

CHAPTER III

A GIFT FOR THE DUKE

The sun and the breeze contended with the mist, entrenched 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 aspersion.

"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."