

Under the Rose

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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 jocularatrix, 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 juggle!" 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!--juggle!" 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!"