

## CHAPTER XIII

### A CHAPLET FOR THE DUKE

Loud rang encomium and blessing on the king, as the people that night crowded in the rear courtyard around the great tables set in the open air, and groaning beneath viands, nutritious and succulent. What swain or yokel had not a meed of praise for the monarch when he beheld this burden of good cheer, and, at the end of each board, elevated a little and garlanded with roses, a rotund and portly cask of wine, with a spigot projecting hospitably tablewards?

Forgotten were the tax-lists under which the commonalty labored; it was "Hosanna" for Francis, and not a plowman nor tiller of the soil bethought himself that he had fully paid for the snack and sup that night. How could he, having had no one to think for him; for then Rousseau had not lived, Voltaire was unborn, and the most daring approach to lese-majesty had been Rabelais' jocose: "The wearers of the crown and scepter are born under the same constellation as those of cap and bells."

Upon the green, smoking torches illumined the people and the surroundings; beneath a great oven, the bright coals cast a vivid glow far and near. Close to the broad face of a cask--round and large like that of a full-fed host presiding at the head of the board--sat the Franciscan monk, whose gluttonous eye wandered from quail to partridge,

thence onward to pastry or pie, with the spigot at the end of the orbit of observation. Nor as it made this comprehensive survey did his glance omit a casual inventory of the robust charms of a bouncing maid on the opposite side of the table. Scattered amid the honest, good-natured visages of the trusting peasants were the pinched adventurers from Paris, the dwellers of that quarter sacred to themselves. Yonder plump, frisky dame seemed like the lamb; the gaunt knave by her side, the wolf.

At length the company could eat no more, although there yet remained a void for drinking, and as the cups went circling and circling, their laughter mingled with the distant strains of music from the great, gorgeously lighted pavilion, where the king and his guests were assembled to close the tourney fittingly with the celebration of the final event--the awarding of the prize for the day.

"Can you tell me, good sir, to whom the umpires of the field have given their judgment?" said a townsman to his country neighbor.

"Did you not hear the king of arms decide the Duke of Friedwald was the victor?" answered the other.

"A decision of courtesy, perhaps?" insinuated the Parisian.

"Nay; two spears he broke, and overcame three adversaries during the day. Fairly he won the award."

"I wish we might see the presentation," interrupted a maid, pertly, her longing eyes straying to the bright lights afar.

"Presentation!" repeated the countryman. "Did we not witness the sport? A fig for the presentation! Give me the cask and a juicy haunch, with a lass like yourself to dance with after, and the nobles are welcome to the sight of the prize and all the ceremony that goes with it."

Within the king's pavilion, the spectacle alluded to, regretfully by the girl and indifferently by the man, was at that moment being enacted. Upon a throne of honor, the lady of the tournament, attended by two maids, looked down on a brilliant assemblage, through which now approached the king and the princess' betrothed. The latter seemed somewhat thoughtful; his eye had but encountered that of the duke's fool, whose gaze expressed a disdainful confidence the other fain would have fathomed. But for that unfortunate meeting in the lists which had sealed the lips of the only person who had divined the hidden danger, the free baron would now have been master of the plaisant's designs. Above, in the palace, the trooper with the red mustaches lay on his couch unconscious.

For how long? The court physician could not say. The soldier might remain insensible for hours. Thus had the jester served himself with that stroke better than he knew, and he of Hochfels bit his lip and

fumed inwardly, but to no purpose. Not that he believed the peril to be great, but the fact he could not grasp it goaded him, and he cursed the trooper for a dolt and a poltroon that a mere fool should have vanquished him. And so he had left him, with a last look of disgust at the silent lips that could not do his bidding, and had proceeded to the royal pavilion, where the final act of the day's drama--more momentous than the king or other spectators realized--was to be performed; an act in which he would have appeared with much complacency, but that his chagrin preyed somewhat on his vanity.

But his splendid self-control and audacity revealed to the courtly assemblage no trace of what was passing in his mind. He walked by the king's side as one not unaccustomed to such exalted company, nor overwhelmed by sudden honors. His courage was superb; his demeanor that of one born to command; in him seemed exemplified a type of brute strength and force denoting a leader--whether of an army or a band of swashbucklers. As the monarch and the free baron drew near, the princess slowly, gracefully arose, while now grouped around the throne stood the heralds and pursuivants of the lists. In her hand Louise held the gift, covered with a silver veil, an end of which was carried by each of the maids.

"Fair Lady of the Tournament," said the king, "this gallant knight is Bon Vouloir, whom you have even heard proclaimed the victor of the day."

"Approach, Bon Vouloir!" commanded the Queen of Love.

The maids uncovered the gift, the customary chaplet of beaten gold, and, as the free baron bowed his head, the princess with a firm hand fulfilled the functions of her office. Rising, Bon Vouloir, amid the exclamations of the court, claimed the privilege that went with the bauble. A moment he looked at the princess; she seemed to bend beneath his regard; then leaning forward, deliberately rather than ardently, he touched her cheek with his lips. Those who watched the Queen of Love closely observed her face become paler and her form tremble; but in a moment she was again mistress of herself, her features prouder and colder than before.

"Did you notice how he melted the ice of her nature?" whispered Diane, with a malicious little laugh, to the countess.

"And yet 'twas not his--warmth that did it," wisely answered the favorite of the king.

"His coldness, then," laughed the other, as the musicians began to play, and the winner of the chaplet led the princess to the dance. "Is it not so, Sire?" she added, turning to the king, who at that moment approached.

"He, indeed, forgot a part of the ceremony," graciously assented Francis.

"A part of the ceremony, your Majesty?" questioned Diane.

"To kiss the two damsels of the princess; and one of them was worthy of casual courtesy," he added, musingly.

"Which, Sire?" asked the countess, quickly.

"The dark-browed maid," returned the monarch, thoughtfully. "Where did I notice her last?"

And then he remembered. It was she who, he suspected, had laughed that night in Fools' hall. Recalling the circumstance, the king looked around for her, but she had drawn back.

"Is it your pleasure to open the festivities, Sire?" murmured the favorite, and, without further words, Francis acquiesced, proffering his arm to his companion.

Masque, costume ball, ballet, it was all one to the king and the court, who never wearied of the diverting vagaries of the dance. Now studying that pantomimic group of merry-makers, in the rhythmical expression of action and movement could almost be read the influence and relative positions of the fair revelers. The countess, airy and vivacious, perched, as it were, lightly yet securely on the arm of the throne; Diane, fearless, confident of the future through the dauphin;

Catharine, proud of her rank, undisturbed in her own exalted place as wife of the dauphin; Marguerite, mixture of saint and sinner, a soft heart that would oft-times turn the king from a hard purpose.

"There! I've danced enough," said a panting voice, and Jacqueline, breathless, paused before the duke's fool, who stood a motionless spectator of the revelry. In his rich costume of blue and white, the figure of the foreign jester presented a fair and striking appearance, but his face, proud and composed, was wanting in that spirit which animated the features of his fellows in motley.

"One more turn, fair Jacqueline?" suggested Marot, her partner in the dance.

"Not one!" she answered.

"Is that a dismissal?" he asked, lightly.

"'Tis for you to determine," retorted the maid.

"Modesty forbids I should interpret it to my desires," he returned, laughing, as he disappeared.

Tall, seeming straighter than usual, upon each cheek a festal rose, she stood before the duke's plaisant, inscrutable, as was her fashion, the scarf about her shoulders just stirring from the effects of the

dance, and her lips parted to her hurried breathing.

"How did you like the ceremony?" she asked, quietly. "And did you know," she went on, without noticing the dark look in his eyes or awaiting his response, "the lance turned upon you to-day was not a 'weapon of courtesy'?"

"You mean it was directed by intention?" he asked indifferently.

"Not only that," she answered. "I mean that the disk had been removed and the point left bare."

"A mistake, of course," he said, with a peculiar smile.

A look of impatience crossed her face, but she gazed at him intently and her eyes held his from the floor where they would have strayed.

"Are you stupid, or do you but profess to be?" she demanded. "Before the tilt I noticed the duke and his trooper talking together. When they separated the latter, unobserved as he thought, struck the point of his weapon against his stirrup. The disk fell to the ground."

"Your glance is sharp, Jacqueline," he retorted, slowly. "Thank you for the information."

Her eyes kindled; an angry retort seemed about to spring from her lips.



It was with difficulty she controlled herself to answer calmly a moment later.

"You mean it can serve you nothing? Perhaps you are right. To-day you were lucky. To-morrow you may be--what? To-day you defended yourself well and it was a good lance you bore. Had it been any other jester, the king would have praised him. Because it was you, no word has been spoken. If anything, your success has annoyed him. Several of the court spoke of it; he answered not; 'tis the signal to ignore it, and--you!"

"Then are you courageous to brave public opinion and hold converse with me," he replied, with a smile.

"Public opinion!" she exclaimed with flashing eyes. "What would they say of a jestress? Who is she? What is she?"

She ended abruptly; bit her lips, showing her gleaming white teeth. Then some emotion, more profound, swept over her expressive face; she looked at him silently, and when she spoke her voice was more gentle.

"I can not believe," she continued thoughtfully, "that the duke told his trooper to do that. 'Tis too infamous. The man must have acted on his own responsibility. The duke could not, would not, countenance such baseness."

"You have a good opinion of him, gentle mistress," he said in a tone that exasperated her.

"Who has not?" she retorted, sharply. "He is as brave as he is distinguished. Farewell. If you served him better, and yourself less, you--"

"Would serve myself better in the end?" he interrupted, satirically. "Thanks, good Jacqueline. A woman makes an excellent counselor."

Disdainfully she smiled; her face grew cold; her figure looked never more erect and inflexible.

"Why," she remarked, "here am I wasting time talking when the music is playing and every one is dancing. Even now I see a courtier approaching who has thrice importuned me." And the jestress vanished in the throng as abruptly as she had appeared.

Thoughtfully the duke's fool looked, not after her, but toward a far end of the pavilion, where he last had seen the princess and her betrothed.

"Caillette should now be well on his way," he told himself. "No one has yet missed him, or if they do notice his absence they will attribute it to his injuries."

This thought lent him confidence; the implied warnings of the maid passed unheeded from his mind; indeed, he had scarcely listened to them. Amid stronger passions, he felt the excitement of the subtle game he and the free baron were playing; the blind conviction of a gambler that he should yet win seized him, dissipating in a measure more violent thoughts.

He began to calculate other means to make assurance doubly sure; an intricate realm of speculation, considering the safeguards the boar of Hochfels had placed about himself. To offset the triumphs of the king's guest there occurred to the jester the comforting afterthought that the greater the other's successes now the more ignominious would be his downfall. The free baron had not hesitated to use any means to obliterate his one foeman from the scene; and he repeated to himself that he would meet force with cunning, and duplicity with stealth, spinning such a web as lay within his own capacity and resources. But in estimating the moves before him, perhaps in his new-found trust, he overlooked the strongest menace to his success--a hazard couched within himself.

Outspreading from the pavilion's walls were floral bowers with myriad lights that shone through the leaves and foliage, where tiny fragrant fountains tinkled, or diminutive, fairy-like waterfalls fell amid sweet-smelling plants. Green, purple, orange, red, had been the colors chosen in these dainty retreats for such of the votaries of the Court of Love as should, from time to time, care to exchange the merry-making

within for the languorous rest without. It was yet too early, however, for the sprightly devotees to abandon the lively pleasures of the dance, so that when the duke's fool abstractedly entered the balmy, crimson nook, at first he thought himself alone.

Around him, carmine, blood-warm flowers exhaled a commingling redolence; near him a toy-like fountain whispered very softly and confidentially. Through the foliage the figures moved and moved; on the air the music fell and rose, thin in orchestration, yet brightly penetrating in sparkling detail. Buoyant were the violins; sportive the flutes; all alive the gittersns; blithesome the tripping arpeggios that crisply fell from the strings of the joyous harps.

The rustling of a gown admonished him he was not alone, and, looking around, amid the crimson flowers, to his startled gaze, appeared the face of her of whom he was thinking; above the broad, white brow shone the radiance of hair, a gold that was almost bronze in that dim light; through the green tangle of shrubbery, a silver slipper.

"Ah, it is you, fool?" she said languidly. It may be, he contrasted the indifference of her tones now with the unconscious softness of her voice when she had addressed him on another occasion--in another garden; for his face flushed, and he would have turned abruptly, when--

"Oh, you may remain," she added, carelessly. "The duke has but left me. He received a message that the man hurt in the lists was most

anxious to see him."

Into the whirl of his reflections her words insinuated themselves. Why had the free baron gone to the trooper? What made his presence so imperative at the bedside of the soldier that he had abruptly abandoned the festivities? Surely, more than mere anxiety for the man's welfare. The jester looked at the princess for the answer to these questions; but her face was cold, smiling, unresponsive. In the basin of the fountain tiny fish played and darted, and as his eyes turned from her to them they appeared as swift and illusive as his own surging fancies.

"The--duke, Madam, is most solicitous about his men," he said, in a voice which sounded strangely calm.

"A good leader has always in mind the welfare of his soldiers," she replied, briefly.

Her hand played among the blossoms. Over the flowers she looked at him. Her features and arms were of the sculptured roundness of marble, but the reflection of the roses bathed her in the warm hue of life. As he met her gaze the illumined pages of a book seemed turning before his eyes. Did she remember?

She could not but perceive his emotion; the tribute of a glance beyond control, despite the proud immobility of his features.

"Sit here, fool," she said, not unkindly, "and you may tell me more about the duke. His exploits--of that battle when he saved the life of the emperor."

The jester made no move to obey, but, looking down, answered coldly: "The duke, Madam, likes not to have his poor deeds exploited."

"Poor deeds!" she returned, and seemed about to reply more sharply when something in his face held her silent.

Leaning her head on her hand, she appeared to forget his presence; motionless save for a foot that waved to and fro, betraying her restless mood. The sound of her dress, the swaying of the foot, held his attention. In that little bower the air was almost stifling, laden with the perfume of many flowers. Even the song of the birds grew fainter. Only the tiny fountain, more assertive than ever, became louder and louder. The princess breathed deeply; half-rose; a vine caught in her hair; she stooped to disentangle it; then held herself erect.

"How close it is in here!" she murmured, arranging the tress the plant had disturbed. "Go to the door, fool, and see if you can find your master."

Involuntarily he had stepped toward her, as though to assist her, but now stopped. His face changed; he even laughed. That last word, from

her lips, seemed to break the spell of self-control that held him.

"My master!" he said in a hard, scoffing tone. "Whom mean you? The man who left you to go to the soldier? That blusterer, my master! That swaggering trooper!"

Her inertness vanished; the sudden anger and wonderment in her eyes met the passion in his.

"How dare you--dare you--" she began.

"He is neither my master, nor the duke; but a mere free-booter, a mountain terrorist!"

Pride and contempt replaced her surprise, but indignation still remained. His audacity in coming to her with this falsehood; his hardihood in maintaining it, admitted of but one explanation. By her complaisance in the past she had fanned the embers of a passion which now burst beyond control. She realized how more than fair she looked that evening--had she not heard it from many?--had not the eyes of the king's guest told her?--and she believed that this lie must have sprung to the jester's lips while he was regarding her.

As the solution crossed her mind, revealing the pleasant, a desperate and despicable, as well as lowly wooer, her face relaxed. In the desire to test her conclusion, she laughed quietly, musically. Cruelly

kind, smiled the princess.

"You are mad," she breathed softly. "You are mad--because--because you--"

He started, studying her eagerly. He fancied he read relenting softness in her gaze; a flash of memory into a past, where glamour and romance, and the heart-history of the rose made up life's desideratum. Wherein existence was but an allegory of love's quest, and the goal, its consummation. Had she not bent sedulously over the rose of the poet? Had not her breath come quickly, eagerly? Could he not feel it yet, sweet and warm on his cheek? Into the past, having gone so far, he stepped now boldly, as though to grasp again those illusive colors and seize anew the intangible substance. He was but young, when shadows seem solid, when dreams are corporeal stuff, and fantasies, rock-like strata of reality.

So he knelt before her. "Yes," he said, "I love you!"

And thus remained, pale, motionless, all resentment or jealousy succeeded by a stronger emotion, a feeling chivalric that bent itself to a glad thralldom, the desire but to serve her--to save her. His heart beat faster; he raised his head proudly.

"Listen, Princess," he began. "Though I meant it not, I fear I have greatly wronged you. I have much to ask your pardon for; much to tell



you. It is I--I--"

The words died on his lips. From the princess' face all softness had suddenly vanished. Her gaze passed him, cold, haughty. Across the illusory positiveness of his world--immaterial, psychological, ghostly--an intermediate orb--a tangible shadow was thrown. Behind him stood the free baron and the king. Quickly the fool sprang to his feet.

"Princess!" exclaimed the hoarse voice of the master of Hochfels.

"My Lord?"

For a moment neither spoke, and then the clear, cold voice of the princess broke the silence.

"Are all the fools in your country so presumptuous, my Lord?" she said.

The king's countenance lightened; he turned his accusing glance upon the fool. As in a dream stood the latter; the words he would have uttered remained unspoken. But briefly the monarch surveyed him, satirically, darkly; then turning, with a gesture, summoned an attendant. Not until the hands of two soldiers fell upon him did the fool betray any emotion. Then his face changed, and the stunned look in his eyes gave way to an expression of such unbridled feeling that involuntarily the king stepped back and the free baron drew his sword. But neither had the monarch need for apprehension, nor the princess'

betrothed use for his weapon. Some emotion, deeper than anger, replaced the savage turmoil of the jester's thoughts, as with a last fixed look at the princess he mechanically suffered himself to be led away. Louise's gaze perforce followed him, and when the canvas fell and he had disappeared she passed a hand across her brow.

"Are you satisfied, my Lord?" said the king to the free baron.

"The knave has received his just deserts, Sire," replied the other, and, stepping to the princess' side, raised her hand to his lips.

"Mère de Dieu!" cried the monarch, passing his arm in a friendly manner over the free baron's shoulder and addressing Louise. "You will find Robert of Friedwald worthy of your high trust, cousin."

Without, they were soon whispering it. The attendant, who was the Count of Cross, breathed what he knew to the Duke of Montmorency, who told Du Bellays, who related the story to Diane de Poitiers, who embellished it for Villot, who carried it to Jacqueline.

"Triboulet has his wish," said the poet-fool, half-regretfully. "There is one jester the less."

"Where have they taken him?" asked the girl, steadily.

"Where--but to the keep!"

"That dungeon of the old castle?"

"Well," he returned significantly, "a fool and his jests--alas!--are soon parted. Let us make merry, therefore, while we may. For what would you? Come, mistress--the dance--"

"No! no! no!" she exclaimed, so passionately he gazed at her in surprise.