

## CHAPTER VI

### THE ARRIVAL OF THE DUKE

Proficient as a poet, bold as a soldier, adroit as a statesman, the king was, nevertheless, most fitted for the convivial role of host, and no part that he played in his varied repertoire afforded such opportunity for the nice display of his unusual talents. History hath sneered at his rhymes as flat, stale and unprofitable; upon the bloody field he had been defeated and subsequently imprisoned; clever in diplomacy, the sagacity of his opponent, Charles, had in truth overmatched him; yet as the ostentatious Boniface, in grand bib and tucker, prodigal in joviality and good-fellowship, his reputation rests without a flaw.

In anticipation of the arrival of the duke and his suite, the monarch had ordered a series of festivities and entertainments such as would gratify his desire for pageantry and display, and at the same time do honor to a guest who was to espouse one of France's fairest wards. To the castle repaired tailors, embroiderers and goldsmiths to make and devise garments for knights, ladies, lords and esquires and for the trapping, decking and adorning of coursers, jennets and palfries. Bales of silks and satins had been long since conveyed thither from distant Paris, in anticipation of the coming marriage; and the old Norman castle that had once resounded with the clashing of arms, the snap of the cross-bow and the clang of the catapult now echoed with the

merry stir and flurry of peace; a bee-hive of activity wherein were no drones; marshal, grand master, chancellor and grand chamberlain preparing for mysteries and hunting parties; dowagers, matrons and maids making ready for balls and other pastimes.

With this new influx of population to the pleasure palace came a plentiful sprinkling of wayside minstrels, jugglers, mountebanks, dulcimer and lute players, street poets who sang the praises of some fair cobbleress or pretty sausage girl; scamps of students from the Paris haunts of vice, loose fellows who conned the classical poets by day and took a purse by night; dancers, dwarfs, and merry men all, not averse to--

"Haunch and ham, and cheek and chine

While they gurgled their throats with right good wine."

Here sauntered a wit-cracker, a peacock feather in his hand, arm-in-arm with an impoverished "banquet beagle," or "feast hound;" there passed a jack in green, a bladder under his arm and a tankard at his belt, with which latter he begged that sort of alms that flows from a spigot. As vagrant followers hover on the verge of a camp, or watchful vultures circle around their prey, so these lower parasites (distinct from the other well-born, more aristocratic genus of smell-feast) prowled vigilantly without the castle walls and beyond the limits of the royal pleasure grounds, finding occasional employment from lackey, valet or

equerry, who, imitating their betters, amused themselves betimes with some low buffoon or vulgar clown and rewarded him for his gross stories and antics with a crust and a cup.

Faith, in those thrice happy days, every henchman could whistle to him his shabby poet, and every ostler hold court in the stable, with a visdase, or ass face, to keep the audience in a roar, and a nimble-footed trull to set them into ecstasies. But woe betide the honest wayfarer who strolled beyond the orderly precincts of the king's walls after dusk; for if some street coxcomb was too drunk to rob him, or a ribald Latin scholar saw him not, he surely ran into a nest of pavement tumblers or cellar poets who forthwith stripped him and turned him loose in the all-insufficient garb of nature.

A fantastic, waggish crew--yet Francis minded them not, so long as they observed sufficient etiquette to keep their distance from his royal person and immediate following. This nice decorum, however, be it said, was an unwritten law with these waifs and scatterlings, knowing the merry monarch who tolerated them afar would feel no compunction at hanging them severally, or in squads, from the convenient branches of the trees surrounding the castle, should the humor seize him that such summary chastisement were best for their morals and the welfare of the community. Thus, though bold, were they also shy, drinking humbly from a black-jack quart in the kitchen and vanishing docilely enough when the sovereign cook bid them be gone with warm words or by flinging over them ladles of hot soup.

One bright morning, like rabbits peeping from their holes when they hear the footfall of the hunter, these field ramblers and wayside peregrinators were all agog, emerging from grassy cover and thicket retreat, to gaze open-mouthed after a gay cavalcade that issued from the castle gate, and rode southward with waving banner and piercing trumpet note.

"The king, knaves!" cried a grimy estray with bells upon his person that jingled like those of a Jewish high priest, to a group of players and gamesters. "Already my mouth waters at the thoughts of the wedding feast, and the scraps and bones that will be thrown away. There I warrant you we'll all find hearty cheer."

"Why are fools ever welcome at a wedding?" asked a singing scholar.

"Because there are two in the ceremony, and the rest make the chorus," answered a philandering mime.

"And our merry monarch goeth down the road to meet one of the two," said a close-cropped rogue.

"Well, he's a brave knight to come so far to yield himself captive--to a woman," returned the student. "As Horace saith--"

"Thou calumniator! shrimp of a man!" exclaimed a dark-browed drab

dressed like a gipsy, seizing the scholar's short doublet. "An I get at you--"

"Take the garment, you harridan, not the man," he retorted, slipping deftly out of the jerkin and dancing away to a safe distance.

"Ha! there's wedded bliss for you!" laughed a man in Franciscan attire, a rough rascal disguised as one of those priests called "God's fools" or "Christ's fools." "A week ago, when I married them, they were billing and cooing. But to your holes, children! When the king returns he would not have his guest gaze upon such scarecrows and trollops. Disperse, and Beelzebub take you!" And as the group scattered the sound of beating horses' hoofs died away in the distance.

Francis was unusually good-humored that day. Apprised by a herald that the duke and his followers were nearing the castle, he had sent the messenger back announcing a trysting-place, and now rode forth to meet his guest and escort him with honor to the castle. Upon a noble steed, black as night, the monarch sat; the saddle and trappings crimson in color; the stirrup and bit, of gold; a jaunty plume of white ostrich feathers waving above the jetty mane. The costume of the king's stalwart figure displayed a splendid suit of plate armor, enriched with chased work and ornament in gold, his appearance in keeping with his character of monarch and knight who sought to revive the spirit of chivalry at a period when the practical modern tendencies seriously threatened to undermine the practices and traditions of a once-exalted,

but now fast-failing, institution for the regulation of morals and conduct.

By his side, less radiant only in comparison with the august monarch, rode the rank and quality of the realm, with silver and spangles, and fluttering plumes, scabbards gleaming with jewels, and girdles adorned with rich settings. Furiously galloping behind came an attenuated snow-white charger, bearing the hunchback. A bladder dangling over his shoulder, his bagpipe hanging from his waist, Triboulet bobbed frantically up and down, clinging desperately to the saddle or winding his legs about the charger's neck to preserve his equilibrium.

"You would better jog along more quietly, fool," observed a courtier, warningly, "or you will suffer for it."

"Alas, sir," replied Triboulet, "I stick my spurs into my horse to keep him quiet, but the more I prick him the more unruly I find the obstinate beast."

The king, who heard, laughed, and the dwarf's heart immediately expanded, auguring he should soon be restored to the monarch's favor; for since the night the buffoon had failed to answer the duke's jester in Fools' hall Francis had received Triboulet's advances and small pleasantries with terrifying coldness. In fact, the dwarf had never passed such an uncomfortable period during his career, save on one memorable occasion when a band of mischievous pages had set upon him,

carried him to the scaffold and nailed his enormous ears to the beam. Now, reassured, burning with delight, the jester spurred presumptuously forward, no longer feeling bound to lag in the rear.

"Go back!" cried an angry knight. "I can not bear a fool on my right."

Triboulet reined in his horse, but pushed ahead on the other side of the rider who had spoken.

"I can bear it very well," he retorted and found his proud reward in the company's laughter. The remark, moreover, passed from lip to lip to the king, and the misshapen jester felt his little cup of happiness filled once more to the brim; his old prestige seemed coming back to him; holding his position in the road, he gazed disdainfully at the disgruntled knight, and the other returned the look with one of hearty ill-will, muttering an imprecation and warning just above his breath.

"Sire," called out Triboulet, loudly, now above fearing courtier, knight or any high official of the realm, "the Count de Piseione says he will beat me to death."

"If he does," good-naturedly answered the king, "I will hang him quarter of an hour afterward."

"Please, your Majesty, hang him quarter of an hour before."

Thus right pleasantly, with quip and jest, and many a smart sally, did the monarch and his retinue draw near the meeting spot, where at a fork of the road, beneath the shade of overhanging branches, were already assembled a goodly group of soldiers. Beyond them, at a respectful distance, stood many beasts of burden, heavily laden, the great packs promising stores of rare and costly gifts. At the head of the troopers was a thick-set man, with broad shoulders and brawny frame, mounted on a powerful gray horse. This leader, whom the approaching company surmised to be the duke, sat motionless as a statue, gazing steadfastly at the shining armor and gallant figure of the king who spurred to him, a friendly greeting on his lips. Then, lightly springing to earth and throwing his bridle to one of his troop, the foreign noble approached the royal horseman on foot, and, bending his head, knelt before him, respectfully kissing his hand.

Grim, silent, with hardened faces, the duke's men regarded the scene, their dusty attire (albeit rich enough beneath the marks of travel), sun-burned visages and stolid manner in marked contrast with the bearing and aspect of the king's gay following. One of the alien troop pulled a red mustachio fiercely and eyed a blithe popinjay of the court with quizzical superiority; the others remained, stock-still, but observant.

"I see you are punctual and waiting, noble sir!" said the monarch gaily when the initial formalities had been complied with. "But that is no more than should be expected from--an impatient bridegroom." Then,

gazing curiously, yet with penetrating look, on the features of his guest, who now had arisen: "You appear slightly older than I expected from the letter of our dear friend and brother, the emperor."

And truly the duke's appearance was that of a man more nearly five and thirty than five and twenty; his face was brown from exposure and upon his brow the scar of an old sword wound; yet a fearless, dashing countenance; an eye that could kindle to headlong passion, and a thick-set neck and heavy jaw that bespoke the foeman who would battle to the last breath.

"Older, Sire?" he replied with composure. "That must needs be, since living in the saddle ages a man."

"Truly," returned the monarch, instinctively laying his hand upon his sword. "The clash of arms, the thunder of hoofs, the waving banners--yes, Glory is a seductive mistress who robs us of our youth. Have I not wooed her and found--gray hairs? Who shall give me back those days?"

"History, your Majesty, shall give them to posterity," answered the duke.

"Even those we lost to Charles?" muttered the king, a shadow passing over his countenance.

"Glory, Sire, is a mistress sometimes fickle in her favors."

"And yet we live but for--" He broke off abruptly, and with the eye of a trained commander surveyed the duke's men. "Daredevils; daredevils, all!" he muttered.

"Rough-looking fellows, Sire!" apologized the duke, "but tried and faithful soldiers. Somewhat dusty and road-worn." And his eyes turned meaningfully to the king's suite; the flashing girdles of silver, the shining hilts, the gorgeous cloaks and even the adornment of ribbons.

"Nay," said Francis meditatively, "on a rough journey I would fain have these fire-eaters at my back. They look as though they could cut and hew."

"Moderately well, your Majesty," answered the duke with modesty.

"Will you mount, noble sir, and ride with me? Yonder is the castle, and in the castle is a certain fair lady whom you, no doubt, fain would see."

Long gazed the Duke of Friedwald at the distant venerable pile of stone; the majestic turrets and towers softly floating in a dreamy mist; the setting, fresh, woody, green. Long he looked at this inviting picture and then breathed deeply.

"Ah, Sire, I would the meeting were over," he remarked in a low voice.

"Why so, sir?" asked the king in surprise. "Do you fear you will not fancy the lady?"

"I fear she may not fancy me," retorted the nobleman, soberly. "Your own remark, Sire; that I appear older than you had expected?" he continued, gravely, significantly.

"A recommendation in your favor," laughed the monarch. "I ever prefer sober manhood to callow youth about me. The one is a prop, stanch, tried; the other a reed that bends this way and that, or breaks when you press it too hard."

"I should be lacking in gratitude were I not deeply appreciative of your Majesty's singular kindness," replied the duke, his face flushing with pleasure. "But your Majesty knows womankind--"

"Nay; I've studied them a little, but know them not," retorted Francis, dryly.

"And it is unlikely the lady may find me all her imagination has depicted," went on the nobleman, with palpable embarrassment. "My noble master, the emperor, hath--regarding me still as but a stripling from his own vantage point of age and wisdom--represented me a young man in his proposals. But though I'm younger than I look, and feel no

older than I am, how young, or how old, shall I seem to the princess?"

"Young enough to be her husband; old enough for her to look up to," answered the monarch, reassuringly.

"Again," objected the duke, meditatively regarding the castle, "she may be expecting a handsome, debonair bridegroom, and when she sees me"--ruefully surveying himself--"what will she say?"

"What will she say? 'Yes' at the altar. Is it not enough?" Leaning back in his saddle, the king's face expressed the enjoyment he derived from the conversation with the backward and too conscientious soldier. Here was a groom whose wedding promised the court much amusement and satisfaction in those jovial days of jesting and merry-making.

"Come," resumed the king, encouragingly, "I'll warrant you more forward in battle."

"Battle!" said the duke. "That's another matter. To see your foeman's gleaming eyes!--but hers!-- Should they express anger, disdain--"

"Let yours show but the greater wrath," advised the king, complaisantly. "In love, like cures like! Let me be your physician; I'll warrant you'll find me proficient."

"I've heard your Majesty hath practised deeply," returned the noble,

readily, in spite of his perplexity.

"Deeply?" Francis lifted his brow. "I am but a superficial student; master only of the rudiments; no graduate of the college of love. Moreover, I've heard the letters you exchanged were--ahem!--well-enough writ. You pressed your suit warmly for one unlearned, a mere novice."

"Because I had seen her face, your Majesty; had it ever before me in the painted miniature. Any man"--with a rough eloquence and fervor that impressed the king with the depth of his passion--"could well worship at that fair shrine, but that she--"

"Forward, I beg you!" interrupted the king. "Womankind are but frail flesh, sir; easily molded; easily won. She is a woman; therefore, soft, yielding; yours for the asking. You are over valorous at a distance; too timorous near her. Approach her boldly, and, though she were Diana's self, I'll answer for your victory! Eh, Triboulet, are our ladies cold-hearted, callous, indifferent to merit?"

"Cold-hearted?" answered the dwarf, with a ludicrous expression of feigned rapture. "Were I to relate--but, no, my tongue is silent--discretion--your Majesty will understand--"

"Well," said the duke, "with encouragement from the best-favored scholar in the kingdom and the--ugliest, I should proceed with more confidence."

"Best-favored!" smirked the little monster. "Really, you flatter me."

"A whimsical fellow, Sire," vouchsafed the nobleman.

"When he is not tiresome," answered the monarch. "On, gentlemen!" And the cavalcade swept down the road toward the castle. Far behind, with cracking of whip, followed the mules and their drivers.