

CHAPTER XV

A NEW DISCOVERY

The dim rays of a candle glimmered within a cubical space, whereof the sides consisted of four stone walls, and a ceiling and floor of the same substantial material. For furnishings were provided a three-legged stool, a bundle of straw and--the tallow dip. One of the walls was pierced by a window, placed almost beyond the range of vision; the outlook limited by day to a bit of blue sky or a patch of verdant field, with the depressing suggestion of a barrier to this outer world, three feet in thickness, massively built of stone and mortar, hardened through the centuries. At night these pictures faded and the Egyptian darkness within became partly dispelled through the brave efforts of the small wick; or when this half-light failed, a far star without, struggling in the depths of the palpable obscure, appeared the sole relief.

But now the few inches of candle had only begun to eke out its brief period of transition and the solitary occupant of the cell could for some time find such poor solace as lay in the companionship of the tiny yellow flame. With his arms behind him, the duke's fool moved as best he might to and fro within the narrow confines of his jail; the events which had led to his incarceration were so recent he had hardly yet brought himself to realize their full significance. Neither Francis' anger nor the free baron's covert satisfaction during the scene

following their abrupt appearance in the bower of roses had greatly weighed upon him; but not so the attitude of the princess.

How vividly all the details stood out in his brain! The sudden transitions of her manner; her seeming interest in his passionate words; her eyes, friendly, tender, as he had once known them; then portentous silence, frozen disdain. What latent energy in the free baron's look had invested her words with his spirit? Had the adduction of his mind compelled hers to his bidding, or had she but spoken from herself? Into the marble-like pallor of her face a faint flush had seemed to insinuate itself, but the words had dropped easily from her lips: "Are all the fools of your country so presumptuous, my Lord?"

Above the other distinctive features of that tragic night, to the pleasant this question had reiterated itself persistently in the solitude of his cell. True, he had forgotten he was only a jester; but had it not been the memory of her soft glances that had hurried him on to the avowal? She had no fault to be condoned; the fool was the sole culprit. From her height, could she not have spared him the scorn and contempt of her question? Over and over, through the long hours he had asked himself that, and, as he brooded, the idealization with which he had adorned her fell like an enshrouding drapery to the dust; of the vestment of fancy nothing but tatters remained.

A voice without, harsh, abrupt, broke in upon the jester's thoughts. The prisoner started, listened intently, a gleam of fierce satisfaction

momentarily creeping into his eyes. If love was dead, a less exalted feeling still remained.

"How does the fool take his imprisonment?" asked the arrogant voice.

"Quietly, my Lord," was the jailer's reply.

"He is inclined to talk over much?"

"Not at all," answered the man.

A brief command followed; a key was inserted in the lock, and, with a creaking of bolts and groaning of hinges, the warder swung back the iron barrier. Upon the threshold stood the commanding figure of the free baron. A moment he remained thus, and then, with an authoritative gesture to the man, stepped inside. The turnkey withdrew to a discreet distance, where he remained within call, yet beyond the range of ordinary conversation. Immovably the king's guest gazed upon the jester, who, unabashed, calmly endured the scrutiny.

"Well, fool," began the free baron, bluntly, "how like you your quarters? You fought me well; in truth very well. But you labored under a disadvantage, for one thing is certain: a jester in love is doubly--a fool."

"Is that what you have come to say?" asked the pleasant, his bright

glance fastened on the other's confident face.

"I came--to return the visit you once made me," easily retorted the master of Hochfels. "By this time you have probably learned I am an opponent to be feared."

"As one fears the assassin's knife, or a treacherous onslaught," said the fool.

"Did I not say, when you left that night, the truce was over?" returned the king's guest, frowning.

"True," was the ironical answer. "Forewarned; forearmed. And that sort of warfare was to be expected from the bastard of Pfalz-Urfeld."

"Well," unreservedly replied the free baron, who for reasons of his own chose not to challenge the affront, "in those two instances you were not worsted. And as for the trooper who attacked you--I know not whether your lance or the doctor's lancet is responsible for his taking off. But you met him with true attainment. You would have made a good soldier. It is to be regretted you did not place your fortune with mine--but it is too late now."

"Yes," answered the plaisant, "it is too late."

Louis of Hochfels gave him a sharp look. "You cling yet to some

forlorn hope?"

To the fool came the vision of a brother jester speeding southward, ever southward. The free baron smiled.

"Caillette, perhaps?" he suggested. For a moment he enjoyed his triumph, watching the expression of the fool's countenance, whereon he fancied he read dismay and astonishment.

"You know then?" said the plaisant finally.

"That you sent him to the emperor? Yes."

In the fool's countenance, or his manner, the king's guest sought confirmation of the dying trooper's words. Also, was he fencing for such additional information as he might glean, and for this purpose had he come. Had the emperor really gone to Spain? The soldier's assurance had been so faint, sometimes the free baron wondered if he had heard aright, or if he had correctly interpreted the meager message.

"And you--of course--detained Caillette?" remarked the prisoner, with an effort at indifference, his heart beating violently the while.

"No," slowly returned the other. "He got away."

Into his eyes the fool gazed closely, as if to read and test this

unexpected statement.

"Got away!" he repeated. "How, since you knew?"

"Because I learned too late," quietly replied the free baron. "He was four-and-twenty hours gone when I found out. Too great a start to be overcome."

"Why should you tell me this--unless it is a lie?" coolly asked the jester.

"A lie!" exclaimed the visitor, frowning.

"Yes, like your very presence in Francis' court," added the fool, fearlessly.

In the silence ensuing the passion slowly faded from the countenance of the king's guest. He remembered he had not yet ascertained what he wished to know.

"Such recriminations from you remind me of a bird beating its wings against the bars of its cage," at length came the unruffled response. "Why should I lie? There is no need for it. You sent Caillette; he is on his way now, for all of me. For"--leading to the thread of what he sought--"why should I have stopped him? He embarked on a hopeless chase. How can he reach Austria and the emperor in time to prevent the

marriage?"

The jester's swift questioning glance was not lost upon the speaker, who, after a pause, continued. "Had I known, I am not sure I would have prevented his departure. What better way to dispose of him than to let him go on a mad-cap journey? Besides, you must have forgotten about the passes. How could you expect him to get by my sentinels? It will attract less attention to have him stopped there than here."

All this, spoken brusquely, was accompanied by frank, insolent looks which beneath their seeming openness concealed an intentness of purpose and a shrewd penetration. Only the first abrupt change in the fool's look, a slight one though it was, betrayed the jester to his caller. In that swiftly passing gleam, as the free baron spoke of Austria, and not of Spain, the other read full confirmation of what he desired to know.

"He will do his best," commented the jester, carelessly.

"And man can do no more," retorted the king's guest. "Many a battle has been thus bravely lost."

He had hoped to provoke from the plaisant some further expression of self-content in his plans for the future, but the other had become guarded.

What if he offered the fool clemency? asked the princess' betrothed of himself. If the jester had confidence in the future he would naturally rather remain in the narrow confines of his dark chamber than consider proposals from one whom he believed he would yet overcome. The free baron began to enjoy this strategic duplicity of language; the enviroing dangers lent zest to equivocation; the seduction of finding himself more potent than forces antagonistic became intoxicating to his egotism.

"Why," he said, patronizingly, surveying the slender figure of the fool, "a good man should die by the sword rather than go to the scaffold. What if I were to overlook Caillette and the rest? He is harmless,"--more shrewdly; "let him go. As for the princess--well, you're young; in the heyday for such nonsense. I have never yet quarreled seriously with man for woman's sake. There are many graver causes for contention--a purse, or a few acres of land; right royal warfare. If I get the king to forgive you, and the princess to overlook your offense, will you well and truthfully serve me?"

"Never!" answered the fool, promptly.

"He is sure the message will reach Charles in Spain," mentally concluded the king's guest. "Yet," he continued aloud in a tone of mockery, "you did not hesitate to betray your master yourself. Why, then, will you not betray him to me?"

"To him I will answer, not to you," returned the jester, calmly.

A contemptuous smile crossed the free baron's face.

"And tell him how you dared look up to his mistress? That you sought to save her from another, while you yourself poured your own burning tale into her ear? Two things I most admire in nature," went on the free baron, with emphasis. "A dare-devil who stops not for man or Satan, and--an honest man. You take but a compromising middle course; and will hang, a hybrid, from some convenient limb."

"But not without first knowing that you, too, in all likelihood, will adorn an equally suitable branch, my Lord of the thieves' rookery," said the jester, smiling.

Louis of Hochfels responded with an ugly look. His bloodshot eyes took fire beneath the provocation.

"Fool, you expect your duke will intervene!" he exclaimed. "Not when he has been told all by the king, or the princess," he sneered. "Do you think she cares? You, a motley fool; a theme for jest between us."

"But when she learns about you?" retorted the plaisant, significantly.

"She will e'en be mistress of my castle."

"Castle?" laughed the Jester. "A robber's aery! a footpad's retreat! A rifler of the roads become a great lord? You of royal blood! Then was your father a king of thieves!"

The free baron's face worked fearfully; the kingly part of him had been a matter of fanatical pride; through it did he believe he was destined to power and honors. But before the cutting irony of the plaisant, that which is heaven-born--self-control--dropped from him; the mad, brutal rage of the peasant surged in his veins.

Infuriate his hand sought his sword, but before he could draw it the fool, anticipating his purpose, had rushed upon him with such impetuosity and suddenness that the king's guest, in spite of his bulk and strength, was thrust against the wall. Like a grip of iron, the jester's fingers were buried in his opponent's throat. For one so youthful and slender in build, his power was remarkable, and, strive as he might, the princess' betrothed could not shake him off. Although his arms pressed with crushing force about the figure of the fool, the hand at his throat never relaxed. He endeavored to thrust the plaisant from him, but, like a tiger, the jester clung; to and fro they swayed; to the free baron, suffocated by that gauntlet of steel, the room was already going around; black spots danced before his eyes. He strove to reach for the dagger that hung from his girdle, but it was held between them. Perhaps the muscles of the king's guest had been weakened by the excesses of Francis' court, yet was he still a mighty tower of strength, and, mad with rage, by a last supreme effort he

finally managed to tear himself loose, hurling the fool violently from him into the arms of the jailer, who, attracted by the sound of the struggle, at that moment rushed into the cell. This keeper, himself a burly, herculean soldier, promptly closed with the prisoner.

Breathless, exhausted, the free baron marked the conflict now transferred to the turnkey and the jester. The former held the fool at a decided disadvantage, as he had sprung upon the back of the jester and was also unweakened by previous efforts. But still the fool contended fiercely, striving to turn so as to grapple with his assailant, and wonderingly the free baron for a moment watched that exhibition of virility and endurance. During the wrestling the jester's doublet had been torn open and suddenly the gaze of the king's guest fell, as if fascinated, upon an object which hung from his neck.

Bending forward, he scrutinized more closely that which had attracted his attention and then started back. Harshly he laughed, as though a new train of thought had suddenly assailed him, and looked earnestly into the now pale face of the nearly helpless fool.

"Why," he cried, "here's a different complication!"

And stooping suddenly, he grasped the stool from the floor and brought it down with crushing force upon the plaisant's head. A cowardly, brutal blow; and at once the prisoner's grasp relaxed, and he lay motionless in the arms of the warder, who placed him on the straw.

"I think the knave's dead, my Lord," remarked the man, panting from his exertion.

"That makes the comedy only the stronger," replied the free baron curtly, as he knelt by the side of the prostrate figure and thrust his hand under the torn doublet. Having procured possession of the object which chance had revealed to him, he arose and, without further word, left the cell.