

CHAPTER VIII

A BRIEF TRUCE

"Turn out these torch-bearers, human candlesticks, and valets de chambre, and I'll get me to bed," commanded the duke, standing in the center of his room, and the trooper with the fierce red mustaches waved a swarm of pages, cup-bearers and attendants from the door and closed it. "How are the men quartered, Johann?"

"With all the creature comforts, my Lord," answered the soldier. "The king hath dressed them like popinjays; they drink overmuch, dice, and run after the maids, but otherwise are well-behaved."

"Drink; dice; run after the maids!" said the noble, gazing thoughtfully downward. "Hold them in check, Johann, as though we were in a campaign."

"Yes, my Lord," returned the man, staring impassively before him.

"And especially keep them from the kitchen wenches. There's more danger in these femmes de chambre, laundresses and scullery Cinderellas than in a column of glittering steel. Remember, no Court of Love in the scullery. Now go! Yet stay, Johann!" he added, suddenly. "This fool of ours is a bold fellow. Look to him well!"

Saluting respectfully, an expression of quick intelligence on his florid features, the trooper backed out of the room. With his hands behind him, his shoulders bent forward, the duke long pondered, his look, keen and discerning; his perspicacity clear, in spite of Francis' wine, or the intoxication of the princess' eyes. Although the noble's glance seemed bent on vacancy, it was himself as well as others he was studying; weighing the memorable events of the evening; recalling to mind every word with the princess; reviewing her features, the softening of her cold disdain; now, mentally distrustful, because she was a woman; again, confident he already dominated the citadel of her heart.

But a new element had entered into the field; an element unforeseen--the jester!--and, although not attaching great importance to this possible source of hazard in his plans for the future, the duke was too good a soldier to disregard any risk, however slight. In love and battle, every peril should be avoided; every vulnerable point made impregnable. Besides, the fool was audacious, foolhardy; his language of covert mockery and quick wit proved him an intelligent antagonist, who might become a desperate one.

"A woman and a fool," muttered the duke, striding with quick step across his chamber, "are two uncertain quantities. The one should be subjected; the other removed!"

Museful, he stood before the niche, wherein shone a cross of silver,

set with amethysts and turquoise, his rugged face lighted by the uncertain flickering of the candles.

"Removed!" he repeated, contemplatively. "And she--"

The clear tinkling of a bell broke in upon his cogitation; a faint, musical sound that seemed at his very elbow. He wheeled about abruptly, saw nothing save the mysterious shadows of the curtains, the flickering lamps, the dark outline of the canopy of the great bed. Instinctively he knew he was not alone, and yet his gaze, rapidly sweeping the apartment, failed to perceive an intruder.

Again the tinkling, a low laugh, and, turning sharply toward an alcove from whence the sounds came, the duke, through the half-light and trailing, sombrous shadows of its entrance, perceived a figure in a chair. From a candle set in a spiked, enameled stick, a yellow glimmering, that came and went with the sputtering flame, rested upon an ironical face, a graceful figure in motley and a wand with the jester's head and the bell. Without rising, the plaisant quizzically regarded the surprised nobleman, who in spite of his self-control had stepped back involuntarily at the suddenness of the encounter.

"Good evening, my Lord," said the fool. "I am like the genii of the tale. You think of me, and I appear."

Regaining his composure at once, the king's guest bent his heavy brows

over his deep-set eyes, and deliberately surveyed the fool.

"And now," went on the jester, gaily, "it is in your mind I am like as suddenly to--disappear! Am I at fault?"

"On the contrary, you are unusually clear-witted," was the answer.

"Oh, my Lord, you over-estimate my poor capacity!" returned the nobleman's unmasked caller with a deprecatory gesture.

The hands of the other worked impatiently; his herculean figure blocked the doorway. "You are a merry fellow!" he observed. "It is to be regretted, but--confess you have brought it upon yourself?"

"What? My fate? Oh, yes!" And he indifferently regarded the wand and the wooden figure upon it, without moving from the chair.

"You have no fear?" questioned the duke, quietly.

"Fear? Why should I?"

Yawning, the fool stretched his arms, looking not at the nobleman, but beyond him, and, instinctively, the princess' betrothed peered over his shoulder in the semi-darkness behind, while his hand quickly sought his sword.

"Fie, most noble Duke!" exclaimed the jester. "We have no eavesdroppers or interlopers, believe me! We are entirely alone, you and I--master and fool. There; come no nearer, I beg!" As the nobleman menacingly moved toward him.

"Have you any argument to advance, Sir Fool, why I should not?" said the other, grimly, a gleam of amusement depicted on his broad face as he paused the while.

"An argument, sharp as a needle, somewhat longer!" replied the jester, touching his breast and drawing from between the folds of his doublet a shining hilt.

Harsh and loud laughed the king's guest. "You fool," he said, "you had your opportunity below there in the hall and missed it. You hesitated, went blindly another course, and now"--with ominous meaning--"you are here!"

Upon the stick a candle dripped, sputtered and went out; the jester bent forward and with the copper snuffer on the table near by deftly trimmed the remaining light.

"Only fools fight in darkness," he remarked, quietly, "and here is but one of them."

"You pit yourself and that--plaything!--against me?" asked the burly

soldier, derisively.

"Have you hunted the wild boar, my Lord?" lightly answered the other.

"How mighty it is! How savage! What tusks! You know the pastime? A quick step, a sure arm, an eye like lightning--presto! your boar lies on his back, with his feet in the air! You, my Lord, are the boar; big, clumsy, brutal! Shall we begin the sport? I promise to prick you with every rush."

The prospective bridegroom paused thoughtfully.

"There is some justice in what you say," he returned, his manner that of a man who has carefully weighed and considered a matter. "I confess to partiality for the thick of the fray, the brunt of the fight, where men press all around you."

"Assuredly, my Lord; for then the boar is in his element; no matter how he rushes, his tusks strike yielding flesh."

"Why should we fight at all--at present?" cautiously ventured the noble, with further hesitation. "Not that I doubt I could easily crush you"--extending his muscular arms--"but you might prick me, and, just now, discretion may be the better part of valor. I--a duke, engaged to wed a princess, have much to lose; you, nothing! A fool's stroke might kill a king."

"Or a knave, my Lord!" added the plaisant.

"Or a knave, sirrah!" thundered the duke, the veins starting out on his forehead.

The jester half drew his dagger; his quiet confidence and glittering eye impressed even his antagonist, inured to scenes of violence and strife.

"Is it a truce, most noble Lord?" said the fool, significantly. "A truce wherein we may call black, black; and white, white! A truce which may be broken by either of us, with due warning to the other?"

Knitting his brow, the noble stood motionless, deeply pondering, his headlong passion evidently at combat with his judgment; then his face cleared, a hard, brusque laugh burst from his lips and he brought his fist violently down on the massive oak table near the door.

"So be it!" he assented, with a more open look.

"A truce--without any rushes from the boar?"

"Fool! Does not my word suffice?" contemptuously retorted the duke.

"Yes; for although you are--what you are--you have been a soldier, and would not break a truce."

"Such commendation from--my jester is, indeed, flattering!" satirically remarked the king's guest, seating himself in a great chair which brought him face to face with the fool and yet commanded the door, the intruder's only means of retreat.

"Pardon me, the duke's jester, you mean?"

"Yes; mine!"

"A distinction with a difference!" retorted the fool. "It is quite true I am the duke's jester; it is equally untrue I am yours. Therefore, we reach the conclusion that you and the duke are two different persons. Plainly, not being the duke, you are an impostor. Have you any fault to find with my reasoning?"

"On the contrary," answered the other, with no sign of anger or surprise, "your reasoning is all that could be desired. Why should I deny what you already know? I was aware, of course, that you knew, when I first learned his jester was in the castle. Frankly, I am not the duke--to you!"

"But with Francis and the court?" suggested the fool, uplifting his brows.

"I am the duke--and such remain! You understand?"

"Perfectly, my Lord," replied the jester, shrugging his shoulders.

"But since I am not the king, nor one of the courtiers, whom, for the time being, have I the honor of addressing? But, perhaps, I am over-inquisitive."

"Not at all," said the other, with mocking ceremony. "You are a whimsical fellow; besides, I am taken with a man who stands near death without flinching. To tell you the truth, our truce is somewhat to my liking. There are few men who would have dared what you have to-night. And although you're only a fool--will you drink with me from this bottle on the table here? I'm tired of ceremonies of rank and would clink a glass in private with a merry fellow. What say you?"

And leaning over, he filled two large goblets with the rich beverage from a great flask placed on the stand for his convenience. His face lighted with gross conviviality, but behind his jovial, free manner, that of a trooper in his cups, gleamed a furtive, guarded look, as though he were studying and testing his man.

"I'm for a free life; some fighting; but snug walls around for companionship," he continued. "Look at my soldiers now; roistering, love-making! Charles? Francis? Not one of the troop would leave me for emperor or king! Not one but would follow me--where ambition leads!" Holding up the glass, he looked into the depths of the thick burgundy. "Why, a likely fellow like you should carry a gleaming

blade, not a wooden sword. I know your duke--a man of lineage--a string of titles long as my arm--an underling of the emperor, while I"--closing his great jaw firmly--"owe allegiance to no man, or monarch, which is the same thing. Drink, lad; I'm pleased I did not kill you."

"And I," laughed the plaisant, "congratulate myself you are still alive--for the wine is excellent!"

"Still alive!" exclaimed the king's guest, boisterously, although a dark shadow crossed his glance.

"I'm scarred from head to foot, and my hide is as tough as--"

"A boar's?" tapping his chin with the fool's head on his wand.

"Ah, you will have your jest," retorted the host of the occasion, good-naturedly. "It's bred in the bone. A quality for a soldier. Next to courage is that fine sense of humor which makes a man a bon camarade. Put down your graven image, lad; you were made to carry arms, not baubles. Put it down, I say, and touch glasses with Louis, of Pfalz-Urfeld."

"The bastard of Hochfels!" exclaimed the jester, fixedly regarding the man whose name was known throughout Europe for his reckless bravery, his personal resources and his indomitable pride or love of freedom and

independence, which held him aloof from emperor or monarch, and made him peer and leader among the many intractable spirits of the Austrian country who had not yet bowed their necks to conquest; a soldier of many battles, whose thick-walled fortress, perched picturesquely in mid-air on a steep mountain top, established his security on all sides.

"The same, my friend of the motley," continued the other, not without complacency, observing the effect of his announcement on the jester.

"He who calls himself the free baron of Hochfels?" observed the fool, setting down the glass from which he had moderately partaken.

"Aye; a man of royal and peasant blood," harshly answered the free-booter. "Ambition, arrogance, are the kingly inheritance; strength, a constitution of iron, the low-born legacy. What think you of such an endowment?"

"You are far from your castle, my Lord of Hochfels," commented the jester, absently, unmindful of a question he felt not called upon to answer.

"And yet as safe as in my own mountain nest," retorted the free baron, or free-booter, indifferently. "Who would betray me? There is not a trooper of mine but would die for his master. You would not denounce me, because--but why enumerate the reasons? I hold you in the palm of my hand, and, when I close my fingers, there's the end of you."

"But where--allow me; the wine has a rare flavor," and he reached for the flask.

"Drink freely," returned the pretender; "it is the king's own, and you are my guest. You were about to ask--"

"Whence came the idea for this mad adventure?" said the jester, his eyes seemingly bent in admiration on the goblet he held; a half globe of crystal sustained by a golden Bacchus.

"Idea!" repeated the self-called baron, with a gesture of satisfaction.

"It was more than an idea. It was an inspiration, born of that chance which points the way to greatness. The feat accomplished, all Europe will wonder at the wanton exploit. At first Francis will rage; then seeing me impregably intrenched, will make the best of the marriage, especially as the groom is of royal blood. Next, an alliance with the French king against the emperor. Why not; was not Francis once ready to treat even with Solyman to defeat Charles, an overture which shocked Christendom? And while Charles' energies are bent to the task of protecting his country from the Turks, a new leader appears; a devil-may-care fellow--and then--and then--"

He broke off abruptly; stared before him, as though the fumes of wine were at last beginning to rise to his head; toyed with his glass and drank it quickly at a draft. "What an alluring will-o'-the-wisp

is--to-morrow!" he muttered.

"An illusive hope that reconciles us with to-day," answered the plaisant.

"Illusive!" cried the other. "Only for poets, dreamers, fools!"

"And you, Sir Baron, are neither one nor the other," remarked the jester. "No philosopher, but a plain soldier, who chops heads--not logic. But the inspiration that caused you to embark upon this hot-brained, pretty enterprise?"

"Upon a spur of rock that overlooks the road through the mountain is set the Vulture's Nest, Sir Fool," began the adventurer in a voice at once confident and arrogant. "At least, so the time-honored fortress of Hochfels is disparagingly designated by the people. As the road is the only pass through the mountains, naturally we come more or less in contact with the people who go by our doors. Being thus forced, through the situation of our fortress, into the proximity of the traveling public, we have, from time to time, made such sorties as are practised by a beleaguered garrison, and have, in consequence, taken prisoners many traffickers and traders, whose goods and chattels were worthy of our attention as spoils of war. Generally, we have confined our operations to migratory merchants, who carry more of value and cause less trouble than the emperor's soldiers or the king's troopers, but occasionally we brush against one of the latter bands so that we

may keep in practice in laying our blades to the grindstone, and also to show we are soldiers, not robbers."

"Which remains to be proved," murmured the attentive jester. "Your pardon, noble Lord"--as the other half-started from his chair--"let me fill your glass. 'Tis a pity to neglect such royal wine. Proceed with your story. Come we presently to the inspiration?"

"At once," answered the apparently appeased master of the fortress, wiping his lips. "One day our western outpost brought in a messenger, and, when we had stripped the knave, upon him we found a miniature and a letter from the princess to the duke. The latter was prettily writ, with here and there a rhyme, and moved me mightily. The eagle hath its mate, I thought, but the vulture of Hochfels is single, and this reflection, with the sight of the picture and that right, fair script, saddened me.

"And then, on a sudden, came the inspiration. Why not play a hand in this international marriage Charles and Francis were bringing about? I commanded the only road across the mountain; therefore, did command the situation. The emperor and the king should be but the wooden figures, and I would pull the strings to make them dance. The duke, your master, why should he be more than a name? The princess' letter told me she had never seen her betrothed. What easier than to redouble the sentries in the valley, make prisoners of the messengers, clap them in the fortress dungeons, read the missives, and then despatch them to

their respective destinations by men of my own?"

"Then that was the reason why on my way through the mountains your knaves attacked me?" said the listener quickly.

"Exactly; to search you. How you slipped through their hands I know not." And he glanced at the other curiously.

"They were but poor rogues," answered the jester quickly.

"Certainly are you not one!" exclaimed the free baron, with a glance of approval at the slender figure of his antagonist. "Two of them paid for their carelessness. The others were so shamed, they told me some great knight had attacked them. A fool in motley!" he laughed. "No wonder the rogues hung their heads! But in deceiving me," he added thoughtfully, "they permitted their master to run into an unknown peril--his ignorance that a fool of the duke, or a fool wearing the emblem of the emperor, had gone to Francis' court."

"You were saying, Sir Free Baron, you intended to read the messages between the princess and the duke, and afterward to despatch them by messengers of your own?" interrupted the plaisant.

"Such were my plans. Moreover, I possessed a clerk--a knave who had killed an abbot and fled from the monastery--a man of poetry, wit and sentiment. Whenever the letters lacked for ardor, and the lovers had

grown too timid, him I set to forge a postscript, or indite new missives, which the rogue did most prettily, having studied love-making under the monks. And thus, Sir Fool, I courted and won the princess--by proxy!"

"Of a certainty, your wooing was at least novel, Sir Knight of the Vulture's Nest," dryly observed the jester. "Although, had my master known the deception, you would, perhaps, have paid dearly for it."

"Your master, forsooth!" laughed the outlaw lord. "A puny scion of a worn-out ancestry! Such a woman as the princess wants a man of brawn and muscle; no weakling of the nursery."

"Well," said the fool, slowly, "you became intermediary between the princess and the duke, and the king and the emperor. But to come into the heart of France; to the king's very palace--did you not fear detection?"

"How?" retorted the other, raising his head and resting his eyes, bloodshot and heavy, on the fool's impassive features. "The road between the two monarchs is mine; no message can now pass. The emperor and the duke may wonder, but the way here is long, and"--with a smile--"I have ample time for the enterprise ere the alarm can be given."

"And you paved the way for your coming by altering the letters of the duke, or forging new ones?" suggested the listener.

"How else? A word added here and there; a post-script, or even a page! As for their highnesses' seals, any fool can break and mend a seal. In a week the duke will wonder at the princess' silence; in a fortnight he will become uneasy; in a month he will learn the cage has been left open and the bird hath flown. Then, too, shall the gates of the dungeon be set ajar, and the true, but tardy, messengers permitted to go their respective ways. Is it not a nice adventure? Am I not a fitter leader than your duke?"

"Undoubtedly," returned the jester. "He sits at home, while you are here in his stead. But what will the princess say when she learns?"

"Nothing. She loves me already."

The fool turned pale; the hand that held his glass, however, was firm, and he set the goblet down without a tremor.

"She may weep a little, but it will pass like a summer shower. Women are weak; women are yielding. Have I not reason to know?" he burst out. "I, a--"

Brusquely he arose from his chair, leaving the sentence uncompleted. Sternly he surveyed the jester.

"Why not take service with me?" he continued, abruptly. "Austria is ripe to revolt against the tyranny of the emperor. With the discontent in the Netherlands, the dissensions in Spain, Europe is like a field, cut up, awaiting new-comers."

He paused to allow the force of his words to appeal to the other's imagination. "What say you?" he continued. "Will you serve me?"

"The matter's worth thinking over," answered the fool, evasively.

"Well, take your time," said the king's guest, regarding him more sharply. "And now, as the candles are low and the flask is empty, you had better take your leave."

At this intimation that the other considered the interview ended, the fool started to his feet and deliberately made his way to the door opening into the corridor.

"Good-night!" he said, and was about to depart when the free baron held him with a word.

"Hold! Why have you not attempted to unmask me--before?"

Steadily the two looked at each other; the eyes of the elder man, cruel, deep, all-observing; those of the younger, steady, fearless,

undismayed. Few of his troopers could withstand the sinister penetration of Louis of Hochfels' gaze, but on the jester it seemed to have no more effect than the casual glance of one of Francis' courtiers.

"You knew--and yet you made no sign?" continued the master of the fortress.

"Because I like a strong play and did not wish to spoil it--too soon!"

The questioner's brow fell; the lids half-veiled the dark, savage eyes, but the mouth relaxed. "Ah, you always have your answer," he returned with apparent cordiality. "Good-night--and, by the by, our truce is at an end."

"The truce--and the wine," said the jester, as with a ceremonious bow, he vanished amid the shadows in the hall.

Slowly the free baron closed the door and locked it; looked at the cross and at the bed, but made no motion toward either.

"He has already rejected my proposal," thought the self-styled duke.

"Does he seek for higher rewards by betraying me? Or is it, then, Triboulet told the truth? Is he an aspiring lover of the princess? Or is he only faithful to his master? Why have I failed to read him? As though a film lay across his eyes, that index to a man's soul!"

Motionless the free baron stood, long pondering deeply, until upon the mantel the richly-chased clock began to strike musically, yet admonishingly. Whereupon he glanced at the cross; hesitated; then, noting the lateness of the hour, and with, perhaps, a mental reservation to retrieve his negligence on the morrow, he turned from the silver, bejeweled symbol and immediately sought the sensuous bodily enjoyment of a couch fit for a king or the pope himself.