

CHAPTER IX

THE FLIGHT OF THE FOOL

Another festal day had come and gone. The crimson shafts of the dying sun had succumbed to the lengthening shadows of dusk, and the pigeons were wending their way homeward to the castle parapets and battlements, when, toward the arched entrance on the front, strode the duke's fool. Beyond the castle walls and the inclosure of the pleasure grounds the peace of twilight rested on the land; the great fields lay becalmed; the distant forests were bivouacs of rest.

The afternoon had been a labor of pleasure; about the great basin of the fountain had passed an ever-varying shifting of moving figures; between the trees bright colors appeared and vanished, and from the heart of concealed bowers had come peals of laughter or strains of music. Unnoticed among the merry throng in palace and park, the jester had moved aimlessly about; unobserved now, he turned his back upon the gray walls, satiated, perhaps, with the fêtes inaugurated by the kingly entertainer. But as he attempted to pass the gate, a stalwart guard stepped forward, presenting a formidable-looking glave.

"Your permit to leave?" he said.

"A permit? Of course!" replied the fool, and felt in his coat. "But what a handsome weapon you have; the staff all covered with velvet and

studded with brass tacks!"

"Has the Emperor Charles, then, no such weapons?" asked the gratified soldier.

"None so handsome! May I see it?" The guard unsuspectingly handed the glave to the jester, who immediately turned it upon the sentinel.

"Give it back, fool!" cried the alarmed guard.

"Nay; I am minded to call out and show a soldier of France disarmed by a foreign fool."

"As well chop off my head with it!" sighed the man.

"And if I wish to walk without the gate?" suggested the jester.

"Go, good fool!" replied the other, without hesitation.

"Well, here is the glave. If any one admires it again, let him study the point. But why may no one pass out?"

"Because so many soldiers and good citizens have been beaten and robbed by those who hover around the palace. But you may go in peace," he added. "No one will harm a fool. If 'tis amusement you seek, there's a camp on the verge of the forest where a dark-haired, good-looking

baggage dances and tells cards. You can find the place from the noise within, and if you're merry, they'll welcome you royally. Go; and God be with you!"

The jester turned from the good-natured guard and quickly walked down the road, which wound gracefully through the valley and lost itself afar in a fringe of woodland. A light pattering on the hard earth behind caused him to look about. Following was a dog that now sprang forward with joyous demonstration. The fool stooped and gravely caressed the hound which last he had seen at the princess' feet.

"Why," he said, "thou art now the fool's only friend at court."

When again he moved on with rapid, nervous stride, the animal came after. Darker grew the road; deeper hued the fields and stubble; more somber the distant castle against the gloaming. Only the cry of a diving night-bird startled the stillness of the tranquil air; a rapacious filcher that quickly rose, and swept onward through the sea of night. Its melancholy note echoed in the breast of the fool; mechanically, without relaxing his swift pace, he looked upward to follow it, when a short, sharp bark behind him and a premonition of impending danger caused him to spring suddenly aside. At the same time a dagger descended in the empty air, just grazing the shoulder of the jester, who, recovering himself, grasped the arm of his assailant and grappled with him. Finding him a man of little strength, the fool easily threw him to the earth and kneeling on his breast in turn

menaced the assailant with the weapon he had wrested from him.

"Have you any reason, knave, why I should spare you?" asked the fool.

"If I had--for want of breath--it would fail me!" answered the miscreant with some difficulty.

The duke's jester arose. "Get up, rogue!" he said, and the man obeyed.

He was a pale, gaunt fellow, with long hair, unshaven face, hollow cheeks, and dark eyes, set deeply in his head and shaded by thick, black brows. His dress consisted of a rough doublet, with lappet sleeves, carried down to a point, tight leggings, broad shoes and the puffed upper hose; the entire raiment frayed and worn; his flesh, or, rather, his bones, showing through the scanty covering for his legs, while his feet were no better protected than those of a trooper who has been long on the march. He displayed no fear or enmity; on the contrary, his manner was rather friendly than otherwise, as though he failed to understand the enormity of his offense and the position in which he was placed. Shifting from one foot to another, he crossed his great, thin hands before him and patiently awaited his captor's pleasure. The latter surveyed him curiously, and, noting his woebegone features and beggarly attire, pity, perhaps, assuaged his just anger toward this starveling.

"Why did you wish to kill me?" asked the jester quietly, if somewhat

impatiently.

"It was not my wish, Master Fool," gently replied the other, but even as he spoke the resignation in his manner gave way to a look of apprehension. Lifting his hand, he felt in his breast and glanced about him on the road. Then his face brightened.

"With your permission--I have e'en dropped something--"

And stooping, the scamp-scholar picked up a small, leathern-bound volume from the ground, where it had fallen during the struggle, and held it tightly clutched in his hand. "Ah," he muttered with a glad sigh, "I feared I had lost it--my Horace! And now, Sir Jester, what would you with me?"

"A question I might answer with a question," replied the fool. "Having failed in your enterprise, why should I spare you?"

"You shouldn't," returned the vagabond-student. "The ancients teach but the irrevocable law of retribution."

To hear a would-be assassin, a castaway out of pocket and heels and elbows, calmly proclaiming the Greek doctrine of inevitableness, under such circumstances, would have surprised an observer even more experienced and worldly than the duke's fool. Involuntarily his face softened; this pauvre diable gazed upon eternity with the calm eyes

of a Socrates.

"You do not then beg for life?" said the plaisant, his former impatience merging into mild curiosity.

"Is it worth begging for?" asked the straitened book-worm. "Life means a pinched stomach, a cold body; Death, no hunger to fear, and a bed that, though cold, chills us not. What we know not doth not exist--for us; ergo, to lie in the earth is to rest in the lap of luxury, for all our consciousness of it. But to be unconscious of the ills of this perishable frame, Horace likewise must be as dead to us as our aches and pains. Thus is life made preferable to death. Yes; I would live. Hold, though--" he again hesitated in deep thought--"what avails Horace if--" he began.

"Why, what new data have entered in the premises?" observed the wondering jester.

"Nanette!" was the gloomy answer.

"Who, pray, is Nanette?" asked the fool, thrusting his assailant's weapon in his jerkin.

"A wanton haggard whose tongue will run post sixteen stages together! Who would make the devil himself malleable; then, work, hammer and wire-draw him!"

"And what is she to you?"

"My wife! That is, she claims that exalted place, having married me one night when I was in my cups through a false priest who dresses as a Franciscan monk. 'Fools in the court of God' are these priests called, and truly he is a jester, for certainly is he no true monk. But Nanette, nevertheless, asserts she is the lawful partner of my sorrows. So work your will on me. A stroke, and the shivering spirit is wafted across the Styx."

"And if I gave you not only your life--for a consideration hereafter to be mentioned--but a small silver piece as well?" suggested the jester, who had been for some moments buried in thought.

"Ha!" ejaculated the scamp-student, brightening. "Your gift would match the piece I already have and which--dolt that I was!--I overlooked to include in my chain of reasoning." And thrusting his hand into his ragged doublet, after some search he extracted a diminutive disk upon which he gazed not without ardor. "Thus are we forced to start the chain of reasoning anew," he remarked, "with Horace and this bit of metal on one side of the scales and Nanette on the other. Now unless the devil sits on the beam with Nanette--which he's like to do--the book and the bit of dross will outweigh her and we arrive at the certitude that life, qualified as to duration, may be happily endured."

"What argument does the dross carry, knave?" demanded the fool, looking down at the hound that crouched at his feet.

"With it may be purchased that which warms the pinched stomach. With it may be bought an elixir, so strong and magical, it may breed defiance even of Nanette. Sir Fool, I have concluded to accept life and the small silver piece."

"Well and good," commented the jester. "But there are conditions attached to my clemency."

"Conditions!" retorted the vagabond. "What are conditions to a philosopher, once he has reached a logical assurance?"

"First, you must find me a horse. Your Nanette, as I take it, is a gipsy and in the camp, are, surely, horses."

"But why should you want a horse? 'Tis not far to the castle?" said the puzzled scholar.

"No; but 'tis far away from it. Next, tell me where you got that small piece of silver, like the one I have promised you?"

"From Nanette."

"What for?"

"To accomplish that which I have failed to do," replied the student, willingly. "But, alas, not having earned it, have I the right idly to spend it?" he added, dolefully, half to himself.

"Why did Nanette--" began the jester.

But the other raised his arm with an expostulatory gesture. "Many things I know," he interrupted; "odds and ends of erudition, but a woman's mind I know not, nor want to know. I had as soon question Beelzebub as her; yea, to stir up the devil with a stick. If sparing my life is contingent on my knowing why she does this, or that, then let me pay the debt of nature."

"No; 'tis slight punishment to take from a man that which he values so little he must reason with himself to learn if he value it at all," returned the duke's jester, slowly. "We'll waive the question, if you find me the horse."

"'Tis Nanette you must ask. There's but one, old, yet serviceable--"

"Then take me to Nanette."

"Very well. Follow me, sir; and if you're still of a mind when you see her, you can question her."

"Why, is she so weird and witch-like to look upon?" said the fool.

"Nay; the devil hides his claws behind the daintiest fingers, all pink and white. He conceals his cloven hoof in a slipper, truly sylph-like."

"You arouse my curiosity. I would fain meet this fair monster."

"Come then, Master Fool," replied the scamp-student, leaving the road for the field to the right, and the jester, after a moment's deliberation, turned likewise into the stubble, while the hound, as if satisfied with the service it had performed, slowly retraced its way toward the castle, stopping, however, now and then to look around after the two men, whose figures grew smaller and smaller in the distance. For some space they walked in silence; then the scholar paused, and, pointing to a low, rambling house that once had been a hunter's lodge and now had fallen into decay, exclaimed:

"There's where she lives, fool. I'll warrant she's not alone."

At the same time a clamor of voices and a chorus of rough melody, coming from the cottage, confirmed the assurance his spouse was not, indeed, holding solitary vigil.

"'Tis e'en thus every night," murmured the scamp student in a melancholy tone. "She gathers 'round her the scum of all rudeness;

ragged alchemists of pleasure, who sing incessantly, like grasshoppers on a summer day."

"Where is the horse?" said the jester, abruptly.

"Stalled in one of the rooms for safe keeping. There are so many rascals and thieves around, you see--"

"They e'en rob one another!" returned the fool.

Advancing more cautiously, the two men approached the ancient forester's dwelling, the hue and cry sounding louder as they drew near, a mingled discord of laughter, shouting and caterwauling, with a woman's piercing voice at times dominating the general vociferation. The philosopher shook his head despondingly, while, creeping to one of the windows, the jester looked in.

Near the fire was a misshapen creature, a sort of monstrous imbecile that chattered and moaned; a being that bore some resemblance to the ancient morios once sold at the olden Forum Morionum to the ladies who desired these hideous animals for their amusement. At his feet gamboled a dwarf that squeaked and screeched, distorting its face in hideous grimaces. Scattered about the room, singing, bawling or brawling, were indigent morris dancers; bare-footed minstrels; a pinched and needy versificator; a reduced mountebank; a swarthy clown, with a hare's mouth; joculars of the streets, poor as rats and living

as such, straitened, heedless fellows, with heads full of nonsense and purses empty, poor in pocket, but rich in plaisanterie.

Upon the table, with cards in her lap, which she studied idly, sat a hard-featured, deep-bosomed woman, neither old nor uncomely, with thick, black hair, coarse as a horse's mane, cheeks red as a berry, glowing with health. In her pose was a certain savage grace, an untrammelled freedom which revealed the vigorous outlines of a well-proportioned figure. Her eye was bright as a diamond and bold as a trooper's; when she lifted her head she looked disdainfully, scornfully, fiercely, upon the strange and monstrous company of which she was queen.

"Where can the thief-friar be?" muttered the student. "He is usually not far off from sweet Nanette."

"You mean the monk who had a hand in your nuptials?"

"Who else? He, the source of all ill. He who gave her the money of which she e'en presented me a moiety. Whoever employed him--was it your friends, gentle sir?--rewarded him with gold. Being a craven rogue, I e'en suspect him of shifting the task to myself for a beggarly pittance, whilst he is off with the lion's share."

The jester, watching the company within, made no reply. From the student to the woman, to the friar, was a chain leading--where? He

found it not difficult to surmise. Suddenly Nanette threw down the cards and laughed harshly.

"Neither the devil nor his imps could read the things that are happening in the castle!"

Then abruptly springing from the table, she made her way to the fire, over which hung a pot of some savory stew, a magnet to the company's sharp desire; for throughout all the boisterous merriment wandering glances had invariably returned to it. To reach the kettle and make herself mistress of the culinary preparations, she cuffed a dwarf with such vigor that he hobbled howling from a suspicious proximity to the appetizing mess to a safe refuge beneath the table. With equally dauntless spirit, she pushed aside the herculean morio who had been childishly standing over the pot, licking his fingers in eager anticipation; whereupon the imbecile set up a sharp cry that blended with the deeper roar of the lilliputian.

"And I caught the rabbit!" piteously bellowed the latter from his retreat.

"And I found the turnips!" cried the colossal idiot, tears running down his lubberly cheeks.

"Peace, you demons!" exclaimed the woman, waving the spoon at them, "or, by the hell-born, you'll ne'er taste morsel of it!"

Quieted by this stupendous threat, they closed their mouths and opened their eyes but the wider, while the gipsy spouse of the student stirred and stirred the mixture in the iron pot, gazing at the fire with frowning brow as though she would read some page of the future in the leaping flames.

"Saw you but now how she served the dwarf and the overgrown lump?" whispered the student to the duke's fool. "Are you still minded to meet her?"

For answer the jester left the window, stepped to the door, and, opening it, strode into the room.