she stood looking down at him. She scarcely knew what he was saying; her mind seemed in a stupor; with apathetic eyes she gazed down the road. But the accident had happened in a little hollow, so that the outlook in either direction along the highway was restricted.

"My emperor is both chivalrous and noble," continued the plaisant, quickly. "Go to him. You must not wait here longer. I did not tell you, but I think the free baron will have no difficulty in crossing. You have no time to lose. Go; and—good-by!"

"But—he had a long way to ride—even if he could cross," she said slowly, passing her hand over her brow.

"Jacqueline!" he cried out, impatiently.

She made no motion to leave, and, reading in her face her determination, angered by his own helplessness, he strove violently to release himself, until wrenching his foot in his frantic efforts, he sank back with a groan. At that sound of pain, wrung from him in spite of his fortitude, all her seeming apathy vanished. With a low cry, she dropped on her knees in the road and swiftly took his head in her arms.

It was he, not the young girl, who spoke first. He forgot all peril—hers and his. He only knew her warm, young arms were about him; that her heart was throbbing wildly.

"Jacqueline!" he cried, passionately. "Jacqueline!" And threw an arm about her, drawing her closer, closer.

Did she hear him? She did not reply. Nor did she release him. She did not even look down. But he felt her bosom rising and falling faster than its wont.

"Jacqueline," he repeated, "are you listening?"

She stirred slightly; the pallor left her face. In her gaze shone a light difficult to divine—pity, tenderness, a warmer passion? Where had he seen it before? In the cell when he lay injured; in his waking dreams? It seemed the sudden dawn of the full beauty of her eyes; a half-remembered impression which now became real. Yet even as she looked down his face changed; his eager glance grew dark; he listened intently.

The sound of horses' hoofs beat upon the air.

"Jacqueline!—go!—there is yet time!"

Abruptly she arose. He held out his hand for a last quick pressure; a God-speed to this stanch maid-comrade of the motley.

"God keep you, mistress!"

Standing in the road, gazing up the hollow, she neither saw his hand nor caught his words of farewell. An expression of bewilderment had overspread her features; quickly she glanced in the opposite direction.

"See! see!" she exclaimed, excitedly.

But he was past response; overcome by pain, in a last desperate attempt to regain his feet, he had lost consciousness. As he fell back, above the hill in the direction she was looking, appeared the black plumes of a band of horsemen.

"No; they are not—"

Her glance rested on the jester, lying there motionless, and hastening to his side, she lifted his head and placed it in her lap. So the troopers of the Emperor Charles—a small squad of outriders—found her sitting in the road, her hair disordered about her, her face the whiter against that black shroud.

CHAPTER XXV

IN THE TENT OF THE EMPEROR

On an eminence commanding the surrounding country an unwonted spectacle that same day had presented itself to the astonished gaze of the workers in a neighboring vineyard. Gleaming with crimson and gold, a number of tents had appeared as by magic on the mount, the temporary encampment of a rich and numerous cavalcade. But it was not the splendent aspect of this unexpected bivouac itself so much as the colors and designs of the flags and banners floating above which aroused the wonderment of the tillers of the soil. Here gleamed no salamander, with its legend, "In fire am I nourished; in fire I die," but the less magniloquent and more dreaded coat of arms of the emperor, the royal rival and one-time jailer of the proud French monarch.

The sunlight, reflected from the golden tassels and ornamentation of the tents, threw a flaming menace over the valley, and the peasants in subdued tones talked of the sudden coming of the dreaded foeman. Mère de Dieu! what did it portend! Ventre Saint Gris! were they going to storm the fortresses of the king? Was an army following this formidable retinue of nobles, soldiers and servants?

Above, on the mount, as the sun climbed toward the meridian, was seated in one of the largest of the tents a man of resolute and stern mien who gazed reflectively toward the fertile plain outstretching in the distance. His grizzled hair told of the after-prime of life; he was simply, even plainly, dressed, although his garments were of fine material, and from his neck hung a heavy chain of gold. His doublet lacked the prolonged and grotesque peak, and was less puffed, slashed and banded than the coat worn by those gallants of the day who looked to Italy for the latest extravagances of fashion. His hat, lying carelessly on the table at his elbow, was devoid of aigrette, jewels or plume; a head-covering for the campaign rather than the court. Within reach of his hand stood a heavy golden goblet of massive German workmanship, the solid character of which contrasted with the drinking vessels after Cellini's patterns affected by Francis. This he raised to his lips, drank deeply, replaced the goblet on the table, and said as much to himself as to those around him:

"A fair land, this of our brother! Small wonder he likes to play the host, even to his enemies. We may conquer him on the ensanguined field, but he conquers us—or Henry of England!—on a field of cloth of gold!"

"But for your Majesty to put yourself in the king's power?" ventured a courtier, who wore a begemmed torsade and a cloak of Genoa velvet.

The monarch leaned back in his great chair and his face grew harsh. As he sat there musing, his virility and iron figure gave him rather the appearance of the soldier than the emperor. This impression his surroundings further emphasized, for the walls of the tent were covered, not with the gorgeous-colored Gobelins of the pleasure-loving French, but with severe and stately tapestries from his native Flanders, depicting in somber shades various scenes of martial triumph. When he raised his head he cast a look of ominous displeasure upon the last speaker.

"Had he not once the English king beneath his roof?" answered the monarch. "At Amboise, where we visited Francis some years ago, was there any restraint put upon us?"

A grim smile crossed his features at the recollection of the gorgeous fêtes in his honor on that other occasion. Perhaps, too, he thought of the excitements held out by those servitors of the king, the frail and fair ladies of the court, for he added:

"Saints et saintes! 'twas a palace of pleasure, not a dungeon, he prepared for us. But enough of this! It is time we rode on. Let the cavalcade, with the tents, follow behind."

"Think you, your Majesty, if the princess be not yet married to the bastard, she is like to espouse the true duke?" asked the courtier, as a soldier left the tent to carry out the orders of the emperor.

Charles arose abruptly. "Of a surety! He must have loved her greatly, else—"

The clattering of hoofs, drawing nearer, interrupted the emperor's ruminations, and, wheeling sharply, he gazed without. A band of horsemen appeared on the mount.

"The outriders!" he said in surprise. "Why have they returned?"

"They are bearing some one on a litter," answered the attendant noble, "and—cap de Dieu—there is a woman with them!"

As the troops approached, the emperor strode forward. Out in the sunlight his face appeared older, more careworn, but although it cost him an effort to walk, his step was unfaltering. A moment he surveyed the men with peremptory glance, and then, casting one look at their burden, uttered an

exclamation. His surprise, however, was of short duration. At once his features resumed their customary rigor.

"What does this mean?" he asked, shortly, addressing the leader of the soldiers. "Is he badly hurt?"

"That I can not say, your Majesty," replied the man. "A horse fell upon his leg, which is badly bruised, and there may be other injuries."

"Where did you find him?" continued the emperor, still regarding the pale face of the plaisant.

"Not far from here, your Majesty. The woman was sitting in the road, holding his head."

Charles' glance swiftly sought the jestress and then returned.

"They were being pursued, for shortly after we came a squad of men appeared from the opposite direction. When they saw us they fled. The woman insisted upon being brought here, when she learned of your Majesty's presence."

"Take the injured man into the next tent and see he has every care. As for the woman, I will speak with her alone."

"Your Majesty's orders to break camp—" began the courtier.

"We have changed our mind and will remain here for the present." And the emperor, without further words, turned and reëntered his pavilion.

With his hands behind him, he stood thoughtfully leaning against a table; his countenance had become somber, morose. The twinges of pain from a disease which afterward caused him to abdicate the throne and relinquish all power and worldly vanities for a life of religious meditation began to make themselves felt. Love—ambition—what were they? The perishable flesh—was it the all-in-all? Those sudden pangs of the body seemed like over-forward confessors abruptly admonishing him.

The jester and the woman—Francis and the princess—what had they become to him now? Figures in an intangible, illusory dream. Deeply religious, repentant, perhaps, for past misdeeds at such a moment as this, the soldier-emperor stood before a silver crucifix.

"Credo in sanctum," he murmured, with contrite glance. "How repugnant is human glory! to conquer the earth; to barter what is immortal! Carnis resurrectionem—"

A shadow fell across the tapestry, and glancing from the blessed symbol, he saw before him, kneeling on the rug, the figure of a woman. For her it was an inauspicious interruption. With almost a frown, Charles, recalled from an absorbing period of oblation and self-examination, surveyed the young girl. The reflection of dark colors from the hangings and tapestries softened the pallor of her face; her hair hung about her in disorder; her figure, though meanly garbed, was replete with youth and grace. Silent she continued in the posture of a suppliant.

"Well?" said the monarch finally, in a harsh voice.

Slowly she lifted her head; her dark eyes rested on the ruler steadfastly, fearlessly. "Your Majesty commanded my presence," she answered.

"Who are you?" he asked coldly.

"I am called Jacqueline; my father was the Constable of Dubrois."

Incredulity replaced every other emotion on the emperor's features, and, approaching her, he gazed attentively into the countenance she so frankly uplifted. With calmness she bore that piercing scrutiny; his dark, troubled soul, looking out of his keen gray eyes, met an equally lofty spirit.

"The Constable of Dubrois! You, his daughter!" he repeated.

His thoughts swiftly pierced the shadows of the past; that umbrageous past, darkened with war and carnage; the memory of triumphs; the bitterness of defeats! And studying her eyes, her face, as in a vision he recalled the features, the bearing, of him who had held himself an equal to his old rival, Francis. A red spot rose to his cheek as he reviewed the martial, combative days; the game of arms he had played so often with Francis—and won! Not always by daring, or courage—rather by sagacity, clear-headedness, more potent than any other force!

But a pang of bodily suffering reminded him of the present and its ills, and the vainglory of brief exultation faded as quickly as it had assailed him; involuntarily his glance sought the sacred emblem of intercession. When he regarded her once more his face had resumed its severe, uncompromising aspect.

"The constable was a proud, haughty man," he said, brusquely. "Yea, over-proud, in fact. You know why he fled to me?"

"Yes, Sire," she answered, flushing resentfully.

"To persuade me to espouse his cause against the king. Many times have my good brother, Francis, and myself gone to war," he added, reflectively and not without a certain complacency, "but then were we engaged in troubles in the east; to keep the Mohammedans from overrunning our Christian land. How could I oblige the constable by fighting the heathen and the believers in the gospel in one breath? Your father—for I am ready to believe him such, by the evidence of your face, and, especially, your eyes—accused me of little faith. But I had either to desert him, or Europe. His cause was lost; 'twas the fortune of war; the fate of great families becomes subservient to that of nations."

He spoke as if rather presenting the case to himself than to her; as though he sought to analyze his own action through the medium of time and the trend of larger events. Attentively she watched him with deep, serious eyes, and, catching her almost accusing look and knowing how, perhaps, he shuffled with history, his brow grew darker; he was visibly annoyed at her—his own conscience—he knew not what!

"I did not complain, your Majesty," she said proudly.

Her answer surprised him. Again he observed her attire; the pallor of her face; the dark circles beneath her eyes. Grimly he marked these signs of poverty; those marks of the weariness and privations she had undergone.

"Was it not your intention to seek me? To beg an asylum, perhaps?" he went on, less sternly.

"Not to beg, your Majesty! To ask, yes! But now—not that!"

"Vrai Dieu!" muttered Charles. "There is the father over again! It is strange this maiden clothed almost in rags should claim such illustrious parentage," he continued to himself, as he walked restlessly to and fro. "It is more strange I ask no other proofs than herself—the evidence of my eyes! Where did you come from?" he added, aloud, pausing before her. "The court of Francis?"

"Yes, Sire."

"Why did you leave the king?"

"Why—because—" Her hands clenched. The gray eyes continued to probe her. "Because I hate him!"

The emperor's face relaxed; a gleam of humor shone in his glance. "Hate him whom so many of your sex love?" he replied.

Through her tresses he saw her face turn red; passionately she arose. "With your Majesty's permission, I will go."

"Go?" he said abruptly. "Where can you go? You are somewhat quick of temper, like—. Have I refused you aught? I could not serve your father," he continued, taking her hand, and, not ungently, detaining her, "but I may welcome his daughter—though necessity, the ruler of kings, made me helpless in his behalf!"

As in a flash her resentment faded. Half-paternally, half-severely, he surveyed her.

"Sit down here," he went on, indicating a low stool. "You are weary and need refreshment."

Silent she obeyed, and the emperor, touching a bell, gave a low command to the servitor who appeared. In a few moments meat, fruits and wine were set before her, and Charles, from his point of vantage—no throne of gold, but a chair lined with Cordovan leather, watched her partake. The pains had again left him; the monk gave way to the ruler; he thought of no more phrases of the Credo, but with impassive face listened to her story, or as much as she cared to relate. When she had finished, for some time he offered no comment.

"A strange tale," he said finally. "But what will our nobles do when ladies take mere fools for knight-errants?"

"He is no mere fool!" she spoke up, impulsively.

The emperor shot a quick look at her from beneath his lowering brows.

"I mean—he is brave—and has protected me many times," she explained in some confusion.

"And so you, knowing what you were, remained—with a poor jester—a clown—rather than leave him to his fate?" continued Charles, inexorably, recalling the words of the outriders.

Her face became paler, but she held her head more proudly; the spirit of the jestress sprang to her lips, "It is only kings, Sire, who fear to cling to a forlorn cause!"

His eyes grew dark and gloomy; morosely he bent his gaze upon her. No one had ever before dared to speak to him like that, for Charles had no love for jesters, and kept none in his court. Unsparing, iron-handed, he had gone his way. But, perhaps, in her very fearlessness he recognized a touch of his

own inflexible nature. At any rate, his sternness soon gave way to an expression of melancholy.

"God alone knows the hearts of monarchs!" he said, somberly, and directed his glance toward the crucifix.

Moved by his unexpected leniency and the aspect of his cheerlessness, she immediately repented of her response. He looked so old, and melancholy, this great monarch. When he again turned to her his face and manner expressed no further cognizance of her reply.

"You need rest," he said, "and shall have a tent to yourself. Now go!" he continued, placing his hand for a moment, not unkindly, on her head. "I shall give orders for your entertainment. It will be rough hospitality, but—you are used to that. I am not sorry, child, you hate our brother Francis, if it has driven you to our court."

CHAPTER XXVI

THE DEBT OF NATURE

Although the daughter of the constable received every attention commensurate with the cheer of the camp, the day passed but slowly. With more or less interest she viewed the diversified group of soldiers, drawn by Charles from the various countries over which he ruled: the brawny troops from Flanders; the alert-looking guards, recruited from the mountains of Spain; the men of Friedwald, with muscles tough as the fibers of the fir in their native forests. Even the Orient—suggestive of many campaigns!—had been drawn upon, and the bright-garbed olive-skinned attendants, moving among the tents of purple or crimson, blended picturesquely with the more solid masses of color.

For the Flemish soldiery, who had brought the fool and herself to the camp, the young girl had a nod and a word, but it was the men of Friedwald who especially attracted her attention, and unconsciously she found herself picturing the land that had fostered this stalwart and rough soldiery. A rocky, rugged region, surely; with vast forests, unbroken brush! Yonder armorer, polishing a joint of steel, seemed like a survivor of that primeval epoch when the trees were roofs and the ground the universal bed. Once or twice she passed him, curiously noting his great beard and giant-like limbs. But he minded her not, and this, perhaps, gave her courage to pause.

"What sort of country is Friedwald?" she said, abruptly.

"Wild," he answered.

"Is the duke liked?" she went on.

"Yes."

"Do you know his—jester?"

"No."

For all the information he would volunteer, the man might have been Doctor Rabelais' model for laconicism, and a moment she stood there with a slight frown. Then she gazed at him meditatively; tap! tap! went the tiny hammer in the mighty hand, and, laughing softly, she turned. These men of Friedwald were not unpleasing in her eyes.

Twice had she approached the tent wherein lay the fool, only to learn that the emperor was with the duke's plaisant. "A slight relapse of fever," had said the Italian leech, as he blocked the entrance and stared at her with

wicked, twinkling eyes. She need be under no apprehension, he had added; but to her quick fancy his glance said: "A maid wandering with a fool!"

Apprehension? No; it could not be that she felt but a new sense of loneliness; of that isolation which contact with strange faces emphasized. What had come over her? she asked herself. She who had been so self-sufficient; whose nature now seemed filled with sudden yearnings and restlessness, impatience—she knew not what. She who thought she had partaken so abundantly of life's cup abruptly discovered renewed sources for disquietude. With welling heart she watched the sun go down; the glory of the widely-radiating hues give way to the pall of night. Upon her young shoulders the mantle of darkness seemed to rest so heavily she bowed her head in her hands.

"A maid and a fool! Ah, foolish maid!" whispered the wanton breeze.

The pale light of the stars played upon her, and the dews fell, until involuntarily shivering with the cold, she arose. As she walked by the emperor's quarters she noticed a figure silhouetted on the canvas walls; to and fro the shadow moved, shapeless, grotesque, yet eloquent of life's vexation of spirit. Turning into her own tent, the jestress lighted the wick of a silver lamp; a faint aroma of perfume swept through the air. It seemed to soothe her—or was it but weariness?—and shortly she threw herself on the silken couch and sank to dreamless slumber.

When she awoke, the bright-hued dome of the tent was aglow in the morning sun; the reflected radiance bathed her face and form; her heaviness of heart had taken wings. The little lamp was still burning, but the fresh fragrance of dawn had replaced the subtile odor of the oriental essence. Upon the rug a single streak of sunshine was creeping toward her. In the brazier which had warmed her tent the glowing bark and cinnamon had turned to cold, white ash.

Through the girl's veins the blood coursed rapidly; a few moments she lay in the rosy effulgence, restfully conscious that danger had fled and that she was bulwarked by the emperor's favor, when a sudden thought broke upon this half-wakeful mood, and caused her to spring, all alert, from her couch. To dress, with her had never been a matter of great duration. The hair of the joculatrix naturally rippled into such waves as were the envy of the court ladies; her supple fingers adjusted garment after garment with swift precision, while her figure needed no device to lend grace to the investment.

Soon, therefore, had she left her tent, making her way through the awakening camp. In the royal kitchen the cook was bending over his fires,

while an assistant mixed a beverage of barley-water, yolks of eggs and senna wine for Charles when he should become aroused. Those courtiers, already astir, cast many glances in the girl's direction, as she moved toward the tent of the fool.

But if these gallants were sedulous, she was correspondingly indifferent. Anxiety or loyalty—that stanchness of heart which braved even the ironical eyes of the black-robed master of medicine—drove her again to the ailing jester's tent, and, remembering how she had ridden into camp—and into the august emperor's favor—these fondlings of fortune looked significantly from one to the other.

"A jot less fever, solicitous maid," said the leech in answer to the inquiries of the jestress, and she endured the glance for the news, although the former sent her away with her face aflame.

"An the leech let her in, he'd soon have to let the patient out," spoke up a gallant. "Her eyes are a sovereign remedy, where bolus, pills and all vile potions might fail."

"If this be a sample of Francis' damsels, I care not how long we are in reaching the Low Countries," answered a second.

To this the first replied in kind, but soon had these gallants matters of more serious moment to divert them, for it began to be whispered about that Louis of Hochfels had determined to push forward. The unwonted activity in the camp ere long gave credence to the rumor; the troopers commenced looking to their weapons; squires hurried here and there, while near the tents stood the horses, saddled and bridled, undergoing the scrutiny of the grooms.

Some time, however, elapsed before the emperor himself appeared. Nothing in the bead-roll, or devotional offering of the morning, had he overlooked; the divers dishes that followed had been scrupulously partaken of, and then only—as a man not to be hurried from the altar or the table—had he emerged from his tent. His glance mechanically swept the camp, noting the bustle and stir, the absence of disorder, and finally rested on the girl. For a moment, from his look, it seemed he might have forgotten her, and she who had involuntarily turned to him so solicitously, on a sudden felt chilled, as confronted by a mask. His voice, when at length he spoke, was hard, dry, matter-of-fact, and it was Jacqueline whom he addressed.

"You slept well?"

"Yes, Sire," she answered.

"And have already been to the fool's tent, I doubt not."

The mask became half-quizzical, half-friendly, as her cheeks mantled beneath his regard. Was it but quiet avengement against a jestress whose tongue had been unsparing enough, even to him, the day before? Certes, here stood now only a rosy maid, robbed of her spirit; or a folle, struck witless, and Charles' face softened, but immediately grew stern, as his mind abruptly passed from wandering jestress and fleeing fool to matters of more moment.

Under vow to the Virgin, the emperor had announced he would not draw sword himself that day, but, seated beneath a canopy of velvet, overlooking the valley, he so far compromised with conscience as personally to direct the preparations for the conflict. On his sable throne, surrounded by funereal hangings, how white and furrowed, how harassed with many cares, he appeared in the glare of the morn to the young girl! Was this he who held nearly all Europe in his palm? who between martial commands talked of Holy Orders, the Apostolic See and the Seven Sacraments to his priestly confessor?

And from aloof she studied him, with new doubts and misgiving, her thoughts running fast; and anon bent her eyes to the hill on the other side of the valley. In her condition of mind, confused as before a crisis, it was a distinct relief when toward noon word was brought that the free baron was approaching. Soon, not far distant, the cortège of Louis of Hochfels was seen; at the front, flashing helmets and breastplates; behind, a cavalcade of ladies on horseback and litters, above which floated many flags and banners.

Would he come on; would he turn back? Many opinions were rife.

"Oh," cried a page with golden hair, "there will be no battle after all."

And truly, confronted by the aspect of the emperor's camp, the marauder had at first hesitated; but if the dangers before him were great, those behind were greater. Accordingly, leaving the cavalcade of the princess, her maids and attendants, the free baron of Hochfels, surrounded by his own trusted troops, dashed forward arrogantly into the valley, bent upon sweeping aside even the opposition of Charles himself.

"Yonder's a daring knave, your Majesty," with some perturbation observed the prelate who stood near the emperor's chair.

"Certes, he tilts at fame, or death, with a bold lance," replied Charles. "Would that Robert of Friedwald were there to cry him quits."

While thus he spoke, as calm as though secluded in one of his monastery retreats, weighing the affairs of state, nearer and nearer drew the soldiers of the bastard of Pfalz-Urfeld; roughly calculating, a force numerically as strong as the emperor's own guard.

The young girl, her face now white and drawn, watched the approaching band. Would Charles never give the signal? Imperturbable sat the mounted troopers of the emperor, awaiting the word of command. At length, when her breath began to come fast and sharp, Charles raised his arm. In a solid, steady body, his men swept onward. The girl strove to look away, but could not.

Both bands, gaining in momentum, met with a crash. That nice symmetry of form and orderliness of movement was succeeded by a tangle of men and horses; the bristling array of lances had vanished, and swords and weapons for hand-to-hand warfare threw a play of light amid the jumble of troops and steeds, flags and banners. With sword red from carnage, Louis of Hochfels drew his men around him, hurling them against the firm front of Charles' veterans. It was the crucial moment; the turning point in a struggle that could not be prolonged, but would be rather sharp, short and decisive. If his men failed at the onset, all was lost; if they gained but a little ascendancy now, their mastery of the field became fairly assured. Great would be the reward for success; the fruits of victory—the emperor himself. And savagely the free baron cut down a stalwart trooper; his blade pierced the throat of another.

"Clear the way to Charles!" he cried, exultantly. "He is our guerdon."

So terrible that rush, the guard of Spain on the right and the troops of Flanders on the left began to give way; only the men of Friedwald stood, but with the breaking of the forces on each side it was inevitable they, too, must soon be overwhelmed. Involuntarily, as the quick eye of the emperor detected this sign of impending disaster, he half-started from his chair. His hand sought his side; in his eyes shone a steely light. The prelate quickly crossed himself and raised his head as if in prayer.

"The penance, Sire," he murmured, but his voice trembled.

Mechanically Charles replaced his blade. "Yea; better a kingdom lost," he muttered, "than a broken vow."

Yet, after so many battles won in the field and Diet; after titanic contests with kings in Christendom, and Solyman in the east, to fall, by the mockery of fate, into the grasp of a thieving mountain rifler—

"Ambition! power! we sow but the sand," whispered satiety.

"Vainglory is a sleeveless errand," murmured the spirit of the flagellant.

Yet he gazed half-fiercely at his priestly adviser, when suddenly his gloomy eye brightened; the inutility of ambition was forgotten; unconsciously he clasped the arm of the joculatrix, who had drawn near. His grip was like a gauntlet; even in her tense, strained mood she winced.

"The fight is not yet lost!" he exclaimed. As he spoke the figure of a knight, fully armed, who had made his way through the avenue of tents, was seen swiftly descending the hill. Upon his strong Arabian steed, the rider's appearance and bearing signaled him as a soldier apart from the rank and file of the guard. His coat-of-arms, that of the house of Friedwald, was richly emblazoned upon the housings of his courser. Whence had he come? The attendants and equerries had not seen him in the camp. Only the taciturn armorer of Friedwald looked complacently after him, stroking his great beard, as one well satisfied. As this late-comer approached the scene of strife the flanks of the guard were wavering yet more perilously.

"A miracle, Sire!" cried the prelate.

"But one that partakes more of earth than Heaven," retorted Charles, with ready irony.

"Who is he, Sire?" breathlessly asked the young girl. At her feet whimpered the blue-eyed page, holding to her skirt, all his courage gone.

But ere he could answer—if he had seen fit to do so—from below, out of the vortex, came the clamorous shouts:

"The duke! The duke!"

The master of the mountain pass heard also, and felt at that moment a sudden thrill of premonition. The guerdon; the quittance; could it be possible after all, the end was not far? He could not believe it, yet a paroxysm of fury seized him; his strength became redoubled; wherever his sword touched a trooper fell.

But like a wave, recovering from the recoil, the soldiers of Friedwald broke upon his doomed band with a force manifold augmented; broke and carried the flanks with it, for the assaulting parties to the right and left were dismayed by the strength unexpectedly hurled against the center. The bulky Flemish, the lithe Spaniard, the lofty trooper of Friedwald, overflowed the shattered line of the marauders.

"Duke Robert!" and "Friedwald!" shouted the Austrian band.

"Cowards! Would you give way?" cried the free baron, striking among them. "Fools! Better the sword than the rope. Come!"

But in his frenzied efforts to rally his men the master of Hochfels found himself face to face with the leader of the already victorious troops. At the sight of him the bastard paused; his breast rose and fell with his labored breathing; his sword was dyed red, also his arms, his clothes; from his forehead the blood ran down over his beard. His eyes rolled like those of an animal; he seemed something inhuman; an incarnation of baffled purpose.

"If it is reprisal you want, Sir Duke, you shall have it," he panted.

"Reprisal!" exclaimed Robert of Friedwald, scornfully. "The best you can offer is your life."

And with that they closed. Evading the strokes of his more bulky antagonist, the younger man's sword repeatedly sought the vulnerable part of the other's armor. The free baron's strength became exhausted; his blows rang harmlessly, or struck the empty air.

A sensation of pain admonished him of his own disability. About him his band had melted away; doggedly had they given up their lives beneath sword, mace and poniard. The ground was strewn with the slain; riderless horses were galloping up the road. The free baron breathed yet harder; before his eyes he seemed to see only blood.

Of what avail had been his efforts? He had won the princess, but how brief had been his triumphs! With a belief that was almost superstition, he had imagined his destiny lay thronewards. But the curse of his birth had been a ban to his efforts; the bitterness of defeat smote him. He knew he was falling; his nerveless hand loosened his blade.

"I am sped!" he cried; "sped!" and released his hold, while the tide of conflict appeared abruptly to sweep away.

As he struck the earth an ornament that he had worn about his neck became unfastened and dropped to the ground. But once he moved; to raise himself on his elbow.

"The hazard of the die!" he muttered, striving to see with eyes that were growing blind. A rush of blood interrupted him, he fell back, straightened out, and stirred no more.

Now had the din of strife ceased altogether, when descending the slope appeared a cavalcade, at the head of which rode a lady on a white palfrey, followed by several maids and guarded by an escort of soldiers who wore the king's own colors. A stricken procession it seemed as it drew near, the faces of the women white with fear; the gay attire and gorgeous trappings—a mockery on that ensanguined arena.

Proudly proceeded the lady on the white horse, although in her eyes shone a look of dread. It was an age when women were accustomed to scenes of bloodshed, inured to conflicts in the lists; yet she shuddered as her palfrey picked its way across that field. At the near side of the hollow her glance singled out a motionless figure among those lying where they had fallen, a thick-set man, whose face was upturned to the sky. One look into those glassy eyes, so unresponsive to her own, and she quickly dismounted and fell on her knees beside the recumbent form. She took one of the cold hands in hers, but dropped it with a scream.

"Dead!" she cried; "dead!"

The lady stared at that terribly repulsive face. For some moments she seemed dazed; sat there dully, the onlookers forbearing to disturb her. Then her gaze encountered that of him who had slain the free baron and she sprang to her feet. On her features an expression of bewilderment had been followed by one of recognition.

"The duke's fool!" she exclaimed wildly. "He is dead, and you have killed him! The fool has murdered his master."

"It is true he is dead," answered the other, leaning heavily on his sword and surveying the inanimate form, "but he was no master of mine."

"That, Madame la Princesse, we will also affirm," broke in an austere voice.

Behind them rode the emperor, a dark figure among those bright gowns and golden trappings, the saddle cloth and adornments of his steed somber as his own garments. As he spoke he waved back the cavalcade, and, in obedience to the gesture, the ladies, soldiers and attendants withdrew to a discreet distance. Bitterly the princess surveyed the monarch; overwrought, a torrent of reproaches sprang from her lips.

"Why has your Majesty made war on my lord? Why have you countenanced his enemies and harbored his murderers?" And then, drawing her figure to its full height, her tawny hair falling in a cloud about her shoulders: "Be sure, Sire, my kinsman, the king, will know how to avenge my wrongs."

"He can not, Madam," answered Charles coldly. "They are already avenged."

"Already avenged!" she exclaimed, with her gaze upon the prostrate figure.

"Yes, Madam. For he who hath injured you has paid the extreme penalty."

"He who was my husband has been foully murdered!" she retorted, vehemently. "What had the Duke of Friedwald done to bring upon himself your Majesty's displeasure?"

"Nothing," answered the emperor, more gently.

"Nothing! And yet he lies there—dead!"

"He who lies before you is not the duke, but Louis of Hochfels, the bastard of Pfalz-Urfeld."

"Ah," she cried, excitedly, "I see you have been listening to the false fool, his murderer."

An expression of annoyance appeared on the emperor's face. He liked not to be crossed at any time by any one.

"You have well called him the false fool, Madam," said Charles, curtly, "for he is no true fool."

"And yet he rode with your troops!"

"To redeem his honor, Madam."

"His honor!"

With a scornful face she approached nearer to the monarch.

"His honor! In God's name, what mean you?"

"That the false fool, Madam, is himself the Duke of Friedwald!"

CHAPTER XXVII

A MAID OF FRANCE

"The Duke of Friedwald!"

It was not the princess who thus exclaimed, but Jacqueline. Charles had spoken loudly, and, drawn irresistibly to the scene, she had caught his significant words at the moment she recognized, in his brave accoutrements, him whom she had known as the duke's fool.

When she had heard, above the din of the fray, the cries with which the new-comer had been greeted, no suspicion of his identity had crossed her mind. She had wondered, been puzzled at the unexpected appearance of Robert, Duke of Friedwald, but that he and the ailing fool were one and the same was wide from her field of speculation. In amazement, she regarded the knight who had turned the tide of conflict, and then started, noticing the colors he wore, a paltry yellow ribbon on his arm, the badge of her office. Much she had not understood now appeared plain. His assurance in Fools' hall; his reckless daring; his skill with the sword. He was a soldier, not a jester; a lord, not a lord's servant.

Lost in no less wonder, the princess gazed from the free baron to Charles, and back again to the lifeless form. Stooping, she looked steadfastly into the face, as though she would read its secret. Perhaps, too, as she studied those features, piece by piece she patched together the scenes of the past. Her own countenance began to harden, as though some part of that mask of death had fallen upon her, and when she glanced once more at the emperor they saw she no longer doubted. With forced self-control, she turned to the emperor.

"Doubtless, it is some brave pastime," she said to Charles. "Will your Majesty deign to explain?"

"Nay," answered the emperor, dryly; "that thankless task I'll leave to him who played the fool."

Uncovering, the Duke of Friedwald approached. The excitement of the contest over, his pallid features marked the effects of his recent injuries, the physical strain under which he had labored. Her cold eyes swept over him haughtily, inquiringly.

"For the part I have played, Madam," he said, "I ask your forbearance. If we both labored under a delusion, I have only regret—"

"Regret!" Was it an outburst of grief, or wounded pride? He flushed, but continued firmly:

"Madame la Princesse, when first a marriage was proposed between us I was younger in experience if not in years than I am now; more used to the bivouac or hunters' camps than courts. And woman—" he smiled—"well, she was a vague ideal. At times, she came to me when sleeping before the huntsman's fire in the solitudes of the forest; again, was reflected from the pages of classic lore. She seemed a part of the woods and the streams, for by ancient art had she not been turned into trees and running brooks? So she whispered in the boughs and murmured among the rushes. Mere Schwärmerei. Do you care to hear? 'Tis the only defense I can offer."

Her contemptuous blue eyes remained fastened on him; she disdained to answer.

"It was a dreamer from brake and copse who went in the disguise of a jester to be near her; to win her for himself—and then, declare his identity. Well may you look scornful. Love!—it is not such a romantic quality—at court. A momentary pastime, perhaps, but—a deep passion—a passion stronger than rank, than death, than all—"

Above the face of her whom he addressed his glance rested upon Jacqueline, and he paused. The princess could but note, and a derisive expression crept about her mouth.

"Once I would have told you all," he resumed. "That night—when you were Lady of the Lists. But—"

He broke off abruptly, wishing to spare her the bitter memory of her own acts. Did she remember that day, when she had been queen of the chaplet? When she had crowned him whom now death and dishonor had overtaken?

"The rest, Madam, you know—save this." And stooping, he picked up the ornament that had dropped from Louis of Hochfels' neck. "Here, Princess, is the miniature you sent me. He, who used you so ill, stole it from me in prison; through it, he recognized the fool for the duke; with an assassin's blow he struck me down."

A moment he looked at that fair painted semblance. Did it recall the past too vividly? His face showed no pain; only tranquillity. His eye was rather that of a connoisseur than a lover. He smiled gently; then held it to her.

Mechanically she let the portrait slip through her fingers, and it fell to the moistened grass near the form of him who had wedded her. Then she drew back her dress so that it might not touch the body at her feet.

"Have I your Majesty's permission to withdraw?" she said, coldly.

"If you will not accept our poor escort to the king," answered Charles.

"My ladies and myself will dispense with so much honor, Sire," she returned.

"Such service as we can command is at your disposal, Madam," he repeated.

"It is not far distant to the château, Sire."

"As you will," said the emperor.

With no further word she bowed deeply, turned, and slowly retracing her steps, mounted her horse, and rode away, followed by her maids and the troopers of France.

As she disappeared, without one backward glance, the duke gazed quickly toward the spot where Jacqueline had been standing. He remembered the young girl had heard his story; he had caught her eyes upon him while he was telling it; very deep, serious, judicial, they seemed. Were they weighing his past infatuation for the princess; holding the scales to his acts? Swiftly he turned to her now, but she had vanished. Save for rough nurses, companions in arms, moving here and there among the wounded, he and the emperor stood alone. In the bushes a bird which had left a nest of fledglings returned and caroled among the boughs; a clarifying melody after the mad passions of the day. The elder man noted the direction of the duke's glance, the yellow ribbon on his arm.

"So it was a jestress, not a princess you found, thou dreamer," he said, half-ironically.

"The daughter of the Constable of Dubrois, Sire," was the reply.

The emperor nodded. "The family colors have changed," he observed dryly.

"With fortune, Sire."

"Truly," said Charles, "fortune is a jestress. She had like to play on us this day. But your fever?" he added, abruptly, setting his horse's head toward camp.

"Is gone, Sire," answered the duke, riding by his side.

"And your injuries?"

"Were so slight they are forgotten."

"Then is the breath of battle better medicine than nostrum or salve. In youth, 'tis the sword-point; in age, turn we to the hilt-cross. But this maid—have you won her?"

The young man changed color. "Won her, Sire?" he replied. "That I know not—no word has passed—"

"No word," said the emperor, doubtingly. "A knight-errant and a castleless maid!"

The duke vouchsafed no answer.

"Humph!" added Charles. "Thus do our plans come to naught. If you got her, and wore her, what end would be served?"

"No end of state, perhaps, Sire."

"Why," observed the monarch, "the state and the faith—what else is there? But go your way. How smooth it may be no man can tell."

"Is the road like to be rougher than it has been, Sire?"

"The maid belongs to France," answered Charles, "and France belongs to the king."

"The king!" exclaimed the duke, fiercely.

Involuntarily had they drawn rein in the shade of a tiny thicket overlooking the valley. Even from this slight exercise, bowed and weary appeared the emperor's form. The hand which controlled his steed trembled, but the lines of his face spoke of unweakened sinew of spirit, the iron grip of a will that only death might loosen.

"The king!" repeated the young man. "He is no king of mine, nor hers. To you, Sire, only, I owe allegiance, or my life, at your need."

A gentler expression softened the emperor's features, as a gleam of sunshine forces itself into the somberest forest depths.

"We have had our need," he said. "Not long since."

His glance swept the outlook below. "Heaven watches over monarchs," he added, turning a keen, satirical look on the other, "but through the vigilance of our earthly servitors."

The duke's response was interrupted by the appearance below of a horseman, covered with dust, riding toward them, and urging his weary steed up the incline with spur and voice. Deliberately the monarch surveyed the new-comer.

"What make you of yonder fellow?" he said. "He is not of the guard, nor of the bastard's following."

"His housings are the color of France, Sire."

"Then can I make a shrewd guess of his purpose," observed the monarch.

As he spoke the horseman drew nearer and a moment later had stopped before the emperor.

"A message from the king, Sire!" exclaimed the man, dismounting and kneeling to present a formidable-looking document, with a great disk of lead through which a silken string was drawn.

Breaking the seal, the emperor opened the missive. "It is well," he said at length, folding the parchment. "The king was even on his way to the château to await our coming, when he met Caillette and received our communication. Go you to the camp"—to the messenger—"where we shall presently return." And as the man rode away: "The king begs we will continue our journey at our leisure," he added, "and announces he will receive us at the château."

"And have I your permission to return to Friedwald, Sire?" asked the other in a low voice.

"Alone?"

"Nay; I would conduct the constable's daughter there to safety."

"And thus needlessly court Francis' resentment? Not yet."

The young man said no word, but his face hardened.

"Tut!" said the emperor, dryly, although not unkindly. "Where's fealty now? Fine words; fine words! A slender chit of a maid, forsooth. Without lands, without dowry; with naught—save herself."

"Is she not enough, Sire?"

"Francis is more easily disarmed in his own castle by his own hospitality than in the battle-field," observed Charles, without replying to this question. "In field have we conquered him; in palace hath he conquered himself, and our friendship. Therefore you and the maid return in our train to the king's court."

"At your order, Sire."

But the young man's voice was cold, ominous.

CHAPTER XXVIII

THE FAVORITE IS ALARMED

Thus it befell that both Robert of Friedwald and Jacqueline accompanied the emperor to the little town, the scene of their late adventures, and that they who had been fool and joculatrix rode once more through the street they had ne'er expected to see again. The flags were flying; cannon boomed; they advanced beneath wreaths of roses, the way paved with flowers. Standing at the door of his inn, the landlord dropped his jaw in amazement as his glance fell upon the jestress and her companion behind the great emperor himself. His surprise, too, was abruptly voiced by a ragged, wayworn person not far distant in the crowd, whose fingers had been busy about the pockets of his neighbors; fingers which had a deft habit of working by themselves, while his eyes were bent elsewhere and his lips joined in the general acclaim; fingers which like antennas seemed to have a special intelligence of their own. Now those long weapons of abstraction and appropriation ceased their deft work; he became all eyes.

"Good lack! Who may the noble gentleman behind the emperor be?" he exclaimed. "Surely 'tis the duke's fool."

"And ride with the emperor?" said a burly citizen at his elbow. "'Tis thou who art the fool."

"Truly I think so," answered the other. "I see; believe; but may not understand."

At that moment the duke's gaze in passing chanced to rest upon the pinched and over-curious face of the scamp-student; a gleam of recollection shone in his glance. "Gladius gemmatus!" cried the scholar, and a smile on the noble's countenance told him he had heard. Turning the problem in his mind, the vagrant-philosopher forgot about pilfering and the procession itself, when a soldier touched him roughly on the shoulder.

"Are you the scamp-student?" said the trooper.

"Now they'll hang me with these spoils in my pockets," thought the scholar. But as bravely as might be, he replied: "The former I am; the latter I would be."

"Then the Duke of Friedwald sent me to give you this purse," remarked the man, suiting the action to the word. "He bade me say 'tis to take the place of a bit of silver you once did not earn." And the trooper vanished.

"Well-a-day!" commented the burly citizen, regarding the gold pieces and the philosopher in wonderment of his own. "You may be a fool, but you must be an honest knave."

At the château the meeting between the two monarchs was unreservedly cordial on both sides. They spoke with satisfaction of the peace now existing between them and of other matters social and political. The emperor deplored deeply the untimely demise of Francis' son, Charles, who had caught the infection of plague while sleeping at Abbeville. Later the misalliance of the princess was cautiously touched upon. That lady, said Francis gravely, to whom the gaieties of the court at the present time could not fail to be distasteful, had left the château immediately upon her return. Ever of a devout mind, she had repaired to a convent and announced her intention of devoting herself, and her not inconsiderable fortune, to a higher and more spiritual life. Charles, who at that period of his lofty estates himself hesitated between the monastery and the court, applauded her resolution, to which the king perfunctorily and but half-heartedly responded.

Shortly after, the emperor, fatigued by his journey, begged leave to retire to his apartments, whither he went, accompanied by his "brother of France" and followed by his attendants. At the door Francis, with many expressions of good will, took leave of his royal guest for the time being, and, turning, encountered the Duke of Friedwald.

Francis, himself once accustomed to assume the disguise of an archer of the royal guard the better to pursue his love follies among the people, now gazed curiously upon one who had befooled the entire court.

"You took your departure, my Lord," said the king, quietly, "without waiting for the order of your going."

"He who enacts the fool, your Majesty, without patent to office must needs have good legs," replied the young man. "Else will he have his fingers burnt."

"Only his fingers?" returned the monarch with a smile, somewhat sardonic.

"Truly," thought the other, as Francis strode away, "the king regrets the fool's escape from Notre Dame and the fagots."

During the next day Charles called first for his leech and then for a priest, but whether the former or the latter, or both, temporarily assuaged the restlessness of mortal disease, that night he was enabled to be present at the character dances given in his honor by the ladies of the court in the great gallery of the château.

At a signal from the cornet, gitterns, violas and pipes began to play, and Francis and his august guest, accompanied by Queen Eleanor, and the emperor's sister, Marguerite of Navarre, entered the hall, followed by the dauphin and Catharine de Medici, Diane de Poitiers, the Duchesse d'Etampes; marshal, chancellor and others of the king's friends and counselors; courtiers, poets, jesters, philosophers; a goodly company, such as few monarchs could summon at their beck and call. Charles' eye lighted; even his austere nature momentarily kindled amid that brilliant spectacle; Francis' palace of pleasure was an intoxicating antidote to spleen or hypochondria. And when the court ladies, in a dazzling band, appeared in the dance, led by the Duchesse d'Etampes, he openly expressed his approval.

"Ah, Madam," he said to the Queen of Navarre, "there is little of the monastery about our good brother's court."

"Did your Majesty expect we should cloister you?" she answered, with a lively glance.

He gazed meditatively upon the "Rose of Valois," or the "Pearl of the Valois," as she was sometimes called; then a shadow fell upon him; the futility of ambition; the emptiness of pleasure. In scanty attire, the Duchesse d'Etampes, with the king, flashed before him; the former, all beauty, all grace, her little feet trampling down care, so lightly. Somberly he watched her, and sighed. Mentally he compared himself to Francis; they had traveled the road of life together, discarding their youth at the same turn of the highway; yet here was his French brother, indefatigable in the pursuit of merriment, while his own soul sang miséréré to the tune of Francis' fiddles. Yet, had he overheard the conversation of the favorite and the king, the emperor's moodiness would not, perhaps, have been unmixed with a stronger feeling.

"Sire," the duchess was saying in her most persuasive manner, "while you have Charles—once your keeper—in your power, here in the château, you will surely punish him for the past and avenge yourself? You will make him revoke the treaty of Madrid, or shut him up in one of Louis XI's oubliettes?"

"I will persuade him if I can," replied the king coldly, "but never force him. My honor, Madam, is dearer to me than my interests."

The favorite said no more of a cherished project, knowing Francis' temper and his stubbornness when crossed. She merely shrugged her white shoulders and watched him closely. The monarch had not scrupled once to break his covenant with Charles, holding that treaties made under duress,

by force majeure, were legally void, while now— But the king was composed of contradictions, or—was her own influence waning?

She had observed a new expression cross his countenance when in the retinue of the emperor he had noted the daughter of the constable; such a tenderness as she remembered at Bayonne when the king had looked upon her, the duchess, for the first time. When she next spoke her words were the outcome of this train of thought.

"To think the jestress, Jacqueline, should turn out the daughter of that traitor, the Constable of Dubrois," she observed, keenly.

"A traitor, certainly," said Francis, "but also a brave man. Perhaps we pressed him too hard," he added retrospectively. "We were young in years and hot-tempered."

"Your Majesty remembers the girl—a dark-browed, bold creature?" remarked the duchess, smiling amiably.

"Dark-browed, perhaps, Madam; but I observed nothing bold in her demeanor," answered the king.

"What! a jestress and not bold! A girl who frequented Fools' hall; who ran away from court with the plaisant!" She glanced at him mischievously, like a wilful child, but before his frown the smile faded; involuntarily she clenched her hands.

"Madam," he replied cynically, "I have always noticed that women are poor judges of their own sex."

And conducting her to a seat, he raised her jeweled fingers perfunctorily to his lips, and, wheeling abruptly, left her.

"Ah!" thought Triboulet, ominously, who had been closely observing them, "the king is much displeased."

Had the duchess observed the monarch's lack of warmth? At any rate, somewhat perplexedly she regarded the departing figure of the king; then humming lightly, turned to a mirror to adjust a ringlet which had fallen from the golden net binding her tresses.

"Mère de Dieu! woman never held man—or king—by sighing," she thought, and laughed, remembering the Countess of Châteaubriant; a veritable Niobe when the monarch had sent her home.

But Triboulet drew a wry face; his little heart was beating tremulously; dark shadows crossed his mind. Two portentous stars had appeared in the horoscope of his destiny: he who had been the foreign fool; she who was the daughter of the constable. Almost fiercely the hunchback surveyed the beautiful woman before him. With her downfall would come his own, and he believed the king had wearied of her. How hateful was her fair face to him at that moment! Already in imagination he experienced the bitterness of the fall from his high estates, and shudderingly looked back to his own lowly beginning: a beggarly street-player of bagpipes; ragged, wretched, importuning passers-by for coppers; reviled by every urchin. But she, meeting his glance and reading his thought, only clapped her hands recklessly.

"How unhappy you look," she said.

"Madam, do you think the duke—" he began.

"I think he will cut off your head," she exclaimed, and Triboulet turned yellow; but a few moments later took heart, the duchess was so lightsome.

"By my sword—if I had one—our jestress has made a triumphant return," commented Caillette as he stood with the Duke of Friedwald near one of the windows, surveying the animated scene. "Already are some of the ladies jealous as Barbary pigeons. Her appearance has been remarked by the Duc de Montrin and other gentlemen in attendance, and—look! Now the great De Guise approaches her. Here one belongs to everybody."

The other did not answer and Caillette glanced quickly at him. "You will not think me over-bold," he went on, after a moment's hesitation, "if I mention what is being whispered—by them?" including in a look and the uplifting of his eyebrows the entire court. The duke laid his hand warmly on the shoulder of the poet-fool. "Is there not that between us which precludes the question?"

"I should not venture to speak about it," continued Caillette, meeting the duke's gaze frankly, "but that you once honored me with your confidence. That I was much puzzled when I met you and—our erstwhile jestress—matters not. 'Twas for me to dismiss my wonderment, and not strive to reconcile my neighbor's affairs. But when I hear every one talking about my—friend, it is no gossip's task to come to him with the unburdening of the prattle."

"What are they saying, Caillette?" asked the duke, in his eyes a darker look.

"That you would wed this maid, but that the king will use his friendly offices with Charles to prevent it."

"And do they say why Francis will so use his influence?" continued the other.

"Because of the claim such a union might give an alien house to a vast estate in France; the confiscated property of the Constable of Dubrois. And—but the other reason is but babble, malice—what you will." And Caillette's manner quickly changed from grave to frivolous. "Now, au revoir; I'm off to Fools' hall," he concluded. "Whenever it becomes dull for you, seek some of your old comrades there." And laughing, Caillette disappeared.

Thoughtfully the duke continued to observe the jestress. Between them whirled the votaries of pleasure; before him swept the fragrance of delicate perfumes; in his ears sounded the subtile enticement of soft laughter. Her face wore a proud, self-reliant expression; her eyes that look which had made her seem so illusive from the inception of their acquaintance. And now, since his identity had been revealed, she had seemed more puzzling to him than ever. When he had sought her glance, her look had told him nothing. It was as though with the doffing of the motley she had discarded its recollections. In a tentative mood, he had striven to fathom her, but found himself at a loss. She had been neither reserved, nor had she avoided him; to her the past seemed a page, lightly read and turned. Had Caillette truly said "now she belonged to the world"?

Stepping upon one of the balconies overlooking the valley, the duke gazed out over the tranquil face of nature, his figure drawn aside from the flood of light within. Between heaven and earth, the château reared its stately pile, and far downward those twinkling flashes represented the town; yonder faint line, like a dark thread, the encircling wall. Above the gate shone a glimmer from the narrow casement of some officer's quarters; and the jester's misgivings when they had ridden beneath the portcullis into the town for the first time, recurred to him; also, the glad haste with which they had sped away.

Memories of dangers, of the free and untrammeled character of their wandering, that day-to-day intimacy, and night-to-night consciousness of her presence haunted him. Her loyalty, her fine sense of comradeship, her inherent tenderness, had been revealed to him. Still he seemed to feel himself the jester, in the gathering of fools, and she a ministralissa, with dark, deep eyes that baffled him.

The sound of voices near the window aroused him from this field of speculation, voices that abruptly riveted his attention and held it: the king's and Jacqueline's.

CHAPTER XXIX

THE FAVORITE IS REASSURED

The young man's brow drew dark; tumultuous thoughts filled his brain; Caillette's words, Brusquet's rhymes, confirming his own conviction, rankled in his mind. This king dared arrogate a law absolute unto himself; its statutes, his own caprices; its canons, his own pretensions? The duke remembered the young girl's outburst against the monarch and a feeling of hatred arose in his breast; his hand involuntarily sought his sword, the blade of Francis' implacable enemy.

"We have heard your story, my child, from our brother, the emperor," the king was saying, "and although your father rebelled against his monarch, we harbor it not against the daughter."

"Sire," she answered, in a low tone, "I regret the emperor should have acquainted you with this matter."

"You have no cause for fear," Francis replied, misinterpreting her words. She offered no response, and the duke, moving into the light, observed the king was regarding the young girl intently, his tall figure conspicuous above the courtiers.

Flushed, Jacqueline looked down; the white-robed form, however, very straight and erect; her hair, untrammeled with the extreme conventions of the day; a single flower a spot of color amid its abundance. Even the duchess—bejeweled, bedecked, tricked out—in her own mind had pronounced the young girl beautiful, and there surely was no mistaking the covert admiration of the monarch as his glance encompassed her. Despite her assumed composure, it was obvious to the duke, however, that only by a strong effort had she nerved herself to that evening's task; the red hue on her cheeks, the brightness of her eyes, told of the suppressed excitement her manner failed to betray.

"Why should you leave with Charles?" continued Francis. "Perhaps were we over-hasty in confiscating the castle of the constable. Vrai Dieu," he added, meditatively. "Had he unbent but a little! Marguerite told us we were driving him to despair, but the queen regent and the rest of our counselors prevailed—" He broke off abruptly and directed a bolder gaze to hers. "May not a monarch, Mademoiselle, undo what he has done?"

"Even a king can not give life to the dead," she replied, and her voice sounded hard and unyielding.

"No," he assented, moodily, "but it would not be impossible to restore the castle—to his daughter."

"Sire!" she exclaimed in surprise; then shook her head. "With your Majesty's permission, I shall leave with the emperor."

Francis made an impatient movement; her inflexibility recalled one who long ago had renounced his fealty to the throne; her resistance kindled the flame that had been smoldering in his breast.

"But if I have pointed out to the emperor that your proper station is here?" he went on. "If he recognizes that it would be to your disadvantage to divert that destiny which lies in France?"

His words were measured; his manner tinged with seeming paternal interest; but, as through a mask, she discerned his face, cynical, libidinous, the countenance of a Sybarite, not a king. The air became stifling; the ribaldry of laughter enveloped her; instinctively she glanced around, and her restless, troubled gaze fell upon the duke.

What was it he read in her eyes? A confession of insecurity, fear; a mute appeal? Before it all his doubts and misgivings vanished; the look they exchanged was like that when she had stood on the staircase in the inn.

Upon the monarch, engrossed in his purpose, it was lost. If silence give consent, then had she already acquiesced in a wish which, from a king, became a demand. But Francis, ever complaisant, with an inconsistent chivalry worthy of the subterfuge of his character, desired to appear forbearing, indulgent.

"For your own sake," he added, "must we refuse that permission you ask of us."

She did not answer, and, noting the direction of her gaze, the eager expectancy written on her face, Francis turned sharply. At the same time the duke stepped forward.

The benignity faded from the king's manner; his countenance, which "at no time would have made a man's fortune," became rancorous, caustic; the corners of his mouth appeared almost updrawn to his nostrils. He had little reason to care for the duke, and this interruption, so flagrant, menacing almost, did not tend to enhance his regard. In nowise daunted, the young man stood before him.

"I trust, Sire, your Majesty will reconsider your decision?"

With a strained look the young girl regarded them. To what new dangers had she summoned him? Was not she, the duke, even the emperor himself, in the power of the king, for the present at least? And knowing well Francis' headstrong passions, his violence when crossed, it was not strange at that moment her heart sank; she felt on the brink of an abyss; a nameless peril toward which she had drawn the companion of her flight. It seemed an endless interval before the monarch spoke.

"Ah, you heard!" remarked Francis at length, satirically.

"Inadvertently, Sire," answered the duke. His voice was steady, his face pale, but in his blue eyes a glint as of fire came and went. Self-assurance marked his bearing; dignity, pride. He looked not at the young girl, but calmly met the scrutiny of the king. The latter surveyed him from head to foot; then suddenly stared hard at a sword whose hilt gleamed even brighter than his own, and was fashioned in a form that recalled not imperfectly a hazard of other days.

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He looked not at the young girl, but calmly

met the scrutiny of the king.

"Where did you get that blade?" he asked, abruptly.

"From the daughter of the Constable of Dubrois."

"Why did she give it to you?"

"To protect her, Sire."

The monarch's countenance became more thoughtful; less acrimonious. How the present seemed involved in the past! Were kings, then, enmeshed in the web of their own acts? Were even the gods not exempt from retributory justice? Those were days of superstition, when a coincidence assumed the importance of inexorable destiny.

"Once was it drawn against me," said Francis, reflectively.

"I trust, Sire, it may never again be drawn by an enemy of your Majesty."

The king did not reply, but stood as a man who yet took counsel with himself.

"By what right," he asked, finally, "do you speak for the lady?"

moment the duke looked disconcerted. "By

what right?"

Then swiftly he regarded the girl. As quickly—a flash it seemed—her dark eyes made answer, their language more potent than words. He could but understand; doubt and misgiving were forgotten; the hesitation vanished from his manner. Hastily crossing to her side, he took her hand and unresistingly it lay in his. His heart beat faster; her sudden acquiescence filled him with wonder; at the same time, his task seemed easier. To protect her now! The king coughed ironically, and the duke turned from her to him.

"By what right, your Majesty?" he said in a voice which sounded different to Francis. "This lady is my affianced bride, Sire."

Pique, umbrage, mingled in the expression which replaced all other feeling on the king's countenance as he heard this announcement. With manifest displeasure he looked from one to the other.

"Is this true, Mademoiselle?" he asked, sternly.

Her cheek was red, but she held herself bravely.

"Yes, Sire," she said.

A new emotion leaped to the duke's face as he heard her lips thus fearlessly confirm the answer of her eyes. And so before the monarch—in that court which Marguerite called the Court of Love—they plighted their troth.

Something in their manner, however, puzzled the observant king; an exaltation, perhaps, uncalled for by the simple telling of a secret understanding between them; that rapid interchange of glances; that significance of manner when the duke stepped to her side. Francis bit his lips.

"Ma foi!" he exclaimed, sharply. "This is somewhat abrupt. How long, my Lord, since she promised to be your wife?"

"Since your Majesty spoke," returned the duke, tranquilly.

"And before that?"

"Before? I only knew that I loved her, Sire."

"And now you know, for the first time, that she loves you?" added the king, dryly. "But the emperor—are you not presuming overmuch that he will give

his consent? Or think you"—with fine irony—"that marriages of state are made in Heaven?"

"It was once my privilege, Sire, so to serve the emperor, as his Majesty thought, that he bade me ask of him what I would, when I would. Heretofore have I had nothing to ask; now, everything."

Some of the asperity faded from Francis' glance. The situation appealed to his strong penchant for merry plaisanterie. Besides—such was his overweening pride—to hear a woman confess she cared for another dampened his own ardor, instead of stimulating it. "None but himself could be his parallel;" the royal lover could brook no rival. Had she merely desired to marry the former fool—the Countess of Châteaubriant had had a husband—but to love him!

After all, she was but an audacious slip of a girl; a dark-browed, bold gipsy; by nature, intended for the motley—yes, the Duchesse d'Etampes was right. Then, he liked not her parentage; she was a constant reminder of one who had been like to make vacant the throne of France, and to destroy, root and branch, the proud house of Orleans. Moreover, whispered avarice, he would save the castle for himself; a stately and right royal possession. He had, indeed, been over-generous in proffering it. Love, said reason, was unstable, flitting; woman, a will-o'-the-wisp; but a castle—its noble solidity would endure. At the same time, policy admonished the king that the duke was a subject of his good brother, the emperor, and a rich, powerful noble withal. So with such grace as he could command Francis greeted one whom he preferred to regard as an ally rather than an enemy.

"Truly, my Lord," he said not discourteously, masking in a courtly manner his personal dislike for him whose sharp criticism he once had felt in Fools' hall, "a nimble-witted jester was lost when you resumed the dignity of your position. But," he added cautiously, as a sudden thought moved him, "this lady has appeared somewhat unexpectedly; the house of Friedwald is not an inconsequential one."

"What mean you, Sire?" asked the young man, as the king paused.

Francis studied him shrewdly. "Why," he replied at length, hesitatingly, "there is that controversy of the Constable of Dubrois; certain lands and a castle, long since rightly confiscated."

"Your Majesty, there is another castle, and lands to spare, in a distant country," returned the duke quickly. "These will suffice."

"As you will," said the king in a livelier tone. "For the future, command our good offices—since you have made us sponsor of your fortunes."

With which well-covered confession of his own defeat, Francis strode away. As he turned, however, he caught the smile of the Duchesse d'Etampes and crossed to her graciously.

"Your dress becomes you well, Anne," he said.

She glanced down at herself demurely; her lashes veiled a sudden gleam of triumph. "How kind of you, Sire, to notice—my poor gown."

"I was right," murmured Triboulet, joyfully, as he saw king and favorite walking together. "No one will ever replace the duchess."

Silent, hand in hand, the duke and the joculatrix stood upon the balcony. Below them lay the earth, wrapped in hazy light. Behind them, the court, with its glamour.

"Have I done well, Jacqueline, to answer the king as I have done?" he said finally. "Are you content to resign all—forever—here in France? To go with me—"

"Into a new world," she interrupted. "Once I asked you to take me, but you hesitated, and were like to leave me behind you."

"But now 'tis I who ask," he answered.

"And I—who hesitate?" looking out over the valley, where the shadow of a cloud crossed the land.

"Do you hesitate, Jacqueline?"

She turned. About her lips trembled the old fleeting smile.

"What woman knows her mind, Sir Fool? Yet if it were not so—"

"If it were not so?" he said, eagerly.

Her eyes became grave on a sudden. "I might believe I had been of one mind—long."

"Jacqueline!—sweet jestress!—"

He caught her suddenly in his arms, his fine young features aglow. This then was the goal of his desires; a goal of delight, far, far beyond all youthful dreams or early imaginings. With drooping eyelids, she stood in his

embrace; she, once so proud, so self-willed. He drew her closer—kissed her hair!—the rose!—

She raised her head, and—sweeter still—he kissed her lips.

Across the valley the shadow receded; vanished. In the full glory of nightly splendor lay the earth, and as the mystic radiance lighted up a world of beauty, it seemed at last they beheld their world; the light more beautiful for the shade and the purple mists.