

CHAPTER XII

THE DUKE ENTERS THE LISTS

In that first "joyous and gentle passage of arms," wherein the weapons were those "of courtesy," their points covered with small disks, several knights broke their lances fairly, two horsemen of the side wearing red plumes became unseated, and their opponents, designated as the "white plumes," swept on intact.

"Well done!" commented the king from his high tribunal, as the squires and attendants began to clear the lists, assisting the fallen belligerents to their tents. "We shall have another such memorable field as that of Ashby-de-la-Zouch!"

The following just, reduced to six combatants, three of the red plumes and three of the white, was even yet more spirited than the first tilt, for the former trio couched their lances with the determination to retrieve the day for their party. In this encounter two of the whites were unhorsed, thus placing the contention once more on an equal basis, while in the third conflict the whites again suffered similar disaster, and but one remained to redeem his party's lapse from an advantage gained in the opening combat.

All eyes were now fastened upon this single remnant of the white fellowship in arms, who, to wrest victory from defeat, became obliged

to overcome each in turn of the trio of reds, a formidable task for one who had already been successful in three stubborn matches. It was a hero-making opportunity, but, alas! for the last of the little white company. Like many another, he made a brave dash for honor and the "bubble reputation"; the former slipped tantalizingly from his grasp, and the latter burst and all its pretty colors dissolved in thin air. Now he lay still on the sands and the king only remarked:

"Certes, he possessed courage."

And the words sounded like an epitaph, a not inglorious one, although the hand that gripped the lance had failed. The defeated champion was removed; the opportunity had passed; the multitude stoically accepted the lame and impotent conclusion, and the tournament proceeded.

Event followed event, and those court ladies who at first had professed their nerves were weaker than their foremothers' now watched the arena with sparkling eyes, no longer turning away at the thrilling moment of contact. Taking their cue from the king, they were lavish in praise and generous in approval, and at an unusual exhibition of skill the stand grew bright with waving scarfs and handkerchiefs. Simultaneous with such an animated demonstration from the galleries would come a roar of approval from the peasantry below, crowded where best they could find places, bespeaking for their part, likewise, an increasing lust for the stirring pastime.

In truth, the only dissatisfied onlookers were the quick-fingered spoilers and rovers who, packed as close as dried dates in a basket by the irresistible forward press of the people, found themselves suddenly occupationless, without power to move their arms, or ply their hands. Thus held in a mighty compress, temporary prisoners with their spoils in their pockets, and cheap jewelry shining enticingly all about them, they were obliged for the time to comport themselves like honest citizens. But, although their bodies were in durance vile, their eyes could roam covetously to a showy trinket on the broad bosom of some buxom good-wife, or a gewgaw that hung from the neck of a red-cheeked lass.

"Ha!" muttered the scamp-student to his good spouse, "here are all the jolly boys immersed to their necks, like prisoners buried in the sand by the Arabs."

"Hush!" she whispered, warningly. "See you yonder--the duke's fool; he wears the arms of Charles, the emperor."

"And there's the Duke of Friedwald himself," answered the ragged scholar. "Look! the jesters are going to fight. They have arranged them in two parties. Half of them go with the duke and his knights; the other half with his Lordship's opponents."

"But the duke's fool, by chance, is set against his master," she mumbled, significantly.

"Call you it chance?" he said in a low voice, and Nanette nudged him angrily in the side with her elbow, so that he cried out, and attention would have been called to them but for a ripple of laughter which started on the edge of the crowd and was taken up by the serried ranks.

"Ho! ho! Look at Triboulet!" shouted the delighted populace. "Ah, the droll fellow!"

All eyes were now bent to the arena, where, on a powerful nag, sat perched the misshapen jester. With whip and spur he was vehemently plying a horse that stubbornly stood as motionless as carven stone. Thinking at the last moment of a plan for escape from the dangerous features of the tourney, the hunchback had bribed one of the attendants to fetch him a steed which for sullen obduracy surpassed any charger in the king's stables. Fate, he was called, because nothing could move or change him, and now, with head pushed forward and ears thrust back, he proved himself beneath the blows and spurring of the seemingly excited rider, worthy of this appellation.

"Go on, Fate; go on!" exclaimed the apparently angry dwarf. "Will you be balky now, when Triboulet has glory within his grasp? Miserable beast! unhappy fate! When bright eyes are watching the great Triboulet!"

If not destined to score success with his lance, the dwarf at least had

won a victory through his comical situation and ready wit. Fair ladies forgot his ugliness; the pages his ill-humor; the courtiers his vindictive slyness; the monarch the disappointment of his failure to worst the duke's fool, and all applauded the ludicrous figure, shouting, waving his arms, struggling with inexorable destiny. Finally, in despair, his hands fell to his side.

"Oh, resistless necessity!" he cried. But in his heart he said: "It is well. I am as safe as on a wooden horse. Here I stand. Let others have their heads split or their bodies broken. Triboulet, like the gods, views the carnage from afar."

While this bit of unexpected comedy riveted the attention of the spectators the duke and his followers had slowly ridden to their side of the inclosure. Here hovered the squires, adjusting a stirrup, giving a last turn to a strap, or testing a bridle or girth. Behind stood the heralds, trumpeters and pursuivants in their bright garb of office. At his own solicitation had the duke been assigned an active part in the day's entertainment. The king, fearing for the safety of his guest and the possible postponement of the marriage should any injury befall him, had sought to dissuade him from his purpose, but the other had laughed boisterously at the monarch's fears and sworn he would break a lance for his lady love that day. Francis, too gallant a knight himself to interpose further objection to an announcement so in keeping with the traditions of the lists, thereupon had ordered the best charger in his stables to be placed at the disposal of the

princess' betrothed, and again nodded his approbation upon the appearance of the duke in the ring. But at least one person in that vast assemblage was far from sharing the monarch's complaisant mood.

If the mind of the duke's fool had heretofore been filled with bitterness upon witnessing festal honors to a mere presumptuous free baron, what now were his emotions at the reception accorded him? From king to churl was he a gallant noble; he, a swaggerer, ill-born, a terrorist of mountain passes. Even as the irony of the demonstration swept over the jester, from above fell a flower, white as the box from whence it was wafted. Downward it fluttered, a messenger of amity, like a dove to his gauntlet. And with the favor went a smile from the Lady of the Lists. But while Bon Vouloir stood there, the symbol in his hand and the applause ringing in his ears, into the tenor of his thoughts, the consciousness of partly gratified ambition, there crept an insinuating warning of danger.

"My Lord," said the trooper with the red mustache, riding by the side of his master, "the fool is plotting further mischief."

"What mean you?" asked the free baron, frowning, as he turned toward his side of the field.

"Go slowly, my Lord, and I will tell you. I saw the fool and another jester with their heads together," continued the trooper in a low tone.

"They were standing in front of the jesters' tent. You bade me watch

him. So I entered their pavilion at the back. Making pretext to be looking for a gusset for an armor joint, I made my way near the entrance. There, bending over barbet pieces, I overheard fragments of their conversation. It even bore on your designs."

"A conversation on my designs! He has then dared--"

"All, my Lord. A scheming knave! After I had heard enough, I gathered up a skirt of tassets--"

"What did you hear?" said the other, impatiently.

"A plan by which he hoped to let the emperor know--"

A loud flourish of trumpets near them interrupted the free baron's informer, and when the clarion tones had ceased it was the master who spoke. "There's time but for a word now. Come to my tent afterward. Meanwhile," he went on, hurriedly, "direct a lance at the fool--"

"But, my Lord," expostulated the man, quickly, "the jesters only are to oppose one another."

"It will pass for an accident. Francis likes him not, and will clear you of unknighly conduct, if--" He finished with a boldly significant look, which was not lost upon his man.

"Even if the leaden disk should fall from my lance and leave the point bare?" said the trooper, hoarsely.

"Even that!" responded the free baron, hastily.

"Laissez-aller!" cried the marshals, giving the signal to begin.

Above, in her white box, the princess turned pale. With bated breath and parted lips, she watched the lines sweep forward, and, like two great waves meeting, collide with a crash. The dust that arose seemed an all-enshrouding mist. Beneath it the figures appeared, vague, undefined, in a maze of uncertainty.

"Oh!" exclaimed Louise, striving to penetrate the cloud; "he is victorious!"

"They have killed him!" said Jacqueline, at the same time staring toward another part of the field.

"Killed him!--what--" began the princess, now rosy with excitement.

"No; he has won," added the maid, in the next breath, as a portion of the obscuring mantle was swept aside.

"Of course! Where are your eyes?" rejoined her mistress triumphantly.

"The duke, is one of the emperor's greatest knights."

"In this case, Madam, it is but natural your sight should be better than my own," half-mockingly returned the maid.

And, in truth, the princess was right, for the king's guest, through overwhelming strength and greater momentum, had lightly plucked from his seat a stalwart adversary. Others of his following failed not in the "attaint," and horses and troopers floundered in the sand. Apart from the duke's victory, two especial incidents, one comic, stood out in the confused picture.

That which partook of the humorous aspect, and was seen and appreciated by all, had for its central figure an unwilling actor, the king's hunchback. Like the famous steed builded by the Greeks, Triboulet's "wooden horse" contained unknown elements of danger, and even while the jester was congratulating himself upon absolute immunity from peril the nag started and quivered. At the flourish of the brass instruments his ears, that had lain back, were now pricked forward; he had once, in his palmy, coltish time, been a battle charger, and, perhaps, some memory of those martial days, the waving of plumes and the clashing of arms, reawoke his combative spirit of old. Or, possibly his brute intelligence penetrated the dwarf's knavish pusillanimity, and, changing his tactics that he might still range on the side of perversity, resolved himself from immobility into a rampant agency of motion. Furiously he dashed into the thick of the conflict, and Triboulet, paralyzed with fear and dropping his lance, was borne

helplessly onward, execrating the nag and his capricious humor.

Opposed to the hunchback rode Villot, who, upon reaching the dwarf and observing his predicament, good-naturedly turned aside his point, but was unable to avoid striking him with the handle as he rode by. To Triboulet that blow, reëchoing in the hollow depths of his steel shell, sounded like the dissolution of the universe, and, not doubting his last moment had come, mechanically he fell to earth, abandoning to its own resources the equine Fate that had served him so ill. Striking the ground, and, still finding consciousness had not deserted him, instinct prompted him to demonstrate that if his armor was too heavy for him to run away in, as the smithy-valet de chambre had significantly affirmed, yet he possessed the undoubted strength and ability to crawl. Thus, amid the guffaws of the peasantry and the smiles of the nobles, he swiftly scampered from beneath the horses' feet, hurriedly left the scene of strife, and finally reached triumphantly the haven of his tent.

The other incident, witnessed by Jacqueline, was of a more serious nature. As the lines swept together, with the dust rising before, she perceived that the duke's trooper had swerved from his course and was bearing down upon the duke's fool.

"Oh," she whispered to herself, "the master now retaliates on the jester." And held her breath.

Had he, too, observed these sudden perfidious tactics? Apparently.

Yet he seemed not to shun the issue.

"Why does he not turn aside?" thought the maid. "He might yet do it. A fool and a knight, forsooth!"

But the fool pricked his horse deeply; it sprang to the struggle madly; crash! like a thunderbolt, steed and rider leaped upon the trooper. Then it was Jacqueline had murmured: "They have killed him!" not doubting for a moment but that he had sped to destruction.

A second swift glance, and through the veil, less obscure, she saw the jester riding, unharmed, his lance unbroken. Had he escaped, after all? And the trooper? He lay among the trampling horses' feet. She saw him now. How had it all come about? Her mind was bewildered, but in spite of the princess' assertion to the contrary, her sight seemed unusually clear.

"Good lance, fool!" cried a voice from the king's box.

"The jester rides well," said another. "The knight's lance even passed over his head, while the fool's struck fairly with terrific force."

"But why did he select the jester as an adversary?" continued the first speaker.

"Mistakes will happen in the confusion of a mêlée--and he has paid

for his error," was the answer. And Jacqueline knew that none would be held accountable for the treacherous assault.

Now the fool had dismounted and she observed that he was bending over another jester who had been unhorsed. "Why," she murmured to herself in surprise, "Caillette! As good a soldier as a fool. Who among the jesters could have unseated him?"

But her wonderment would have increased, could she have overheard the conversation between the duke's fool and Caillette, as the former lifted the other from the sands and assisted him to walk, or rather limp, to the jesters' pavilion.

"Did I not tell you to beware of the false duke?" muttered Caillette, not omitting a parenthesis of deceptive groans.

"Ah, if it had only been he, instead," began the fool.

"Why," interrupted the seemingly injured man, "think you to stand up against the boar of Hochfels?"

"I would I might try!" said the other quickly.

"Your success with the trooper has turned your head," laughed Caillette, softly. "One last word. Look to yourself and fear not for me. Mine injuries--which I surmise are internal as they are not

visible--will excuse me for the day. Nor shall I tarry at the palace for the physician, but go straight on without bolus, simples or pills, a very Mercury for speed. Danger will I eschew and a pretty maid shall hold me no longer than it takes to give her a kiss in passing. Here leave me at the tent. Turn back to the field, or they will suspect. Trust no one, and--you'll mind it not in a friend, one who would serve you to the end?--forget the princess! Serve her, save her, as you will, but, remember, women are but creatures of the moment. Adieu, mon ami!"

And Caillette turned as one in grievous physical pain to an attendant, bidding him speedily remove the armor, while the duke's fool, more deeply stirred than he cared to show, moved again to the lists.