

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 VI!" 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 subtle, 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.