

CHAPTER X

THE FOOL RETURNS TO THE CASTLE

As the duke's fool suddenly appeared in the crowded apartment, the hubbub abruptly ceased; the minstrels and mountebanks gazed in surprise at the slender figure of the alien jester whose rich garments proclaimed him a personage of importance, one who had reached that pinnacle in buffoonery, the high office of court plaisant. The morio crouched against the wall, his fear of the new-comer as great as his body was large; the garret minstrels stopped strumming their instruments, while the woman at the fire uttered a quick exclamation and dropped the spoon with a clatter to the floor, where it was promptly seized by the dwarf, who, taking advantage of the woman's consternation, thrust it greedily to his lips. But soon recovering from her wonderment, the gipsy soundly boxed the dwarf's ears, recovered her spoon and set herself once more to stirring the contents of the pot.

The jester observed her for a moment--the heavy, bare arm moving round and round over the kettle; her sunburnt legs uncovered to the knee; the masculine attitude of her figure with the torn and worn garments that covered her--and she seemed to him a veritable trull of disorder and squalor. The gipsy, too, looked at him over her shoulder, and, as she gazed, her hand went slower and slower, until all motion ceased, and the spoon lay on the edge of the pot, when she turned deliberately,

offering him the full sight of her bold cheeks and shameless eyes.

"Are you Nanette, wife of this philosopher?" asked the duke's fool, approaching, and indicating the miserable scamp who clung near the doorway as one undecided whether to enter or run away.

"Yes; I am Nanette, his true and lawful spouse," she answered with a shrill laugh. "Wilt come to me, true-love?" she called out to her apprehensive yoke-mate.

"Nay; I'll go out in the air a while," hurriedly replied the vagabond-scholar, and quickly vanished.

"Ah, how he loves me!" she continued.

"So much he prefers a cony-burrow to his own fireside," said the fool dryly.

"A hole i' the earth is too good for such a scurvy fellow," she retorted. "But what would you here, fool? A song, a jest, a dance? Or have you come to learn a new story, or ballad, for the lordlings you must entertain?" Unabashed, she approached a step nearer.

"Your stories, mistress, would be unsuited for the court, and your ballads best unsung," he retorted. "I came, not to sharpen my wits, but to learn from whom the thief-friar got the small piece of silver

you gave your consort, and, also, to procure a horse."

Her brazen eyes wavered. "A horse and a fool flying," she muttered. "Even what the cards showed. The fool seeking the duke!" A puzzled look crossed her face. "But the duke is here?" she continued to herself. "A strange riddle! All the signs show devilment, but what it is--"

"Good Nanette," interrupted the jester, satirically, "I have no time for spells or incantation."

"How dared you come here," she said, hoarsely, "after--"

"After your mate proved but an indifferent servant of yours?" he concluded, meeting her sullen gaze with one so stern and inflexible that before it her eyes fell.

"Do you not know," she said, endeavoring to maintain a hardened front, "I have but to say the word, and all these friends of mine would tear you to pieces? What would you do, my pretty fellows, an I ask you?" she cried out, her voice rising audaciously. "Would you suffer this duke's jester to stand against me?"

Glances of suspicion and animosity shot from a score of eyes; fists were half-clenched; knives appeared in a trice from the concealment of rags, and a low murmur arose from the gathering. Even the imbecile

morio, nature's trembling coward, became suddenly valiant, and, with huge frame uplifted, seemed about to spring savagely upon the fool. An expression of disgust replaced all other feeling on the features of the duke's plaisant.

"Spare me your threats, Nanette," he replied, coldly. "Had you intended to set them on me, you would have done it long ere this."

The woman hesitated. His calm, almost contemptuous, confidence was not without its effect upon her. Had he trembled, she would have spoken, but before his disdain, and the gay splendor of his attire, conspicuous amid rags from rubbish heaps, she felt a sudden consciousness of her own unclean environment; at the same time unusual warnings in her conjurations recurred to her. Something about him--was it dignity or pride or a nameless fear she herself experienced but could not understand?--beat down her eyes and she turned them doggedly away.

Abruptly she moved to the fire and again began to stir the mess, while the suppressed excitement in the room at once subsided. A minstrel lightly touched his battered dulcimer; a poet hummed a song in the dialect of thieves; a juggler began practising some deft work for hand and eye, and he of the hare lip sank quietly into a corner and patiently watched the simmering pot. The dwarf, with some misgiving, as a dog that is beaten crawls cautiously out of its kennel, crept from beneath the table.

"Oh, mistress," he whimpered, "some of it has boiled over!"

"Boiled over!" echoed the morio, mournfully.

At the same time the woman grasped the handle of the heavy kettle, lifted it from the jack, displaying in her bared arms the muscles of a man, and, staggering beneath the load, bore it steaming to the table. Amid the subsequent confusion, the gipsy held aloof from the demolition of the rabbit, and, seating herself at the foot of the table, began moodily once more to turn the cards.

A merry droll acted as host and dipped freely for all with the long spoon, commenting the while he dispensed the mess according to the wants of the miscellaneous gathering: "Pot-luck! 'Tis luck, and they're no field mice in it! There's everything else!" or "A bit of rabbit, my masters! I'll warrant he'll hop down your throats as fast as e'er he jumped a hillock." And, when one ate too greedily, slap went a spoonful of gravy o'er him with: "I thought you would catch it, knave!"

"Are they not blithe devils 'round the caldron?" muttered the woman.

"There it is again!"--Bending over the bits of pasteboard on the table.

"The duke here! And the fool on horseback! What do the cards mean?"

"That I must have the horse, Nanette," said the duke's jester, standing motionless and firm before the fireplace.

"Are you the fool?" she asked, more to herself than him. "Why does he wish to ride away?"

"Will you sell me the horse?" he demanded.

She hesitated. Around them danced the shadows of the kettle-gourmands:

"A kern and a drole, a varlet and a blade
A drab and a rep, a skit and a jade--"

sang the street poet; the dwarf and the morio (a lilliputian and Gulliver) fought a mimic combat; the juggler and the clown, who could eat no more, were keeping time to a chorus by beating with their empty trenchers on the table.

"Sell you the horse? For what?" asked the gipsy.

"For five gold pieces."

"A fool with five gold pieces!" she exclaimed, incredulously.

"Here! You may see them." And he opened a purse he carried at his girdle.

"Do not let them know," she said, hurriedly. "They would kill you

and--"

"You would not get the money," he added, significantly. "If you act quickly, find me a horse and let me go; it is you, not they, who will profit."

Abruptly she rose. "It is fate," she remarked, her eyes greedy.

His glance, as he stood there, proud and stern, cut her sharply. "Say cupidity, Nanette!" he laughed softly. "It is more profitable not to betray me. In the one case you get much; in the other, little."

"Stay here," she replied, hastily. "I'll fetch the horse." And vanished.

A moment he remained, then resolutely turning to the door through which she had disappeared, opened it, and found himself in a combined sleeping-room and stable; a dark apartment, with floor of hardened earth and a single window, open to wind and weather. The atmosphere in this chamber for man and beast was impregnated with the smell of mold and dry-rot, mingled with the livelier effluvium of dirt and grime of years; but amid the malodor and mustiness, on a couch under the window, slumbered and snored the false Franciscan monk. By his side was a tankard, half-filled with stale sack, and in his hand he clutched a gold piece as though he had had an intimation it would be safer there than elsewhere on his person during the pot-valiant sleep he had

deliberately courted. His hood had fallen back, displaying a bullet head, red cheeks and purple nose, while the wooden beads of this sottish counterfeit of a friar trailed from his girdle on the ground. From a stall in a far corner a large, bony-looking nag turned its head reproachfully, as if mentally protesting against such foul quarters and the poor company they offered. Its melancholy whinny upon the appearance of the woman was a sigh for freedom; a sad suspiration to the memory of radiant clover fields or poppy-starred meadows.

"Why, here's a holy man worn out by too many paternosters," commented the duke's fool, standing on the threshold; and then gazed from the gold piece in the monk's hand to the woman. "I need not ask where you got the silver, Nanette. 'Tis a chain of evidence leading--where?"

The gipsy replied only with dark looks, regarding his intrusion in this inner sanctuary as a fresh provocation for her just displeasure. The jester, however, paid no attention to these signs of new acerbity on her face.

Crossing to the couch, he shook the monk vigorously, but the latter only held his piece of money tighter like a miser whose treasure is threatened, and snored the louder. Again the fool essayed to waken him, and this time he opened his eyes, felt for his beads and commenced to mutter a prayer in Latin words, strung together in meaningless phrases.

"Why," commented the jester, "his learning is as false as his cloak. Wake up, sirrah! Would you approach Heaven's gate with a feigned prayer on your lips and a toss-pot in your hand?"

"Christe tuum--I absolve you! I absolve you!" muttered the friar.

"Go your way in peace."

"Hear me, thou trumped-up monk; do you want another piece of gold?"

"Gold!" repeated the other, tipsily. "What--what for? To--to help some fool to paradise--or purgatory? 'Tis for the Church I beg, good people. The holy Church--Church I say!"

Winking and blinking, seeing nothing before him, he held out a trembling hand. "The piece of gold--give it to me!" he mumbled.

"Yes; in exchange for your cloak," answered the jester.

"My cloak, thou horse-leech! Sell my skin for--piece of gold! Want my cloak? Take it!" And the dissembler rolled over, extending his arms. The jester grasped the garment by the sleeves and with some difficulty whipped it from him.

"Now hand me--the money and--cover me with rags that--I may sleep," continued the beer-bibber. "So"--as he grasped the money the fool gave him and stretched himself luxuriously beneath a noisome litter of

cast-off clothes and rubbish--"I languish in ecstasies! The angels--are singing around me."

With growing surprise and ill-humor had the woman observed this novel proceeding, and now, when the jester had himself donned the false friar's gown, she said grudgingly:

"You did not give him one of the five pieces?"

"No; there are still five left."

"A bit of gold for a cloak!" she grumbled. "It is overmuch. But there!" Unfastening a door that looked out upon the field. "Give me the money and be gone."

He grasped the bridle of the horse, handed her the promised reward, and, drawing the hood of the monk's garment over his head, led the nag out into the open air. The door closed quickly behind him and he heard the wooden bolt as it shot into place. Above the dark outlines of the forest, the moon, full-orbed, now shone in the sky, with a myriad attendant stars, its silver beams flooding the open spaces and revealing every detail, soft, dreamy, yet distinct. A languorous, redolent air just stirred the waving grain, on which rested a glossy shimmer.

As the fool was about to spring upon the horse, a shadow suddenly

appeared around the corner of the house and the animal danced aside in affright. Before the jester could quiet and mount the nag, the shadow resolved itself into a man, and, behind him, came a numerous band, the play of light on helmet, sword and dagger revealing them as a party of troopers. Doubtless having indulged freely, they had become inclined to new adventures, and accordingly had bent their footsteps toward the "little house on the verge of the wood," where merry company was always to be found. At the sight of the duke's fool and the horse they pressed forward, and, with one accord, surrounded him.

"The Franciscan monk!" cried one.

"Where is he going so late with the nag?" asked another.

"He's off to confess some one," exclaimed a third.

"A petticoat, most likely, the rogue!" rejoined the second speaker.

"Well, what have we to do with his love affairs?" laughed the first trooper. "Ride on, good father, and keep tryst."

"Yes, ride on!" the others called out.

The monk bowed. An interruption which had promised to defeat his designs seemed drawing to a harmless conclusion. His hopes ran high; the soldiers had not yet penetrated beneath the costume; he had already

determined to leap upon the horse in a rush for freedom when a heavy, detaining hand was laid on his shoulder.

"One moment, knave!" said a deep voice, and, wheeling sharply, the fool looked into the keen, ferret eyes of the trooper with the red mustaches. "I have a question to ask. Have you done that which you were to do?"

The friar nodded his assent. "The fool will trouble the duke no more," he answered.

"Ah, he is"--began the soldier.

"Even so. And now pray let me pass."

"Yes; let him pass!" urged one of the soldiers. "Would you keep some longing trollop waiting?"

The leader of the troopers did not answer; his glance was bent upon the ground. "Yes, you may go," he commented, "when--" and suddenly thrust forth an arm and pulled back the enshrouding cloak.

"The duke's fool!" he cried. "Close in, rogues! Let him not escape."

Fiercely the fool's hand sought his breast; then, swiftly realizing that it needed but a pretext to bring about the end desired by the

pretender in the castle, with an effort he restrained himself, and confronted his assailants, outwardly calm.

"'Tis a poor jest which fails," he said, easily.

"Jest!" grimly returned he of the red mustaches. "Call you it a jest, this monk's disguise? Once on the horse, it would have been no jest, and I'll warrant you would soon have left the castle far behind. Yes; and but for the cloven foot, the jest, as you call it, would have succeeded, too. Had it not been," he added, "for the pointed, silken shoe, peeping out from beneath the holy robe--a covering of vanity, instead of holy nakedness--you would certainly have deceived me, and"--with a brusque laugh--"slipped away from your master, the duke."

"The duke?" said the jester, as casting the now useless cloak from him, he deliberately scrutinized the rogue.

"The duke," returned the man, stolidly. "Well, this spoils our sport for to-night, knaves," he went on, turning to the other troopers, "for we must e'en escort the jester back to the castle."

"Beshrew him!" they answered, of one accord. "A plague upon him!"

And slowly the fool and the soldiers began to retrace their way across the moon-lit fields, the trooper with the red mustaches grumbling as they went: "Such luck to turn back now, with all those mad-caps right

under our nose! A curse to a dry march over a dusty meadow! An
unsanctified dog of a monk! 'Tis like a campaign, with naught but
ditch water to drink. The devil take the friar and the jester!
Forward! the fool in the center, and those he would have fooled around
him!"

And when they disappeared in the distance the gipsy woman might have
been seen leaving the house by the stable door and leading in the horse.