

CHAPTER IV

AN IMPATIENT SUITOR

"Well, Sir Mariner, do you not fear to venture so far on a dangerous sea?" asked a mocking voice.

"A dangerous sea, fair Jacqueline?" he replied, stroking the head of the hound which lay before the bench. "I see nothing save smiling fields and fragrant beds of flowers."

"Oh, I recognize now Monsieur Diplomat, not Sir Mariner!" she retorted.

Beneath her head-dress, resembling in some degree two great butterfly wings, her face looked smaller than its wont. Laced tight, after the fashion, the cotte-hardie made her waist appear little larger than could be clasped by the hands of a soldier, while a silken-shod foot with which she tapped the ground would have nestled neatly in his palm. Was it pique that moved her thus to address the duke's jester? Since he had arrived, Jacqueline had been relegated, as it were, to the corner. She, formerly ever first with the princess, had perforce stood aside on the coming of the foreign fool whose company her mistress strangely seemed to prefer to her own.

First had it been talking, walking and jesting, in which last accomplishment he proved singularly expert, judging from the peals of

laughter to which her mistress occasionally gave vent. Then it had become riding, hawking and, worst of all, reading. Lately Louise, learned, as has been set forth, in the profane letters, had displayed a marked favor for books of all kinds--The Tree of Battles, by Bonnet, the Breviary of Nobles in verse, the "Livre des faits d'armes et de chevalerie," by Christine de Pisan; and in a secluded garden spot, with her fool and servant, she sedulously pursued her literary labors.

As books were rare, being hand-printed and hand-illuminated, the princess' choice of volumes was not large, but Marguerite, the king's sister, possessed some rarely executed poems--in their mechanical aspect; the monarch permitted her the use of several precious chronicles; while the abbess in the convent near by, who esteemed Louise for her piety and accomplishments, submitted to her care a gorgeously painted, satin-bound Life of Saint Agnes, a Roman virgin who died under the sanguinary persecution of Diocletian. But Jacqueline frowningly noticed that the saint's life lay idle--conspicuously, though fittingly, on the altar-table--while a manuscript of the Queen of Navarre suspiciously accompanied the jester when he sought the pleasant nook selected for reading and conversation.

It was to this spot the maid repaired one soft summer afternoon, where she found the fool and a volume--Marguerite's, by the purple binding and the love-knot in silver!--awaiting doubtless the coming of the princess; and at the sight of them, the book of romance and the jester who brought it, what wonder her patience gave way?

"You have been here now a fortnight, Monsieur Diplomat," she continued, bending the eyes which Triboulet so feared upon the other.

"Thirteen days, to be exact, sweet Jacqueline!" he answered calmly.

"Indeed! Then there is some hope for you, if you've kept track of time," she returned pointedly.

Still he forbore to qualify his manner, save with a latent smile that further exasperated the girl.

"What mean you, gentle mistress?" he asked quietly, without even looking at her.

"Sweet Jacqueline! 'Gentle mistress!' you are profuse with soft words!" she cried sharply.

"And yet they turn you not from anger."

"Anger!" she said, her eyes flashing. "Not another man at court would dare to talk to me as you do."

At this he lifted his brows and surveyed her much as one would a spoiled child, a glance that excited in her the same emotion she had experienced the night of his arrival in Fools' hall, when he had

contemplated her in her garb of Joculatrix, as some misplaced anomaly.

"I know, mistress," he returned ironically, "you have a reputation for sorcery. But I think it lies more in your eyes than in the moon."

"And yet I can see the future for all that," she replied, persistently, defiantly.

"The future?" he retorted, and looked from the earth to the sky. "What is the goal of yonder tiny cloud? Can you tell me that?"

"The goal?" she repeated, uplifting her head. "Wait! It is very small. The sun is already swallowing it up."

"Heigho!" yawned the jester, outstretching his yellow-pointed boot, "I catch not the moral to the fable--an there be one!

"The moral!" she said, quickly. "Ask Marot."

"Why Marot?" Balancing the stick with the fool's head in his hand.

"Because he dared love Queen Marguerite!" she answered impetuously.

"The fool in motley; the lady in purple! How he jested at her wedding! How he wept when he thought himself alone!"

"He had but himself to blame, Jacqueline," returned the other with

composure, although his eyes were now bent straight before him. "He could not climb to her; she could not stoop to him. Yet I daresay, it was a mad dream he would not have foregone."

"Not have foregone!" she exclaimed, quickly. "What would he not have given to tear it from his breast; aye, though he tore his heart with it! That day, bright and fair, when Henry d'Albret, King of Navarre, took her in his arms and kissed her brow! When amid gay festivities she became his bride! Not have foregone? Yes; Marot would forego that day--and other days."

Still that inertia; that irritating immobility. "What a tragic tale for a summer day!" was his only comment.

"And Caillette!" she continued, rapidly. "Distinguished in mien, graceful in manner. In the house of his patron, he dared look up to that nobleman's daughter, Diane de Poitiers. A dream; a youthful dream! Enter Monsieur de Brézé, grand seneschal of Normandy. Shall I tell you the rest? How Caillette stares, moody, knitting his brows at his cups! Of what is the jester thinking?"

"Whether the grand seneschal will let him sleep with the spaniels, Jacqueline, or turn him out," laughed the jester.

Angrily she clasped her hands before her. "Is it the way your mind would move?" she retorted.

"A jester without a roof to cover him is like a dog without a kennel, mistress."

Disdain, contempt, rapidly crossed her face, but her lip curved knowingly and her voice came more gently, because of the greater sting that lay behind her words.

"You but seek to flout me from my tale," she said sweetly. "Caillette is none such, as you know. They were young together. 'Twas said he confessed his love; that tokens passed between them. Rhymes he writ to her; a flower, perhaps, she gave him. A flower he yet cherishes, mayhap; dried, faded, yet plucked by her!"

Involuntarily the hand of her listener touched his breast, the first sign he had made that her story moved him. Jacqueline, watching him keenly, smiled, and demurely looked away. Her next words seemed to dance from her lips, as with head bent, like a butterfly poised, she addressed her remark to vacancy.

"A flower for himself, no doubt! Not given him for another!"

Whereupon she turned in time to catch the burning flush which flamed his cheek and left it paler than she had ever seen it. At this first signal of her success--proving that he was not impregnable to her attack--she hummed a little song and beat time on the sward with a

green-shod foot.

"What mean you?" he asked, momentarily dropping his unruffled manner.

"Not much!" Lightly she tripped to a bush, broke off a flower and regarded it mischievously. "Why should people hide that which is so sweet and fragrant?" she remarked, and set the rose in her hair.

"Hide?" he said, looking at the flower, but not at her.

"I trust you kept the rose, Monsieur Diplomat?" she spoke up, suddenly, her expression most serious.

"What rose?" he asked, now become restless beneath her cutting tongue.

"What rose! As if you did not know! How innocent you look! How many roses are there in the world? A thousand? Or only one? What rose? Her rose, of course. Have you got it? I hope so--for the duke is coming and might ask for it!"

This, then, was the information she had taken such a roundabout way to communicate! It was to this end she had purposely led the conversation by adroit stages, studying him gaily, impatiently or maliciously, as she marked the effect of her words upon him. All alive, she stepped back laughing; elate, she put her arms about a branch of the rose-bush and drew a score of roses to her bosom, as though she were a witch,

impervious to thorns. He had risen--yes, there was no doubt about it!--but her sunny face was turned to the flowers. His countenance became at once puzzled and thoughtful.

"The duke--coming--" He condescended to ask for information now.

Sidewise she gazed at him, unrelenting. "Does the flower become me?" she asked.

"The duke--coming--" he repeated.

"How impolite! To refuse me a compliment!" she flashed.

The next moment he was by her side, and had taken her arm, almost roughly. "Speak out!" he cried. "Some one is coming! What duke is coming?"

"You hurt me!" she exclaimed, angrily. He loosened his grasp.

"What duke?" she answered scornfully. "Her duke! Your duke! The emperor's duke!"

"The Duke of Friedwald?" he asked.

"Of course! The princess' fiancé; bridegroom-to-be; future husband, lord and master," she explained, with indubious and positive iteration.

"But the time--set for the wedding---has not expired," he protested with what she thought seemed a suspicion that she was playing with him.

"That is easily answered," she said cheerfully. "The duke, it seems, has become more and more enamored. Finally his passion has so grown and grown he fears to let it grow any more, and, as the only way out of the difficulty, petitioned the king to curtail the time of probation and relieve him of the constantly augmenting suspense. To which his most gracious Majesty, having been a lover himself (on divers occasions) and measuring the poor fellow's troubles by the qualms he has himself experienced, has seen generously fit to cut off a few weeks of waiting and set the wedding for the near future."

"How know you this?" he demanded, sharply, striding to and fro.

"This morning the princess sent me with a message to the Countess d'Etampes. You know her? You have heard? She has succeeded the Countess of Châteaubriant. Well, the king was with her--not the Countess of Châteaubriant, but the other one, I mean. They left poor me to await his Majesty's pleasure, and, as the Countess d'Etampes has but newly succeeded to her present exalted position and the king has not yet discovered her many imperfections, I should certainly have fallen asleep for weariness had I not chanced to overhear portions of their conversation. The Countess d'Etampes, it seemed, was very angry. 'Your Majesty promised to send her home,' she said. 'But, my dear,

give me time,' pleaded the king. 'Pack her off at once,' she demanded, raising her voice. 'Send her to her husband. That's where she belongs. Think of him, poor fellow!' Laughing, his Majesty capitulated. 'Well, well, back to her castle goes the Countess of Châteaubriant!' Thereupon--"

"But the duke, mistress," interrupted the jester, who had become more and more impatient during the prolonged narration. "The duke?"

"Am I not to tell it in my own way?" she returned. "What manners you have! First, you pinch my arm until I must needs cry out. Then you ask a question and interrupt me before I can answer."

"Interrupt!" he muttered. "You might have told a dozen tales. What care I for the king's Jezebels?"

"Jezebels!" she repeated, in mock horror. "I see plainly, if you don't die one way, you will another."

"'Tis usually the case. But go on with your story."

"If I can not tell it in my own way--"

"Tell it as you will, if your way be as slow as your tongue is sharp," he answered sullenly.

"Sharp! Jezebels! You deserve not to hear, but--the king, it seems, had laid the duke's request before the Countess d'Etampes. 'Here is an impatient suitor,' he said gaily. 'How shall we cure his passion?'

'By marrying him,' blithely answered this light-of-love. 'Tis a medicine that never fails!' His Majesty frowned; I could not see him, but felt sure of it from his tone, for although he neglects the queen, yet, to some degree, is mindful of her dignity. 'Marriage is a holy state, Madam,' he replied severely. 'There's no doubt about it, Francis,' returned the lady, 'and therefore is the antidote to passion. But a man bent on matrimony is like a child that wants a toy. Better give it to him at once--the plaything will the sooner be thrown aside!' 'Nay, Madam,' he said reprovingly, 'the duke shall have his wish, but for no such reason.' 'What reason then?' quoth she, petulantly.

'Because thou hast shown me love is a monarch stronger than any king and that we are but as slaves in its hands!' he exclaimed, passionately. 'I know I shall like the duke,' cried she, 'since he is the cause of that pretty speech.'

"At this point, not daring to listen longer, I coughed; there was silence; then the countess herself appeared at the door and looked at me sharply. With such grace as I could command, I delivered my message, left the house and was hurrying through the garden when chance threw you in my way. And now you have it all, sir."

"The princess--has she heard the king has received a letter from the duke, and that his Majesty has changed the wedding date?"

The jester spoke slowly, but Jacqueline was assured that beneath his deliberate manner surged deep and conflicting emotions; that his calmness was no more than a mask to conceal his pain. Had he given utterance to the feeling that beset him, had he betrayed more than a suggestion of the passion, rage or grief which struggles for mastery beneath a forced sloth of sensibility, she would have once more mocked him with laughter. But perhaps his very quiescence inclined her to look upon him with a grain of sympathy or compassion, for her tones were now grave.

"The princess knows; has heard all from the king. Not long since he sent for her. Will she consent? What else can she do? 'Tis the monarch who commands; we who obey!"

"Is the court then only a mart, a guildhall?" he exclaimed. "A woman--even a princess--should be won, not--exchanged!"

Her lashes drooped; in her gaze shone once more the ironical amusement.

"Why," she said, "from what wilds, or forests, have you come? The heart follows where the trader lists! Think you the princess will wear the willow?" she laughed. "How well you know women!"

"Do you mean that she--"

"I mean that her welfare is in strong hands; that there will be few

greater in all the land; none more honored! The duke's principality is vast--but here comes the princess." The hound sprang to his feet and ran gamboling down the path. "Ask her the rest yourself, most Unsophisticated Fool! Ah,"--with a touch she could not resist--"what a handsome bride she will make for the duke!"