

IV

The next morning was bright and breezy, and Jeanne was early at her post, feeling quite a different girl. The busy little market-place was full of colour and movement, and the gay patches of flowers and fruit, the strings of fluttering kerchiefs, and the piles of red and yellow pottery, formed an artistic setting to the quiet impressive scaffold which they framed. Jeanne was in short sleeves, according to the etiquette of her office, and her round graceful arms showed snowily against her dark blue skirt and scarlet, tight-fitting bodice. Her assistant looked at her with admiration.

"Hope you're better, miss," he said respectfully. "It was just as well you didn't put yourself out to come yesterday; there was nothing particular to do. Only one fellow, and he said he didn't care; anything to oblige a lady!"

"Well, I wish he'd hurry up now, to oblige a lady," said Jeanne, swinging her axe carelessly to and fro: "ten minutes past the hour; I shall have to talk to the Mayor about this."

"It's a pity there ain't a better show this morning," pursued the assistant, as he leant over the rail of the scaffold and spat meditatively into the busy throng below. "They do say as how the young Seigneur arrived at the Château yesterday--him as has been finishing his

education in Paris, you know. He's as likely as not to be in the market-place to-day; and if he's disappointed, he may go off to Paris again, which would be a pity, seeing the Château's been empty so long. But he may go to Paris, or anywhere else he's a mind to, he won't see better workmanship than in this here little town!"

"Well, my good Raoul," said Jeanne, colouring slightly at the obvious compliment, "quality, not quantity, is what we aim at here, you know. If a Paris education has been properly assimilated by the Seigneur, he will not fail to make all the necessary allowances. But see, the prison-doors are opening at last!"

They both looked across the little square to the prison, which fronted the scaffold; and sure enough, a small body of men, the Sheriff at their head, was issuing from the building, conveying, or endeavouring to convey, the tardy prisoner to the scaffold. That gentleman, however, seemed to be in a different and less obliging frame of mind from that of the previous day; and at every pace one or other of the guards was shot violently into the middle of the square, propelled by a vigorous kick or blow from the struggling captive. The crowd, unaccustomed of late to such demonstrations of feeling, and resenting the prisoner's want of taste, hooted loudly; but it was not until that ingenious mediæval arrangement known as *_la marche aux crapauds_* had been brought to bear on him that the reluctant convict could be prevailed upon to present himself before the young lady he had already so unwarrantably detained.

Jeanne's profession had both accustomed her to surprises and taught her the futility of considering her clients as drawn from any one particular class; yet she could hardly help feeling some astonishment on recognising her new acquaintance of the previous evening. That, with all his evident amiability of character, he should come to this end, was not in itself a special subject for wonder; but that he should have been conversing with her on the ramparts at the hour when--after courteously excusing her attendance on the scaffold--he was cooling his heels in prison for another day, seemed hardly to be accounted for, at first sight. Jeanne, however, reflected that the reconciling of apparent contradictions was not included in her official duties.

The Sheriff, wiping his heated brow, now read the formal procès delivering over the prisoner to the executioner's hands; "and a nice job we've had to get him here," he added on his own account. And the young man, who had remained perfectly tractable since his arrival, stepped forward and bowed politely.

"Now that we have been properly introduced," said he courteously, "allow me to apologise for any inconvenience you have been put to by my delay. The fault was entirely mine, and these gentlemen are in no way to blame. Had I known whom I was to have the pleasure of meeting, wings could not have conveyed me swiftly enough."

"Do not mention, I pray, the word inconvenience," replied Jeanne, with that timid grace which so well became her. "I only trust that any slight

discomfort it may be my duty to cause you before we part will be as easily pardoned. And now--for the morning, alas! advances--any little advice or assistance that I can offer is quite at your service; for the situation is possibly new, and you may have had but little experience."

"Faith! none worth mentioning," said the prisoner gaily. "Treat me as a raw beginner. Though our acquaintance has been but brief, I have the utmost confidence in you."

"Then, sir," said Jeanne, blushing, "suppose I were to assist you in removing this gay doublet, so as to give both of us more freedom and less responsibility?"

"A perquisite of the office?" queried the prisoner with a smile, as he slipped one arm out of its sleeve.

A flush came over Jeanne's fair brow. "That was ungenerous," she said.

"Nay, pardon me, sweet one," said he, laughing: "'twas but a poor jest of mine--in bad taste, I willingly admit."

"I was sure you did not mean to hurt me," she replied kindly, while her fingers were busy in turning back the collar of his shirt. It was composed, she noticed, of the finest point lace; and she could not help a feeling of regret that some slight error--as must, from what she knew, exist somewhere--should compel her to take a course so at variance

with her real feelings. Her only comfort was that the youth himself seemed entirely satisfied with his situation. He hummed the last air from Paris during her ministrations, and when she had quite finished, kissed the pretty fingers with a metropolitan grace.

"And now, sir," said Jeanne, "if you will kindly come this way: and please to mind the step--so. Now, if you will have the goodness to kneel here--nay, the sawdust is perfectly clean; you are my first client this morning. On the other side of the block you will find a nick, more or less adapted to the human chin, though a perfect fit cannot, of course, be guaranteed in every case. So! Are you pretty comfortable?"

"A bed of roses," replied the prisoner. "And what a really admirable view one gets of the valley and the river, from just this particular point!"

"Charming, is it not?" replied Jeanne. "I'm so glad you do justice to it. Some of your predecessors have really quite vexed me by their inability to appreciate that view. It's worth coming here to see it. And now, to return to business for one moment,--would you prefer to give the word yourself? Some people do; it's a mere matter of taste. Or will you leave yourself entirely in my hands?"

"Oh, in your fair hands," replied her client, "which I beg you to consider respectfully kissed once more by your faithful servant to command."

Jeanne, blushing rosily, stepped back a pace, moistening her palms as she grasped her axe, when a puffing and blowing behind caused her to turn her head, and she perceived the Mayor hastily ascending the scaffold.

"Hold on a minute, Jeanne, my girl," he gasped. "Don't be in a hurry. There's been some little mistake."

Jeanne drew herself up with dignity. "I'm afraid I don't quite understand you, Mr. Mayor," she replied in freezing accents. "There's been no little mistake on my part that I'm aware of."

"No, no, no," said the Mayor apologetically; "but on somebody else's there has. You see it happened in this way: this here young fellow was going round the town last night; and he'd been dining, I should say, and he was carrying on rather free. I will only say so much in your presence, that he was carrying on decidedly free. So the town-guard happened to come across him, and he was very high and very haughty, he was, and wouldn't give his name nor yet his address--as a gentleman should, you know, when he's been dining and carrying on free. So our fellows just ran him in--and it took the pick of them all their time to do it, too. Well, then, the other chap who was in prison--the gentleman who obliged you yesterday, you know--what does he do but slip out and run away in the middle of all the row and confusion; and very inconsiderate and ungentlemanly it was of him to take advantage of us in

that mean way, just when we wanted a little sympathy and forbearance. Well, the Sheriff comes this morning to fetch out his man for execution, and he knows there's only one man to execute, and he sees there's only one man in prison, and it all seems as simple as A B C--he never was much of a mathematician, you know--so he fetches our friend here along, quite gaily. And--and that's how it came about, you see; *_hinc illæ lachrymæ_*, as the Roman poet has it. So now I shall just give this young fellow a good talking to, and discharge him with a caution; and we sha'n't require you any more to-day, Jeanne, my girl."

"Now, look here, Mr. Mayor," said Jeanne severely, "you utterly fail to grasp the situation in its true light. All these little details may be interesting in themselves, and doubtless the press will take note of them; but they are entirely beside the point. With the muddleheadedness of your officials (which I have frequently remarked upon) I have nothing whatever to do. All I know is, that this young gentleman has been formally handed over to me for execution, with all the necessary legal requirements; and executed he has got to be. When my duty has been performed, you are at liberty to reopen the case if you like; and any 'little mistake' that may have occurred through your stupidity you can then rectify at your leisure. Meantime, you've no *_locus standi_* here at all; in fact, you've no business whatever lumbering up my scaffold. So shut up and clear out."

"Now, Jeanne, do be reasonable," implored the Mayor. "You women are so precise. You never will make any allowance for the necessary margin of

error in things."

"If I were to allow the necessary margin for all your errors, Mayor," replied Jeanne coolly, "the edition would have to be a large-paper one, and even then the text would stand a poor chance. And now, if you don't allow me the necessary margin to swing my axe, there may be another 'little mistake'----"

But at this point a hubbub arose at the foot of the scaffold, and Jeanne, leaning over, perceived sundry tall fellows, clad in the livery of the Seigneur, engaged in dispersing the municipal guard by the agency of well-directed kicks, applied with heartiness and anatomical knowledge. A moment later, there strode on to the scaffold, clad in black velvet, and adorned with his gold chain of office, the stately old seneschal of the Château, evidently in a towering passion.

"Now, mark my words, you miserable little bladder-o'-lard," he roared at the Mayor (whose bald head certainly shone provokingly in the morning sun), "see if I don't take this out of your skin presently!" And he passed on to where the youth was still kneeling, apparently quite absorbed in the view.

"My lord," he said firmly though respectfully, "your hair-brained folly really passes all bounds. Have you entirely lost your head?"

"Faith, nearly," said the young man, rising and stretching himself. "Is

that you, old Thibault? Ow, what a crick I've got in my neck! But that view of the valley was really delightful!"

"Did you come here simply to admire the view, my lord?" inquired Thibault severely.

"I came because my horse would come," replied the young Seigneur lightly: "that is, these gentlemen here were so pressing; they would not hear of any refusal; and besides, they forgot to mention what my attendance was required in such a hurry for. And when I got here, Thibault, old fellow, and saw that divine creature--nay, a goddess, *_deja certé_*--so graceful, so modest, so anxious to acquit herself with credit---- Well, you know my weakness; I never could bear to disappoint a woman. She had evidently set her heart on taking my head; and as she had my heart already----"

"I think, my lord," said Thibault, with some severity, "you had better let me escort you back to the Château. This appears to be hardly a safe place for light-headed and susceptible persons!"

Jeanne, as was natural, had the last word. "Understand me, Mr. Mayor," said she, "these proceedings are entirely irregular. I decline to recognise them, and when the quarter expires I shall claim the usual bonus!"