

CHAPTER VII

THE COURT OF LOVE

The rough Norman banqueting hall, with its massive rafters, frayed tapestries and rude adornment of bristling heads of savage boars, wide-spreading antlers and other trophies of the chase, had long since been replaced under the king's directions by an apartment more to the satisfaction of a monarch who was a zealous and lavish patron of the brilliant Italian school of painting, sculpture and architecture. Those barbarous decorations, celebrating the hunt, had been relegated to subterranean regions, the walls dismantled, and the room turned over to a corps of artists of such renown as Da Vinci, François Clouet, Jean Cousin and the half-mad Benvenuto Cellini.

Where formerly wild boars had snarled with wicked display of yellow tusks from the blackened plaster, now Cleopatra, in the full bloom of her mature charms, reclined with her stalwart Roman hero in tender dalliance. Where once the proud and stately head of the majestic stag had hung over door and panel, now classic nymphs bathed in a pellucid pool, and the only horns were those which adorned the head of him who, according to the story, dared gaze through the foliage, and was rewarded for his too curious interest by--that then common form of punishment--metamorphosis.

Overhead, vast transformation from the great ribbed beams of oak and barren interspaces, graceful Peri floated on snow-white clouds and roguish Cupids swam through the azure depths, to the edification of nondescript prodigies, who constituted the massive molding, or frame, to the decorative scene. The ancient fireplace, broad and deep, had given way to an ornate mantel of marble; the capacious tankard and rotund pewter pot of olden times, suggestive of mighty butts of honest beer, had been supplanted by goblets of silver and gold, covered with scroll work, arabesques or chiseled figures.

In this spacious hall, begilt, bemirrored, assembled, on the evening of the duke's arrival, Francis, his court and the guest of the occasion. From wide-spreading chandeliers, with their pendent, pear-shaped crystals, a thousand candles threw a flood of light upon the scene, as 'mid trumpet blast and softer strains of harmony, King Francis and good Queen Eleanor led the way to the royal table; and thereat, shortly after, at a signal from the monarch, the company seated themselves.

At the head of the board was the king; on his right, his lawful consort, pale, composed, saintly; on his left, the Countess d'Etampes, rosy, animated, free. Next to the favorite sat the "fairest among the learned and most learned among the fair," Marguerite, beloved sister of Francis, and her second husband, Henry d'Albret, King of Navarre; opposite, Henry the dauphin and his spouse, Catharine de Medici; not far removed, Diane de Poitiers, whose dark eyes Henry ever openly sought, while Catharine complacently talked affairs of state with the

chancellor.

In the midst of this illustrious company, and further surrounded by a plentiful sprinkling of ruddy cardinals, fat bishops, constables, governors, marshals and ladies, more or less distinguished through birth or beauty, the Duke of Friedwald and the Princess Louise were a center of attraction for the wits whose somewhat free jests the license of the times permitted. At the foot of the royal table places had been provided for Marot, Caillette, Triboulet, Jacqueline and the duke's fool.

The heads and figures of the ladies of the court were for the most part fearfully and wonderfully bedecked. In some instances the horned-shaped head-dress had been followed by yet loftier steeples, "battlements to combat God with gold, silver and pearls; wherein the lances were great forked pins, and the arrows the little pins." With more simplicity, the Princess Louise wore her hair cased in a network of gold and jewels, and the austere French moralist who assailed the higher bristling ramparts of vanity would, perhaps, have borne in silence this more modest bastion of the flesh and the devil.

But the face beneath was a greater danger to those who hold that beauty is a menace to salvation; on her cheek hung the rosy banner of youth; in her eyes shone the bright arrows of conquest. And the duke, discarding his backwardness, as a soldier his cloak before battle, watched the hue that mantled her face, proffered his open breast to the

shining lances of her gaze, and capitulated unconditionally before the smile of victory on her blood-red lips. With his great shoulders, his massive neck and broad, virile face, he seemed a Cyclops among pygmies in that gathering of slender courtiers and she but a flower by his side.

"I thought, Sire, your duke was timorous, bashful as a boy?" murmured the Countess d'Etampes to the king.

"He was--on the road!" answered the king thoughtfully.

"Then has he marvelously recovered his assurance."

"In love, Madam, as in battle, the zest grows with the fray," said Francis with meaning.

"And the duke is reputed a brave soldier. He looks very strong, as if--almost--he might succeed with any woman he were minded to carry off."

"To carry off!" laughed the monarch. "'Tis he, Madam, who will be bound in tethers! At heart he's shame-faced as a callow youngster."

She wilfully shook her head. "No woman could keep him in leading-strings, your Majesty. There is something domineering, savage, crushing, in his hand. Look at it, on the table there. Is it not mighty as an iron gauntlet? What other man at the board has such a

brutal hand? The strength in it makes me shudder. Will she not bend to it; kiss it?"

With amused superiority Francis regarded his fair neighbor on the left. "Women, Madam, are but hasty judges of men," he said, dryly, "and then 'tis fancy more than reason which governs their verdict. If the duke should seem over-confident, 'tis to hide a certain modesty, and not to appear out of confidence in so large a company."

"And yet, Sire, at their first meeting he did not comport himself like one easily put out," persisted the favorite. "'Tis with a cold hand you welcome me, Princess,' he said, noticing her insensibility of manner. Then rising he gazed upon her long and deep, as a soldier might survey a battlefield. 'And yet,' said he, still holding her fingers, 'I'll warrant me warm blood could course through this little hand.' At that the color rose in her cheek; behold! the statue was touched with life and she looked at him as drawn against her will. 'If my hand be cold, my Lord,' she answered, courteously, 'it belies the character of your welcome.' Whereupon he laughed like one who has had a victory."

"Beshrew me," said the king, modifying his last observation, "if women are not all eyes and ears! I neither heard nor saw all that. A little constraint--a natural blush to punctuate their talk--the meeting seemed conventional enough. 'Tis through your own romantic heart you looked, Anne!"

Quicker circulated the goblets of silver, gold and crystal; faster babbled the pretty lips; brighter grew the eyes beneath the stupendous towers that crowned the heads of the court ladies. All talked at once without disturbing the king, who now whispered soft nothings in the ear of the countess. From the other tables in the hall arose a varying cadence of clatter and laughter, which increased with the noise and din of the king's own board; a clamor always just subservient to the deeper chorus of the royal party; an accompaniment, as it were, full yet unobtrusive, to the hubbub from the more exalted company. But the princely uproar growing louder, the grand-masters, grand-chamberlain, gentlemen of the chamber and lesser lights of the church were enabled to carol and make merry with less restraint. The pungent smell of roses permeated the hall, arising from a screen of shrubbery at one end of the room wherein sang a hundred silver-toned birds.

At the king's table Caillette recited a merry roundelay, and Triboulet roared out tale after tale, each more full-flavored than the one that went before it, flinging smart sayings at marriage, and drawing a ludicrous picture of the betrayed husband. Villot, a lily in his hand, which he regarded ever sentimentally, caroled the boisterous espousals of a yokel and a cinder-wench, while Marot and a bishop contended in a heated argument regarding the translation of a certain passage of Ovid's "Art of Love."

Singularly pale, unusually tranquil, the duke's fool furtively watched

his master and the princess. In contrast to his composure, Jacqueline's merriment seemed the more unrestrained; she laughed like a witch; her hands flashed with pretty gestures, and she had so tossed her head, her hair floated around her, wild and disordered.

"Why are you so quiet?" she whispered to the duke's fool.

"Is there not enough merriment, mistress?" he answered, gravely.

"There can never be any to spare," she said. "And you would do well to remember your office."

"What do you mean?" he asked, absently.

"That you have many enemies; that you can not live at court with a jaundiced countenance. Heigh-ho! Alackaday! You should hie yourself back to the woods and barren wastes of Friedwald, Master Fool."

Her sparkling glance returned to the exhilarating scene. Well had the assemblage been called a court of love. Now soft eyes invited burning glances, and graceful heads swayed alluringly toward the handsome cavaliers who momentarily had found lodgment in hearts which, like palaces, had many ante-chambers. From hidden recesses, strains of music filled the room with tinkling passages of sensuous, but illusive, harmony; a dream of ardor, masked in the daintiness of a minuet.

Upon the back of the princess' chair rested one of the duke's hands; with the other he lifted his glass--a frail thing in fingers better adapted for a sword-hilt or massive battle mace.

"Drink, Princess," he said, bending over her, "to--our meeting!"

Her eyelids fluttered before his look; her breast rose a little. The scar on his brow held her gaze, as one fascinated, but she drew away slightly and mechanically sought the tiny golden goblet at her elbow. Dreamily, dreamily, sounded the rhythmical music; heavily, so heavily hung the perfume in the air! Full of mist seemed the hall; the king, the queen, the countess, all of the party, unreal, fanciful. The touch of the goblet chilled her lips and she put it down quickly.

"Is not the wine to your liking?" he asked, his hand tightening on her chair. "Perhaps it is too sour for your taste?"

"Nay; I thought it rather sweet," she answered. "Oh, I meant not that--"

"It is sweet wine, Princess," he said, setting down an empty glass.

"Sweeter than our Austrian vintage. Not white and thin and watery, but red--red as blood--red as your heart's blood--or mine--"

Crash! from the hand of the duke's jester had fallen a goblet to the floor. The princess started, turned; for a moment their glances

bridged the distance from where she sat, to the fools' end of the table; then hers slowly fell; slowly, and she passed a hand, whereon shone the king's ring, across her brow; looked up, as though once more to span infinity with her gaze, when her eyes fell short and met the duke's. Deliberately he lifted his filled glass.

"Red as your heart's blood--and mine--my love!" he repeated; and then stared sharply across the table at his jester.

Triboulet, swaggering in his chair, so high his feet could not touch the floor, surveyed the broken glass, the duke and the duke's fool. For some time his vigilant eyes had been covertly studying the unconscious foreign jester, noting sundry signs and symptoms. Nor had the princess' look when the goblet had fallen, been lost upon the misshapen buffoon; alert, wide-awake, his mind, quick to suspect, reached a sudden conclusion; a conclusion which by rapid process of reasoning became a conviction. Privileged to speak where others must need be silent, his profession that of prying subtlety, which spared neither rank nor power so that it raised a laugh, he felt no hesitation in publishing the information he had gleaned by his superior mental nimbleness.

"Ho! ho!" he bellowed, the better to attract attention to himself.

"The duke sent his fool to amuse his betrothed and the fool hath lost his heart to his mistress."

The king left off his whispering, Catharine turned from the chancellor, Diane ceased furtively to regard Caillette, while the Queen of Navarre laughed nervously and murmured:

"Princess and jester! It will make another tale."

But Henry of Navarre looked gravely down. He, and Francis' queen--a passive spectator at the feast--and a bishop, whose interest lay in a truffled capon, alone followed not the direction of the duke's eyes. The fair favorite of the king clapped her hands, but the monarch frowned, not having forgotten that night in Fools' hall when the jester had appointed rogues to offices.

"What is this? A fool in love with the princess?" said the king, ominously.

"Even so, your Majesty," cried Triboulet. "But a moment ago Duke Robert did whisper to his bride-to-be, and the fool's hand trembled like a leaf and dropped his glass. Tra! la! la! What a situation! Holy Saint-Bagpipe! Here's a comedy in high life!"

"A comedy!" repeated the duke, and half-rose from his chair, regarding his fool with surprise and anger.

Now Triboulet roared. Had he not in the past attained his high position of favorite jester to the king by his very foolhardihood? And

were not trusting lovers and all too-confiding husbands the legitimate butt of all jesting?

"Look at the fool," he went on exultantly. "Does any one doubt his guilt? He is silent; he can not speak!"

And, indeed, the foreign jester seemed momentarily disconcerted, although he strove to appear indifferent.

"A presumptuous knave!" muttered Francis, darkly. "He saved his neck once only by a trick."

"Oh, the duke would not mind, now, if you were to hang him, Sire," answered Triboulet, blithely.

"True!" smiled the king. "The question of breach of hospitality might not occur. What have you to say, fool?" he continued, turning to the object of the buffoon's insidious and malicious attack.

"Laugh!" whispered Jacqueline, furtively pressing the arm of the duke's fool. "Laugh, or--"

The touch and her words appeared to arouse him from his lethargy and the jester arose, but not before the princess, with flaming cheeks, but proud bearing, had cast a quick glance in his direction; a glance half-appealing, half-resentful. Idly the jocularatrix regarded him, her

hands upon the table playing with the glasses, her lips faintly repeating the words of a roundelay:

"For love is madness;
While madness rules,
Fools in love
Remain but fools!
Sing hoddy-doddy,
Noddy!
Remain but fools!"

With the eyes of the company upon him, the duke's fool impassively studied the carven figure on his stick. If he felt fear of the king's anger, the resentment of his master, or the malice of the dwarf, his countenance now did not betray it. He had seemed about to speak, but did not.

"Well, rascal, well?" called out the king. "Do you think your wand will save you, sirrah?" he added impatiently.

"Why not, Sire?" tranquilly answered the jester.

The duke's face grew more and more ominous. Still the fool, looking up, did not quail, but met his master's glance freely, and those who observed noted it was the duke who first turned away, although his jaw

was set and his great fist clenched. Swiftly the jester's gaze again sought the princess, but she had plucked a spray of blossoms from the table and was holding it to her lips, mindlessly biting the fragrant leaves; and those who followed the fool's glance saw in her but a picture of languid unconcern such as became a kinswoman of the king.

Almost imperceptibly the brow of the plaisant clouded, but recovering himself, he confronted the king with an enigmatic smile.

"Why not?" he repeated. "In the Court of Love is not the fool's wand greater than a king's miter or the pastoral staff of the Abbé de Lys? Besides, Sire," he added quickly, "as a fool takes it, in the Court of Love, not to love--is treason!"

"Good!" murmured the bishop, still eating. "Not to love is treason!"

"Who alone is the culprit? Whose heart alone is filled with umbrage, hatred, pique?"

"Triboulet! Triboulet, the traitor!" suddenly cried the countess, sprightly as a child.

"Yes; Triboulet, the traitor!" exclaimed the fool, pointing the wand of folly at the hunchback.

Even Francis' offended face relaxed. "Positively, I shall never hang

this fellow," he said grimly to Marguerite.

"Before this tribunal of ladies whose beauty and learning he has outraged by his disaffection and spleen, I summon him for trial," continued the duke's jester. "Triboulet, arise! Illustrious ladies of the Court of Love, the offender is in your hands."

"A little monster!" spoke up Diane with a gesture of aversion, real or affected.

"He is certainly somewhat reprehensible," added the Queen of Navarre, whose tender heart ever inclined to the weaker side.

"An unconscionable rogue," murmured the bishop, complacently clasping his fat fingers before him.

"So he is already tried by the Church and the tribunal," went on the plaisant of the duke. "The Church hath excommunicated him and the Court of Love--"

"Will banish him!" exclaimed the countess mirthfully, regarding the captious monarch with mock defiance.

"Yes, banish him; turn him out," echoed Catharine, carelessly.

"But, your Majesty!" remonstrated the alarmed Triboulet, turning to the

monarch whose favor he had that day enjoyed.

"Appeal not to me!" returned Francis, sternly. "Here Venus rules!"

And he gallantly inclined to the countess.

"Venus at whom he scoffs!" broke in Jacqueline, shrilly, leaning back in her chair with her hands on her hips.

"You witch!--you sorceress!--it was you who"--he hissed with venomous glance.

"Hear him!" exclaimed the girl, lightly. "He calls me witch--sorceress--because, forsooth, I am a woman!"

"A woman--a devil"--muttered Triboulet between his closed teeth.

"And now," she cried, rising, impetuously, "he says that women are devils! What shall we do with him?"

"Pelt him out!" answered the countess. "Pelt him out!"

With peals of merriment and triumphant shouts, the court, of one accord, directed a fusillade of fruits, nuts and other viands at the head and person of the raging and hapless buffoon, the countess herself, apple in hand--Eve bent upon vengeance--leading in the assault. The other tables responded with a cross-fire, and heavier

articles succeeded lighter, until after having endured the continuous attack for a few moments as best he might, the unlucky dwarf raised his arms above his head and fairly fled from the hall, leaving behind in his haste a bagpipe and his wooden sword.

"So may all traitors be punished!" said the bishop unctuously, as he reached for a dish of confections that had escaped the fair hands in search of ammunition.

"Well," laughed the Countess d'Etampes, "if we have the support of the Church--"

"I will confess you, myself, Madam," gallantly retorted the bishop.

"And all the Court of Love?" asked Marguerite.

"Ah, your Highness--all?--I am old--in need of rest--but with an assistant or two--"

"Assistant or two!" interrupted Catharine, imperiously. "Would the task then be so great?"

"Nay"--with gentle expostulation--"but you--members of the court--are many; not your sins."

"I suppose," whispered Jacqueline to the duke's fool, when the

attention of the company was thus withdrawn from the jester's end of the table, "you think yourself in fine favor now?"

"Yes," he answered, absently; "thanks to your suggestion."

"My suggestion!" she repeated, scornfully. "I gave you none."

"Well, then, your crossing Triboulet."

"Oh, that," she replied, picking at a bunch of grapes, "was to defend my sex, not you."

"But your warning for me to laugh?"

"Why," she returned, demurely, "'twas to see you go more gallantly to your execution. And"--eating a grape--"that is reasonably certain to be your fate. You've only made a few more enemies to-night--the duke--the--"

"Name them not, fair Jacqueline," he retorted, indifferent.

"True; you'll soon learn for yourself," she answered sharply. "I think I should prefer to be in Triboulet's place to yours at present."

"Why," he said, with a strange laugh, "there's a day for the duke and a day for the fool."

Deliberately she turned from him and sang very softly:

"For love is madness;
(A dunce on a stool!)
A king in love,
A king and a fool!
Sing hoddy-doddy,
Noddy!
A king and a fool!"

The monarch bent over the countess; Diane and the dauphin exchanged messages with their eyes; Catharine smiled on Villot; the princess listened to her betrothed; and the jestress alone of all the ladies leaned back and sang, heart-free. But suddenly she again broke off and looked curiously at the duke's plaisant.

"Why did you not answer them with what was first in your mind?" she asked.

"What was that?" he said, starting.

"How can I tell?" she returned, studying him.

"You can tell a great deal," he replied.

"Sing hoddy-doddy,

Noddy!

The duke and the fool"--

she hummed, deigning no further words.