CHAPTER XI

A NEW MESSENGER TO THE EMPEROR

Between Caillette and the duke's jester had arisen one of those friendships which spring more from similitude than unlikeness; an amity of which each had been unconscious in its inception, but which had gradually grown into a sentiment of comradeship. Caillette was of noble mien, graceful manner and elegant address; a soldier by preference; a jester against his will, forced to the office by the nobleman who had cared for and educated him. In the duke's fool he had found his other self; a man who like himself lent dignity to the gentle art of jesting; who could turn a rhyme and raise a laugh without resorting to grossness.

The line of demarcation between the clown and the merry-and-wise wit was, in those days, not clearly drawn. The stories of the former, which made the matrons look down and the maidens to hide their faces, were often more appreciated by the inebriate nobles than some subtile comicality or nimble lines of poetry, that would serve to take home and think over, and which improved with time like a wine of sound body. Triboulet abused the ancient art of foolery, thought Caillette; the duke's plaisant played upon it with true drollery, and as a master who has a delicate ear for an instrument, so Caillette, being sensitive to broadness or stupidity which masked as humor or pleasantry, turned naturally from the mountebank to the true jester.

Moreover, Caillette experienced a superior sadness, sifted through years of infestivity and gloom, beginning when Diane was led to the altar by the grand seneschal of Normandy, that threw an actual, albeit cynical, interest about the love-tragedy of the duke's fool which the other divined and--from his own past heart-throbs--understood. The plaisant to the princess' betrothed, Caillette would have sworn, was of gentle birth; his face, manner and bearing proclaimed it; he was, also, a scholar and a poet; his courage, which Caillette divined, fitted him for the higher office of arms. Certainly, he became an interesting companion, and the French jester sought his company on every occasion. And this fellowship, or intimacy, which he courted was destined to send Caillette forth on a strange and adventuresome mission.

The day following the return of the duke's fool to the castle, Francis, who early in his reign had sought to model his life after the chivalrous romances, inaugurated a splendid and pompous tournament. Some time before, the pursuivants had proclaimed the event and distributed to the knights who were to take active part the shields of arms of the four juges-diseurs, or umpires of the field. On this gala occasion the scaffolds and stands surrounding the arena were bedecked in silks of bright colors; against the cloudless sky a thousand festal flags waved and fluttered in the gentle breeze; beneath the tasseled awning festoons of bright flowers embellished gorgeous hangings and tapestries.

The king rode from the castle under a pavilion of cloth of gold and purple velvet, with the letters F and R, boldly outlined, followed by ladies and courtiers, pages and attendants. Amid the shouts and huzzas of the people, the monarch and his retinue took their places in the center of the stand, the royal box hung with ornate brocades and trimmings.

In an inclosure of white, next to that of the king, was seated the Lady of the Tournament, the Princess Louise, and her maids of honor, arrayed all in snowy garb, and, against the garish brilliancy of the general background, a pompous pageantry of colors, the decoration of this dainty nook shone in silvery contrast. A garland of flowers was the only crown the lady wore; no other adornment had her fair shoulders save their own argent beauty, of which the fashion of the day permitted a discernible suggestion. One arm hung languorously across the railing, as she leaned forward with seeming carelessness, but intently directed her glance to the scene below, where the attendants were arranging the ring or leading the wondrously pranked-out chargers to their stalls.

Behind her, motionless as a statue, with face that looked paler, and lips the redder, and hair the blacker, stood the maid Jacqueline. If the casual glance saw first the blond head, the creamy arms and sunny blue eyes of the princess, it was apt to linger with almost a start of wonder upon the striking figure of the jestress, a nocturnal touch in a pearly picture.

"On my word, there's a decorative creature for any lord to have in his house," murmured the aged chancellor of the kingdom, sitting near the monarch. "Who is she?"

"A beggar's brat Francis found here when he took the castle," replied the beribboned spark addressed. "You know the story?"

"Yes," said the white-haired diplomat, half-sadly. "This castle once belonged to the great Constable of Dubrois. When he fell from favor the king besieged him; the constable fled and died in Spain. That much, of course, I--and the world--know. But the girl--"

"When our victorious monarch took possession of this ancient pile," explained the willing courtier, "the only ones left in it were an old gamekeeper and his daughter, a gipsy-like maid who ran wild in the woods. Time hath tamed her somewhat, but there she stands."

"And what sad memories of a noble but unfortunate gentleman cluster around her!" muttered the chancellor. "Alas, for our brief hour of triumph and favor! Yesterday was he great; I, nothing. To-day, what am I, while he--is nothing."

A great murmur, resolving itself into shouts and resounding outcry, interrupted the noble's reminiscent mood, as a thick-set figure in richly chased armor, mounted on a massive horse, crossed the arena.

"Bon Vouloir!" they cried. "Bon Vouloir!"

It was the name assumed by the free baron for the day, while other knights were known for the time being by such euphonious and chivalrous appellations as Vaillant Desyr, Bon Espoir or Coeur Loyal. Bon Vouloir, upon this popular demonstration, reined his steed, and, removing his head-covering, bowed reverently to the king and his suite, deeply to the Lady of the Tournament and her retinue, and carelessly to the vociferous multitude, after which he retired to a large tent of crimson and gold, set apart for his convenience and pleasure.

From the purple box the monarch had nodded graciously and from the silver bower the lady had smiled softly, so that the duke had no reason for dissatisfaction; the attitude of the crowd was of small moment, an unmusical accompaniment to the potent pantomime, of which the principal figures were Francis, the King Arthur of Europe, and the princess, queen of beauty's unbounded realm.

In front of the duke's pavilion was hung his shield, and by its side stood his squire, fancifully dressed in rich colors. Behind ranged the men of arms, whose lances formed a fence to hold in check the people from far and wide, among whom the pick-purses, light-fingered scamps, and sturdy beggars conscientiously circulated, plying themselves assiduously. The fashion of the day prescribed carrying the purse and the dagger dangling from the girdle, and many a good citizen departed

from the tourney without the one and with the other, and it is needless to say which of the two articles the filcher left its owner. And none was more enthusiastic or demonstrative of the features of the lists than these rapacious riflers, who loudly cheered the merry monarch or shouted for his gallant knights, while deftly cutting purse-cords or despoiling honest country dames of brooches, clasps or other treasured articles of adornment.

Near the duke's pavilion, to the right, had been pitched a commodious tent of yellow material, with ropes of the same color, and a fool's cap crowning the pole in place of the customary banner. Over the entrance was suspended the jester's gilded wand and a staff, from which hung a blown bladder. Here were quartered the court jesters whom Francis had commanded to be fittingly attired for the lists and to take part in the general combat. In vain had Triboulet pleaded that they would occasion more merriment if assigned to the king's box than doomed to the arena.

"That may be," Francis had answered, "but on this occasion all the people must witness your antics."

"Antics!" Triboulet had shuddered. "An I should be killed, your Majesty?"

"Then it will be amusing to see you quiet for once in your life," had been the laughing reply.

And with this poor assurance the dwarf had been obliged to content himself--not merrily, 'tis true, but with much inward disquietude, secretly execrating his monarch for this revival of ancient and barbarous practices.

Now, in the rear of the jesters' pavilion, his face was yellow with trepidation, as the armorer buckled on the iron plates about his stunted figure, fastening and riveting them in such manner, he mentally concluded he should never emerge from that frightful shell.

"The worst of it is," dryly remarked the hunchback's valet as he briskly plied his little hammer, "these clothes are so heavy you couldn't run away if you wanted to."

"Oh, that the duke were married and out of the kingdom!" Triboulet fervently wished, and the fiery comments of Marot, Villot and those other reckless spirits, who seemed to mind no more the prospect of being spitted on a lance than if it were but a novel and not unpleasant experience to look forward to, in no wise served to assuage his heart-sinking.

At the entrance of the pavilion stood Caillette, who had watched the passing of Bon Vouloir and now was gazing upward into a sea of faces from whence came a hum of voices like the buzzing of unnumbered bees.

"Certes," he commented, "the king makes much of this unmannered,

lumpish, beer-drinking noble who is going to wed the princess."

"Caillette," said the low voice of the duke's jester at his elbow, "would you see a woman undone?"

"Why, mon ami!" lightly answered the French fool, "I've seen many undone--by themselves."

"Ah," returned the other, "I appeal to your chivalry, and you answer with a jest."

"How else," asked Caillette, with a peculiar smile that was at once sweet and mournful, "can one take woman, save as a jest--a pleasant mockery?"

"Your irony precludes the test of friendship--the service I was about to ask of you," retorted the duke's fool, gravely.

"Test of friendship!" exclaimed the poet. "'Tis the only thing I believe in. Love! What is it? A flame! a breath! Look out there--at the flatterers and royal sycophants. Those are your emissaries of love. Ye gods! into the breasts of what jack-a-dandies and parasites has descended the unquenchable fire of Jove! Now as for comradeship"--placing his hand affectionately on the other's shoulder--"by Castor and Pollux, and all the other inseparables, 'tis another thing. But expound this strange anomaly--a woman wronged. Who

is the woman?"

"The Princess Louise!"

Caillette glanced from the place where he stood to the center of the stand and the white bower, inclining from which was a woman, haughty, fair, beautiful; one whose face attracted the attention of the multitude and who seemed not unhappy in being thus scrutinized and admired. Shaking his head slowly, the court poet dropped his eyes and studied the sand at his feet.

"She looks not wronged," he said, dryly. "She appears to enjoy her triumphs."

"And yet, Caillette, 'tis all a farce," answered the duke's jester.

"So have I--thought--on other occasions."

And again his gaze flew upward, not, however, to the lady whom Francis had gallantly chosen for Queen of Beauty, but, despite his alleged cynicism, to a corner of the king's own box, where sat she who had once been a laughing maid by his side and with whom he had played that diverting pastoral, called "First Love." It was only an instant's return into the farcical but joyous past, and a moment later he was sharply recalled into the arid present by the words of his companion.

"The man the Princess Louise is going to marry is no more Robert, the Duke of Friedwald, than you are!" exclaimed the foreign fool. "He is the bastard of Pfalz-Urfeld, the so-called free baron of Hochfels. His castle commands the road between the true duke and Francis' domains. He made himself master of all the correspondence, conceived the plan to come here himself and intends to carry off the true lord's bride. Indeed, in private, he has acknowledged it all to me, and, failing to corrupt me to his service, last night set an assassin to kill me."

His listener, with folded arms and attentive mien, kept his eyes fixed steadily upon the narrator, as if he doubted the evidence of his senses. Without, the marshals had taken their places in the lists and another stentorian dissonance greeted these officers of the field from the good-humored gathering, which, basking in the anticipation of the feast they knew would follow the pageantry, clapped their hands and flung up their caps at the least provocation for rejoicing. Upon the two jesters this scene of jubilation was lost, Caillette merely bending closer to the other, with:

"But why have you not denounced him to the king?"

"Because of my foolhardiness in tacitly accepting at first this free-booter as my master."

Caillette shot a keen glance at the other and smiled. His eyes said: "Foolhardiness! Was it not, rather, some other emotion? Had not the

princess leaned more than graciously toward her betrothed and--"

"I thought him but some flimsy adventurer," went on the duke's fool, hastily, "and told myself I would see the play played out, holding the key to the situation, and--"

"You underestimated him?"

"Exactly. His plans were cunningly laid, and now--who am I that the king should listen to me? At best, if I denounce him, they would probably consider it a bit of pleasantry, or--madness."

"Yes," reluctantly assented Caillette, Triboulet's words, "a fool in love with the princess!" recurring to him; "it would be undoubtedly even as you say."

The duke's jester looked down thoughtfully. He had only half-expressed to the French plaisant the doubts which had assailed him since his interview with Louis of Hochfels. Who could read the minds of monarchs? The motives actuating them? Should he be able to convince Francis of the deception practised upon him, was it altogether unlikely that the king might not be brought to condone the offense for the sake of an alliance with this bastard of Pfalz-Urfeld and the other unconquerable free barons of the Austrian border against Charles himself? Had not Francis in the past, albeit openly friendly with the emperor, secretly courted the favor of the powerful German nobles in

Charles' own country? Had not his covenant with the infidel, Solyman, been a covert attempt to undermine the emperor's power?

From the day when, as young men, both had been aspirants for the imperial throne of Germany and Francis had suffered defeat, the latter had assiduously devoted himself to the retributory task of gaining the ascendancy over his successful rival. And now, although the tempering years had assuaged their erstwhile passions and each had professed to eschew war and its violence, might not this temptation prove too great for Francis to resist a last blow at the emperor's prestige? How easy to affect disbelief of a fool, to overthrow the fabric of friendship between Charles and himself, and at the same time apparently not violate good faith or conscience!

The voice of Caillette broke in upon his thoughts.

"You will not then attempt to denounce him?"

The fool hesitated. "Alone--out of favor with the king, I like not to risk the outcome--but--if I may depend upon you--"

"Did ever friend refuse such a call?" exclaimed Caillette, promptly. A quick glance of gratitude flashed from the other's eyes.

"There is one flaw in the free baron's position," resumed the duke's fool, more confidently; "a fatal one 'twill prove, if it is possible to

carry out my plans. He thinks the emperor is in Austria, and his followers guard the road through the mountains. He tells himself not only are the emperor and the Duke of Friedwald too far distant to hear of the pretender and interfere with the nuptials, but that he obviates even the contingency of their learning of that matter at all by controlling the way through which the messengers must go. Thus rests he in double security--but an imaginary one."

"What mean you?" asked Caillette, attentively, from his manner giving fuller credence to the extraordinary news he had just learned.

"That Charles, the emperor, is not in Austria, but in Aragon at Saragossa, where he can be reached in time to prevent the marriage. Just before my leaving, the emperor, to my certain knowledge, secretly departed for Spain on matters pertaining to the governing of Aragon. Charles plays a deep game in the affairs of Europe, though he works ever silently and unobtrusively. Is he not always beforehand with your king? When Francis was preparing the gorgeous field of the cloth of gold for his English brother, did not Charles quietly leave for the little isle, and there, without beat of drum, arrange his own affairs before Henry was even seen by your pleasure-loving monarch? Yes; to the impostor and to Francis, Charles is in Austria; to us--for now you share my secret--is he in Spain, where by swift riding he may be found, and yet interdict in this matter."

"Then why--haven't you ere this fled to the emperor with the news?"

"Last night I had determined to get away, when first I was assaulted by an assassin of the impostor, and next detained by his troop and brought back to the castle. I had even left on foot, trusting to excite less suspicion, and hoping to find a horse on the way, but fortune was with the pretender. So here am I, closely watched--and waiting," he added grimly.

The listener's demeanor was imperturbability itself. He knew why the other had taken him into his confidence, and understood the silent appeal as plainly as though words had uttered it. Perhaps he duly weighed the perils of a flight without permission from the court of the exacting and capricious monarch, and considered the hazards of the trip itself through a wild and brigand-infested country. Possibly, the thought of the princess moved him, for despite his irony, it was his mocking fate to entertain in his breast, against his will, a covert sympathy for the gentler sex; or, looking into the passionate face of his companion, he may have been conscious of some bond of brotherhood, a fellow-feeling that could not resist the call upon his good-will and amicable efforts. The indifference faded from Caillette's face and almost a boyish enthusiasm shone in his eyes.

"Mon ami, I'll do it!" he exclaimed, lightly. "I'll ride to the emperor for you."

Silently the jester of the duke wrung his hand. "I've long sighed for

an adventure," laughed Caillette. "And here is the opportunity. Caillette, a knight-errant! But"--his face falling--"the emperor will look on me as a madman."

"Nay," replied the duke's plaisant, "here is a letter. When he reads it he will, at least, think the affair worth consideration. He knows me, and trusts my fidelity, and will be assured I would not jest on such a serious matter. Believe me, he will receive you as more than a madman."

"Why, then, 'twill be a rare adventure," commented the other. "Wandering in the country; the beautiful country, where I was reared; away from the madness of courts. Already I hear the wanton breezes sighing in Sapphic softness and the forests' elegiac murmur. Tell me, how shall I ride?"

"As a knight to the border; thence onward as a minstrel. In Spain there's always a welcome for a blithe singer."

"'Tis fortunate I learned some Spanish love songs from a fair señora who was in Charles' retinue the time he visited Francis," added Caillette. "An I should fail?" he continued, more gravely.

"You will not fail," was the confident reply.

"I am of your mind, but things will happen--sometimes--and why do you

not speak to the princess herself--to warn her--"

"Speak to her!" repeated the duke's jester, a shadow on his brow. "When he has appealed to her, perhaps--when--" He broke off abruptly. His tone was proud; in his eyes a look which Caillette afterward understood. As it was, the latter nodded his head wisely.

"A woman whose fancy is touched is--what she is," he commented, generally. "Truly it would be a more thankless task, even, than approaching the king. For women were ever creatures of caprice, not to be governed by any court of logic, but by the whimsical, fantastic rules of Marguerite's court. Court!" he exclaimed. "The word suggests law; reason; where merit hath justice. Call it not Love's Court, but love's caprice, or crochet. But look you, there's another channel to the princess' mind--yonder black-browed maid--our ally in motley--when she chooses to wear it--Jacqueline."

"She likes me not," returned the fool. "Would she believe me in such an important matter?"

"I'm afraid not," tranquilly replied Caillette, "in view of the improbability of your tale and the undoubted credentials held by this pretender. For my part, to look at the fellow was almost enough. But to the ladies, his brutality signifieth strength and power; and his uncouthness, originality and genius. Marguerite, even, is prepossessed in his favor and has written a platonic poem in his honor. As for the

princess"--pressing the other's arm gently--"do you not know, mon ami, that women are all alike? There is but one they obey--the king--that is as high as their ambitions can reach--and even him they deceive. Why, the Countess d'Etampes--but this is no time for gossip. We are fools, you and I, and love, my friend, is but broad farce at the best."

Even as he spoke thus, however, from the lists came the voices of the well-instructed heralds, secretaries of the occasion, who had delved deeply into the practices of the merry and ancient pastime: "Love of ladies! For you and glory! Chivalry but fights for love. Look down, fair eyes!" a peroration which was answered with many pieces of silver from the galleries above, and which the gorgeously dressed officials readily unbent to gather. Among the fair hands which rewarded this perfunctory apostrophe to the tender passion none was more lavish in offerings than those matrons and maids in the vicinity of the king. A satirical smile again marred Caillette's face, but he kept his reflections to himself, reverting to the business of the moment.

"I should be off at once!" he cried. "But what can we do? The king hath commanded all the jesters to appear in the tournament to-day, properly armed and armored, the better to make sprightlier sport amid the ponderous pastime of the knights. Here am I bound to shine on horseback, willy-nilly. Yet this matter of yours is pressing. Stay! I have it. I can e'en fall from my horse, by a ruse, retire from the field, and fly southward."

"Then will I wish you Godspeed, now," said the duke's fool. "Never was a stancher heart than thine, Caillette, or a truer friend."

"One word," returned the other, not without a trace of feeling which even his cynicism could not hide. "Beware of the false duke in the arena! It will be his opportunity to--"

"I understand," answered the duke's fool, again warmly pressing Caillette's hand, "but with the knowledge you are fleeing to Spain I have no fear for the future. If we meet not after to-day--"

"Why, life's but a span, and our friendship has been short, but sweet," added the other.

Now without sounded a flourish of trumpets and every glance was expectantly down-turned from the crowded stand, as with a clatter of hoofs and waving of plumes France's young chivalry dashed into the lists, divided into two parties, took their respective places and, at a signal from the musicians, started impetuously against one another.