

CHAPTER XIV

AN EARLY-MORNING VISIT

In a mood of contending thought, the free baron left his apartments the next morning and traversed the tapestry-hung corridor leading toward the servants' and soldiers' quarters. He congratulated himself that the incident of the past night had precipitated a favorable climax in one source of possible instability, and that the fool who had opposed him had been summarily removed from the field of action. Confined within the four walls of the castle dungeon, there was scant likelihood he would cause further trouble and annoyance. Francis' strong prison house would effectively curb any more interference with, or dabbling in, the affairs of the master of the Vulture's Nest.

Following the exposure of the jester's weakness, his passion for his mistress, Francis, as Villot told Jacqueline, had immediately ordered the fool into strictest confinement, the donjon of the ancient structure. In that darkened cell he had rested over night and there he would no doubt remain indefinitely. The king's guest had not been greatly concerned with the jester's quixotic love for the princess, being little disposed to jealousy. He was no sighing solicitant for woman's favor; higher allurements than woman's eyes, or admiration for his inamorata, moved him--that edge of appetite for power, conquest hunger, an itching palm for a kingdom. His were the unscrupulous soldier's rather than the eager true-love's dreams.

But to offset his satisfaction that the jester lay under restraint he took in bad part the trooper's continued insensibility which deprived him of the much-desired information. When he had repaired to the bedside of the soldier the night before he had only his trip for his pains, as the man had again sunk into unconsciousness shortly before his coming. Thus the free baron was still in ignorance of the person to whom the fool had betrayed him. The fact that there still roamed an unfettered some one who possessed the knowledge of his identity caused him to knit his brows and look glum.

These jesters were daring fellows; several of them had borne arms, as, for example, Clement Marot, who had been taken prisoner with Francis at the battle of Pavia. Brusquet had been a hanger-on of the camp at Avignon; Villot, a Paris student; Caillette had received the spirited education of a soldier in the household of his benefactor, Diane's father. And as for the others--how varied had been their careers!--lives of hazard and vicissitude; scapegraces and adventurers--existing literally by their wits.

To what careless or wanton head had his secret been confined? What use would the rashling make of it? Daringly attempt to approach the throne with this startling budget of information; impulsively seek the princess; or whisper it over his cups among the femmes de chambre, laundresses or scullery maids?

"If the soldier should never speak?" thought the free baron out of humor, as he drew near the trooper's door. "What a nest of suspicion may be growing! The wasps may be breeding. A whisper may become an ominous threat. Is not the danger even greater than it was before, when I could place my hand on my foeman? The man must speak!--must!"

With a firm step the king's guest entered the chamber of the injured soldier. Upon a narrow bed lay the trooper, his mustachios appearing unusually red and fierce against his now yellow, washed-out complexion. As the free baron drew near the couch a tall figure arose from the side of the bed.

"How is your patient, doctor?" said the visitor, shortly.

"Low," returned the other, laconically. This person wore a black gown; a pair of huge, broad-rimmed glasses rested on the bridge of a thin, long nose, and in his claw-like fingers he held a vial, the contents of which he stirred slowly. His aspect was that of living sorrow and melancholy.

"Has he been conscious again?" asked the caller.

"He has e'en lain as you see him," replied the wearer of the black robe.

"Humph!" commented the free baron, attentively regarding the motionless and silent figure.

"I urged upon him the impropriety of sending for you at the festivities," resumed the man, sniffing at the vial, "but he became excited, swore he would leave the bed and brain me with mine own pestle if I ventured to hinder him. So I consented to convey his request."

"And when I arrived he was still as a log," supplemented the visitor, gloomily.

"Alas, yes; although I tried to keep him up, giving him specifics and carminatives and bleeding him once."

"Bleeding him!" cried the false duke, angrily, glowering upon the impassive and woebegone countenance of the medical attendant. "As if he had not bled enough from his hurts! Quack of an imposter! You have killed him!"

"As for that," retorted the man in a sing-song voice, "no one can tell whether a medicine be antidote or poison, unless as leechcraft and chirurgery point out--"

"His days are numbered," quoth the free baron to himself, staring downward. But as he spoke he imagined he saw the red mustachios move, while one eye certainly glared with intelligent hatred upon the doctor and turned with anxious solicitude upon his master. The latter immediately knelt by the bedside and laid his hand upon the already

cold one of the soldier.

"Speak!" he said.

It was the command of an officer to a trooper, an authoritative bidding, and seemed to summon a last rallying energy from the failing heart. The man's gaze showed that he understood. From the free baron's eye flashed a glance of savage power and force.

"Speak!" he repeated, cruelly, imperatively.

The mustachios quivered; the leader bent his head low, so low his face almost touched the soldier's. A voice--was it a voice, so faint it sounded?--breathed a few words:

"The emperor--Spain--Caillette gone!"

Quickly the free baron sprang to his feet. The soldier seemed to fall asleep; his face calm and tranquil as a campaigner's before the bivouac fire at the hour of rest; the ugliness of his features glossed by a new-found dignity; only his mustachios strangely fierce, vivid, formidable, against the peace and pallor of his countenance. The leech looked at him; stopped stirring the drug; leaned over him; straightened himself; took the vial once more from the table and threw the medicine out of the window. Then he methodically began gathering up bottles and other receptacles, which he placed neatly in a handbag. The free baron

passed through the door, leaving the cheerless practitioner still gravely engaged in getting together his small belongings.

Soberly the king's guest walked down the echoing stairway out into the open air of the court. The emperor in Spain? It seemed not unlikely. Charles spent much of his time in that country, nor was it improbable he had gone there quietly, without flourish of trumpet, for some purpose of his own. His ways were not always manifest; his personality and mind-workings were characterized by concealment. If the emperor had gone to Spain, a messenger, riding post-haste, could reach Charles in time to enable that monarch to interpose in the nuptials and override the confidence the free baron had established for himself in the court of Francis. An impediment offered by Charles would be equivalent to the abandonment of the entire marital enterprise.

Pausing before a massive arched doorway that led into a wing of the castle where the free baron knew the jesters and certain of the gentlemen of the chamber lodged, the master of Hochfels, in answer to his inquiries from a servant, learned that Caillette had not been in his apartments since the day before; that he had ridden from the tournament, ostensibly to return to his rooms, but nothing had been heard of him since. And the oddest part of it was, as the old woman volubly explained when the free baron had pushed his way into the tastefully furnished chambers of the absent fool, the jester had been desperately wounded; had groaned much when the duke's plaisant had assisted him from the field, and had been barely able to mount his

horse with the assistance of a squire.

Meditatively, while absorbing this prattle, the visitor gazed about him. The bed had been unslept in, and here and there were evidences of a hasty and unpremeditated leave-taking. Upon an open desk lay a half-finished poem, obviously intended for no eyes save the writer's. Several dainty missives and a lace handkerchief, with a monogram, invited the unscrupulous and prying glance of the inquisitive newsmonger.

But as these details offered nothing additional to the one great germ of information embodied in the loquacity of the narrator, the free baron turned silently away, breaking the thread of her volubility by unceremoniously disappearing. No further doubt remained in his mind that the duke's plaisant had sent a comrade in motley to the emperor, and, as he would not have inspired a mere fool's errand, Charles without question was in Spain, several days nearer to the court of the French monarch than the princess' betrothed had presumed. Caillette had now been four-and-twenty hours on his journey; it would be useless to attempt pursuit, as the jester was a gallant horseman, trained to the hunt. Such a man would be indefatigable in the saddle, and the other realized that, strive as he might, he could never overcome the handicap.

Then of what avail was one fool in the dungeon, with a second--on the road? Should he abandon his quest, be driven from his purpose by a

nest of motley meddlers? The idea never seriously entered his mind; he would fight it out doggedly upon the field of deception. But how? As surely as the sun rose and set, before many days had come and gone the hand of Charles would be thrust between him and his projects.

Circumspect, suspicious, was the emperor; he would investigate, and investigation meant the downfall of the structure of falsehood that had been erected with such skill and painstaking by the subtile architect. The maker had pride in his work, and, to see it totter and tumble, was a misfortune he would avert with his life--or fall with it.

As he had no intention, however, of being buried beneath the wreckage of his endeavors, he sought to prop the weakening fabric of invention and mendacity by new shuffling or pretense. Should a disgraced fool be his undoing? From that living entombment should his foeman in cap and bells yet indirectly summon the force to bend him to the dust, or send him to the hangman's knot?

Step by step the king's guest had left the palace behind him, until the surrounding shrubbery shut it from view, but the path, sweeping onward with graceful curve, brought him suddenly to a beautiful château. Lost in thought, he gazed within the flowering ground, at the ornate architecture, the marble statues and the little lake, in whose pellucid depths were mirrored a thousand beauties of that chosen spot--an improved Eden of the landscape gardener wherein resided the Countess d'Etampes.

"Why," thought the free baron, brightening abruptly, "that chance which served me last night, which forced the trooper to speak to-day, now has led my stupid feet to the soothsayer."

Within a much begilt and gorgeous bower, he soon found himself awaiting patiently the coming of the favorite. Upon a tiny chair of gold, too fragile for his bulk, the caller meanwhile inspected the ceilings and walls of this dainty domicile, mechanically striving to decipher a painted allegory of Venus and Mars, or Helen and Paris, or the countess and Francis--he could not decide precisely its purport--when she who had succeeded Châteaubriant floated into the room, dressed in some diaphanous stuff, a natural accompaniment to the other decorations; her dishabille a positive note of modesty amid the vivid colorings and graceful poses of those tributes to love with which Primaticcio and other Italian artists had adorned this bower.

"How charming of you!" vaguely murmured the lady, sinking lightly upon a settee. "What an early riser you must be, Duke."

Although it was then but two hours from noon, the visitor confessed himself open to criticism in this regard. "And you, as well, Madam," he added, "must plead guilty of the same fault. One can easily see you have been out in the garden, and," he blundered on, "stolen the tints from the roses."

Sharply the countess looked at him, but read only an honest attempt at

a compliment.

"Why," she said, "you are becoming as great a flatterer as the rest of them. But confess now, you did not call to tell me that?"

The free baron looked from her through the folding doors into a retiring apartment, set with arabesque designs, and adorned with inlaid tables bearing statues of alabaster and enamel. Purposely he waited before he replied, and was gratified to see how curiously she regarded him when again his glance returned to her.

"No, Madam," he answered, taking credit to himself for his diplomacy, "it is not necessary that truth should be premeditated. I had a serious purpose in seeking you. Of all the court you alone can assist me; it is to you, only, I can look for aid. Knowing you generous, I have ventured to come."

"What a serious preamble," smiled the lady. "How grave must be the matter behind it!"

"The service I ask must be from the king," he went on, with seeming embarrassment.

"Then why not go to his Majesty?" she interrupted, with the suggestion of a frown.

"Because I should fail," he retorted, frankly. "The case is one wherein a messenger--like yourself--a friend--may I so call you?--would win, while I, a rough soldier, should but make myself ridiculous, the laughing stock of the court."

"You interest me," she laughed. "It must be a pressing emergency when you honor me--so early in the day."

"It is, Madam," he replied. "Very pressing to me. I want the wedding day changed."

"Changed!" she exclaimed, staring at him. "Deferred?"

"No; hastened, Madam. It is too long to wait. Go to the king; ask him to shorten the interval; to set the day sooner. I beg of you, Madam!"

His voice was hard and harsh. It seemed almost a demand he laid upon her. Had he been less blunt or coercive, had he employed a more honeyed appeal, she would not have felt so moved in his behalf. In the atmosphere of adulation and blandishment to which she was accustomed, the free baron offered a marked contrast to the fine-spoken courtiers, and she leaned back and surveyed him as though he were a type of the lords of creation she had not yet investigated.

"Oh, this is delicious!" purred the countess. "Samson in the toils! His locks shorn by our fair Delilah!"

The thick-set soldier arose; muscular, well-knit, virile. "I fear I am detaining you, Madam," he said, coldly.

"No; you're not," she answered, merrily. "Won't you be seated--please! I should have known," she could not resist adding, "that love is as sensitive as impatient."

"I see, Madam, that you have your mind made up to refuse me, and therefore--"

"Refuse," repeated the favorite, surveying this unique petitioner with rising amusement. "How do you read my mind so well?"

"Then you haven't determined to refuse me?" And he stepped toward her quickly.

"No, I haven't," she answered, throwing back her head, like a spoiled child. "On the contrary, I will be your messenger, your advocate, and will plead your cause, and will win your case, and the king shall say 'yes,' and you shall have your princess whene'er you list. All this I promise faithfully to do and perform. And now, if you want to leave me so sullenly, go!"

But the free baron dropped awkwardly to his knee, took her little hand in his massive one and raised it to his lips. "Madam, you overwhelm

me," he murmured.

"That is all very well," she commented, reflectively, "but what about the princess? What will she say when--"

"It shall be my task to persuade her. I am sure she will consent," returned the suitor.

"Oh, you're sure of that?" observed the lady. "You have some faith in your own powers of persuasion--in certain quarters!"

"Not in my powers, Madam, but in the princess' amiability."

"Perhaps you have spoken to her already?" asked the countess.

"No, Madam; without your assistance, of what use would be her willingness?"

"What a responsibility you place on my weak shoulders!" cried the other. "However, I will not shift the burden. I will go to his Majesty at once. And do you"--gaily--"go to the princess."

"At your command!" he replied, and took his departure.

Without the inclosure of the château gardens, the free baron began to review the events of the morning with complacency and satisfaction,

but, as he took up the threads of his case and examined them more narrowly, his peace of mind was darkened with the shadow of a new disquietude. What if Francis, less easily cozened than the countess, should find his suspicions aroused? What if the princess, who had immediately dismissed the fool's denouncement of the free baron as an ebullition of blind jealousy--after informing her betrothed of the mad accusation--should see in his request equivocal circumstances? Or, was the countess--like many of her sisters--given to second thoughts, and would this after-reverie dampen the ardor of her impetuous promise?

"But," thought the king's guest, banishing these assailing doubts, "there never yet was victory assured before the battle had been fought, and, with renewed precautions, defeat is most unlikely."

By the time he had reached this conclusion he had arrived at the princess' door.