

III

Jeanne passed a somewhat restless night after her small scene with her cousin, waking depressed and unrefreshed. Though she had carried matters with so high a hand, and had scored so distinctly all around, she had been more agitated than she had cared to show. She liked Enguerrand; and more especially did she like his admiration for her; and that chance allusion to Clairette contained possibilities that were alarming. In embracing a professional career, she had never thought for a moment that it could militate against that due share of admiration to which, as a girl, she was justly entitled; and Enguerrand's views seemed this morning all the more narrow and inexcusable. She rose languidly, and as soon as she was dressed sent off a little note to the Mayor, saying that she had a nervous headache and felt out of sorts, and begging to be excused from attendance on that day; and the missive reached the Mayor just as he was taking his usual place at the head of the Board.

"Dear, dear!" said the kind-hearted old man, as soon as he had read the letter to his fellow-councilmen: "I'm very sorry. Poor girl! Here, one of you fellows, just run round and tell the gaoler there won't be any business to-day. Jeanne's seedy. It's put off till to-morrow. And now, gentlemen, the agenda----"

"Really, your worship," exploded Robinet, "this is simply ridiculous!"

"Upon my word, Robinet," said the Mayor, "I don't know what's the matter

with you. Here's a poor girl unwell,--and a more hard-working girl isn't in the town,--and instead of sympathising with her, and saying you're sorry, you call it ridiculous! Suppose you had a headache yourself! You wouldn't like----"

"But it is ridiculous," maintained the tanner stoutly. "Who ever heard of an executioner having a nervous headache? There's no precedent for it. And 'out of sorts,' too! Suppose the criminals said they were out of sorts, and didn't feel up to being executed?"

"Well, suppose they did," replied the Mayor, "we'd try and meet them half-way, I daresay. They'd have to be executed some time or other, you know. Why on earth are you so captious about trifles? The prisoners won't mind, and I don't mind: nobody's inconvenienced, and everybody's happy!"

"You're right there, Mr. Mayor," put in another councilman. "This executing business used to give the town a lot of trouble and bother; now it's all as easy as kiss-your-hand. Instead of objecting, as they used to do, and wanting to argue the point and kick up a row, the fellows as is told off for execution come skipping along in the morning, like a lot of lambs in May-time. And then the fun there is on the scaffold! The jokes, the back answers, the repartees! And never a word to shock a baby! Why, my little girl, as goes through the market-place every morning--on her way to school, you know--she says to me only yesterday, she says, 'Why, father,' she says, 'it's as good as the

play-actors,' she says."

"There again," persisted Robinet; "I object to that too. They ought to show a properer feeling. Playing at mummers is one thing, and being executed is another, and people ought to keep 'em separate. In my father's time, that sort of thing wasn't thought good taste, and I don't hold with new-fangled notions."

"Well, really, neighbour," said the Mayor, "I think you're out of sorts yourself to-day. You must have got out of bed the wrong side this morning. As for a little joke, more or less, we all know a maiden loves a merry jest when she's certain of having the last word! But I'll tell you what I'll do, if it'll please you; I'll go round and see Jeanne myself on my way home, and tell her--quite nicely, you know--that once in a way doesn't matter; but that if she feels her health won't let her keep regular business hours, she mustn't think of going on with anything that's bad for her. Like that, don't you see? And now, gentlemen, let's read the minutes!"

Thus it came about that Jeanne took her usual walk that evening with a ruffled brow and a swelling heart; and her little hand opened and shut angrily as she paced the ramparts. She couldn't stand being found fault with. How could she help having a headache? Those clods of citizens didn't know what a highly strung sensitive organisation was. Absorbed in her reflections, she had taken several turns up and down the grassy footway before she became aware that she was not alone. A youth, of

richer dress and more elegant bearing than the general run of the Radegundians, was leaning in an embrasure, watching the graceful figure with evident interest.

"Something has vexed you, fair maiden?" he observed, coming forward deferentially as soon as he perceived he was noticed; "and care sits but awkwardly on that smooth young brow."

"Nay, it is nothing, kind sir," replied Jeanne; "we girls who work for our living must not be too sensitive. My employers have been somewhat exigent, that is all. I did wrong to take it to heart."

"'Tis the way of the bloated capitalist," rejoined the young man lightly, as he turned to walk by her side. "They grind us, they grind us; perhaps some day they will come under your hands in turn, and then you can pay them out. And so you toil and spin, fair lily! And yet, methinks, those delicate hands show little trace of labour?"

"You wrong me, indeed, sir," replied Jeanne merrily. "These hands of mine, that you are so good as to admire, do great execution!"

"I can well believe that your victims are numerous," he replied; "may I be permitted to rank myself among the latest of them?"

"I wish you a better fortune, kind sir," answered Jeanne demurely.

"I can imagine no more delightful one," he replied; "and where do you ply your daily task, fair mistress? Not entirely out of sight and access, I trust?"

"Nay, sir," laughed Jeanne, "I work in the market-place most mornings, and there is no charge for admission; and access is far from difficult. Indeed, some complain--but that is no business of mine. And now I must be wishing you a good-evening. Nay,"--for he would have detained her,--"it is not seemly for an unprotected maiden to tarry in converse with a stranger at this hour. *Au revoir*, sir! If you should happen to be in the market-place any morning----" And she tripped lightly away. The youth, gazing after her retreating figure, confessed himself strangely fascinated by this fair unknown, whose particular employment, by the way, he had forgotten to ask; while Jeanne, as she sped homewards, could not help reflecting that, for style and distinction, this new acquaintance threw into the shade all the Enguerrands and others she had met hitherto--even in the course of business.