CHAPTER V

JACQUELINE FETCHES THE PRINCESS' FAN

Through the flowery path, so narrow her gown brushed the leaves on either side, the Princess Louise appeared, walking slowly. A head-dress, heart-shaped, held her hair in its close confines; the gown of cloth-of-silver damask fitted closely to her figure, and, from the girdle, hung a long pendent end, elaborately enriched. With short, sharp barks, the dog bounded before her, but the hand usually extended to caress the animal remained at her side.

Intently the jester watched her draw near and ever nearer, their common trysting spot, her favorite garden nook. A handsome bride, forsooth, as Jacqueline had suggested. All in white was she now; a glittering white, with silver adornment; ravishingly hymeneal. A bride for a duke--or a king--more stately than the queen; handsomer than the favorite of favorites who ruled the king and France.

"Jacqueline," she said, evincing neither surprise nor any other emotion, as she approached, "go and fetch my fan. I believe 'tis in the king's ante-chamber."

"Madam carried no fan when"--began the girl.

"Then 'tis somewhere else. Do not bandy words, but find it."

Sinking on the bench as the maid walked quickly away, she remained for some moments in silent thought,--a reverie the jester forbore to disturb. Her head rested on her arm, from which fell the flowing sleeve almost to the ground; her wrist was lightly inclasped by a slender golden band of delicate Byzantine enamel work; over the sculptured form of the stone griffin that constituted one of the supports of the ancient Norman bench flowed the voluminous folds of her dress, partly concealing the monster from view. Against the clambering ivy which for centuries had reveled in this chosen spot, and which the landscape gardeners of Francis had wisely spared, lay her hand, a small ring of curious workmanship gleaming from her finger. The ring caused the jester to start, remembering he had last seen it worn by the king.

Truly, the capricious, but august, monarch must have been well pleased with the complaisance of his fair ward, and the face of the fool, glowing and eager, became on the instant hard and cold. Did he experience now the first pangs of that sorrow Jacqueline had vividly portrayed as the love-portion of Marot and Caillette? Faintly the ivy whispered above the princess, telling perhaps of other days when, centuries gone by, some Norman lady had been wooed and won, or wooed and lost, in the shadow of the griffin, which, silent, sphinx-like, yet endured through the ages.

Idly the Princess Louise plucked a leaf from the old, old vine, picked it apart and let the pieces float away. As they fluttered and fell at

the jester's feet she regarded him with thoughtful blue eyes.

"How far is it," she asked, "to the duke's principality?"

If he had doubted the maid's story, he was now convinced. The ring and her question confirmed Jacqueline's narrative. Moodily he surveyed the great claws of the griffin, firmly planted on the earth, and then looked from the feet to the laughing mouth of the stone figure, or so much of it as the shining dress left uncovered.

"About fifteen days' journey, Princess," he replied.

"No farther?"

"Barring accidents, it may be made in that time."

She did not notice how dull was his tone; how he avoided her gaze. Blind to him, she turned the ring around and around on her finger, as though her thoughts were concentrated on it.

"Accidents," she repeated, her hand now motionless. "Is the way perilous?"

"The country is most unsettled."

"What do you mean by unsettled?" she continued, bending forward with

fingers clasped over her knees. Supinely she waved a foot back and forth, showing and then withdrawing the point of a jeweled slipper, and a suggestion of lavender in silk network above. "What do you call unsettled?"

"The country is infested with many roving bands commanded by the so-called independent barons who owe allegiance to neither king nor emperor," he answered. "Their homes are perched, like eagles' nests, upon some mountain peak that commands the valleys travelers must proceed through. A fierce, untamed crew, bent on rapine and murder!"

"Did you encounter any such?" Gently.

"Ofttimes."

"And left unscathed?"

"Because I was a jester, Madam; something less than man; a lordling's slave; a woman's plaything! Their sentinels shared with me their flasks; I slept before their signal fires, and even supped in the heart of their stone fastnesses. Fools and monks are safe among them, for the one amuses and the other absolves their sins. Yet is there one free baron," he added reflectively, "whom even I should have done well to avoid; he, the most feared, the most savage! Louis, the bastard of Pfalz-Urfeld!"

"Have you ever met him?" asked the princess, in a mechanical tone.

"No," with a short laugh. "A few of his knaves I encountered, however, whose conduct shamed the courtesy of the other mountain rogues. I all but fared ill indeed, from them. To the pleasantry of my greeting, they replied with the true pilferer's humor; the free baron had ordered every one searched. They would have robbed and stripped me, despite the color of my coat, only fortunately, instead of a fool's staff, I had a good blade of the duke's. For a moment it was cut and thrust--not jest and gibe; the suddenness of the attack surprised them, and before they could digest the humor of it the fool had slipped away."

She leaned inertly back against the soft cushion of ivy. In the shadow the tint on her cheeks deepened, but below the sunlight played about her shoulders through leafy interspace, or crept in dancing spots down over her gown and arms.

"The duke would not be molested by these outlaws?" she continued, pursuing her line of questioning.

"The duke has a strong arm," he answered cautiously. "They may be well content to permit him to come and go as he sees fit."

"Well, well," she said, perversely, "I was only curious about the distance and the country."

"For leagues the land is wild, bleak, inhospitable, and then 'tis level, monotonous, deserted, so lonely the song dies on the wandering minstrel's lips. But the duke rides fast with his troop and soon would cover the mountain paths and dreary wastes."

"Nay," she interrupted impatiently, "I asked not how the duke would ride."

"I thought you wished to know, Princess," he replied, humbly.

"You thought"--she began angrily, sitting erect.

"I know, Princess; a fool should but jest, not think."

"Why do you cross me to-day?" she demanded petulantly. "Can you not see--"

Abruptly she rose; impatiently moved away; but a few steps, however, when she turned, her face suddenly free from annoyance, in her eyes a soft decision.

"There!" she exclaimed with a smile, half-arch, half-repentant. "How can any one be angry on such a day--all sunshine, butterflies and flowers!"

He did not reply, and, mistress once more of herself, she drew near.

"What a contrast to the stuffy palace, with all the courtiers, ministers and lap-dogs!" she went on. "Here one can breathe. But how shall we make the most of such a day? Stroll into the forest; sit by the fountain; run over the grass?"

Her voice was softer than it had been; her words fraught with suggestions of exhilarating companionship. Did she note their effect? At any rate, she laughed lightly.

"But how," she resumed, surveying the great enfolding skirt, "could one trip the sward with this monstrous gown, weighted with wreaths of silver? Is it not but one of the many penalties of high birth? Oh, for the short skirts of the lowly! What comfort to be arrayed like Jacqueline!"

"And she, Princess, doubtless thinks likewise of more gorgeous apparel." His heart beat faster as he strove to answer her in kind.

"A waste of cloth in vanity, as saith Master Calvin!" she replied, lifting her arms that shone with creamy softness from the dangling folds of heavy silk. "Were it not for this courtly encumbrance, I should propose going into the fields with the haymakers. You may see them now--look!--through the opening in the foliage."

With an expression, part resignation, part regret, she leaned against

the wind-worn griffin which formed the arm of the bench. Fainter sounded the warning of the jestress in the ears of the duke's fool; so faint it became but a weak admonition. More and more he abandoned himself to the pleasure of the moment.

"To make the most of the day," the princess had said.

How? By denying himself the sight of her ever-varying grace; by refusing to yield to the charm of her voice. He raised his head more boldly; through her drooping lashes a lazy light shot forth upon him, and the shadow of a smile seemed to say: "That is better. When the mistress is indulgent, a fool should not be unbending. A melancholy jester is but poor company."

And so her mood swayed his; he forgot his resolution, his pride, and yielded to the infatuation of the moment. But when he endeavored to call the weapons of his office to his aid, her glance and the shadow of that smile left him witless. Jest, fancy and whim had taken flight.

"Well?" she said. "Well, Sir Fool?"

His color shifted; withal his half-embarrassment, there was something graceful and noble in his bearing.

"Madam"--he began, and stopped for want of matter to put into words.

But if the princess was annoyed at the new-found dullness of her plaisant, her manner did not show it.

"What," she said, gently; "no news from the court; no word of intrigue; no story of the king? I should seek a courtier for my companion, not a jester. But there! What book have you brought?" indicating the volume that lay upon the bench.

"Guillaume de Lorris's 'Romance of the Rose,'" he answered, more freely.

"Where did we leave off?"

"Where the hero, arriving at a fountain, beheld a beautiful rose tree," said the fool in a low tone. "Desiring the rose, he reached to gather it--"

"Yes, I remember. And then, Reason and Danger did battle with Love."

"Is it your wish we continue?" he asked, taking the book in his hand.

"I would fain learn if he gathers his rose. Nay, sit here on the bench and I"--brightly--"may look over your shoulder ever and anon, to steal a glimpse of the pretty pictures."

Unquestioningly, he obeyed her, the book, illumined, gleaming in the sunshine; the letters, red, gold, many-hued, dancing before them. Love

in crimson, the five silver shafts of Cupid, the Tower of Jealousy, a frowning fortress, the Rose, incentive for endless striving and endeavor--all floated by on the creamy parchment leaves. So interested was she in these wondrous pages, executed with such precision and perfection, with marginal adornment, and many a graceful turn and fancy in initial letter and tail-piece, she seemed to him for the moment rather some simple lowly maiden than a proud princess of the realm.

"How much splendor the penman has shown!" she murmured, her breath on his cheek. "'Tis more beautiful than the 'Life of Saint Agnes.' Is not that figure well done? A hard, austere old man; Reason, I believe, in monkish attire."

"Reason, or Duty, ever partakes of the monastery," he retorted with a short, mirthless laugh.

"Duty; obedience!" she broke in. "Do I not know them? Please turn the page."

Reaching over, she herself did so, her fingers touching his, her bosom just brushing his shoulder; and then she flushed, for it was Venus's self the page revealed, standing on a grassy bank and showing Love the rose. Around the queen of beauty floated a silver gauze; her hair was indicated by threads of gold tossed luxuriantly about her; upon the shoulder of Love rested her hand, encouraging him in his quest. Most zealously had the monk-artist executed the lovely lady, as though some

heart-dream flowed from the ink on his pen, every line exact, each feature radiantly shown. Some youthful anchorite, perhaps, was he, and this the fair temptation that had assailed his fancy; such a vision as St. Anthony wrestled with in the grievous solitude of his hermit cell.

From the book and the picture, the jester, feeling the princess draw back impulsively, dared look up, and, looking up, could not look down from a loveliness surpassing the idealization on vellum of a monkish dream. From head to foot, the sunlight bathed the princess, glistening in her hair until it was alive with light. Even when he gazed into her blue eyes he was conscious of a more flaming glory than lay in the heavens of their depths; a splendent maze that shed a brightness around her.

"Oh, Princess," he said, wildly, "I know what the king hath told you! Why you wear the monarch's ring!"

"The monarch's ring!" she repeated, as recalled suddenly from wandering thought. "Why--how know you--ah, Jacqueline--"

"And a ring signifieth consent. You will fulfill the king's desire?"

"The king's desire?" she replied, mechanically. "Is it not the will of God?"

"But your own heart?" he cried, holding her with his eager gaze.

She laid her hand on his shoulder; her eyes answered his. Did she not realize the tragedy the future held for him? Or did to-morrow seem far off, and the present become her greater concern? Was hers the philosophy of Marguerite's code which taught that the sweets of admiration should be gathered on the moment? That a cry of pain from a worshiping heart, however lowly, was honeyed flattery to Love's votaries? As the jester looked at her a sudden chill seized his breast. Jacqueline's mocking laughter rang in his ears. "Ask her the rest yourself, most Unsophisticated Fool!"

"Then you will obey the king?" he persisted, dully.

"Why," she answered, smiling and bending nearer, "will you spoil the day?"

"You would give yourself to a man, whether or not you loved him?"

A frown gathered on the princess' brow, but she stooped, herself picked up the book he had dropped, brushed the earth from it and seated herself upon the bench. Her manner was quiet, resolute; her action, a rebuke to the forward fool.

"Will you not read?" she said, with an inscrutable look.

"True," he exclaimed, rising quickly, "I was sent to amuse--"

"And you have found me a too exacting mistress?" she asked, more gently, checking the implied reproach.

"Exacting!" he repeated.

"What then?" she said, half sadly.

"Nothing," he answered.

But in his mind Jacqueline's scornful words reiterated themselves: "Think you the princess will wear the willow?"

Taking the book, he opened it at random, mechanically sinking at her feet. The quest, the idle quest! Was it but an awakening? So far lay the branch above his reach! His voice rose and fell with the mystic rhythm of the meter, now dwelling on death and danger, the shortness of life, the sweetness of passion; then telling the pleasures of the dance.

Lower fell the princess' hand until it touched the reader's head; touched and lingered. Before the fool's eyes the letters of the book became blurred and then faded away. Doubt, misgiving, fear, vanished on the moment. The flower she had given him seemed to burn on his heart. He forgot the decree of the king; her equivocation; the unanswered question. Passionately he thrust his hand into his doublet.

"The rose and love are one," he cried. "The rose is--"

"Pardon me, Madam," said a voice, and Jacqueline, clear-eyed, calm, stood before them; "the fan was not in the king's ante-chamber, or I should have been here sooner. I trust you have not been put out for want of it?"

"Not at all, Jacqueline," returned her mistress, with a natural, tranquil movement, "although"--sharply--"you were gone longer than you should have been!"