

## CHAPTER XVI

### TIDINGS FROM THE COURT

When Brusquet, the jester, fled from the camp at Avignon, where he had presumed to practise medicine, to the detriment of the army, some one said: "Fools and cats have nine lives," and the revised proverb had been accepted at court. It was this saying the turnkey muttered when he bent over the prostrate figure of the duke's plaisant after the free baron had departed. Thus one of the fabled sources of existence was left the fool, and again it seemed the proverb would be realized.

Day after day passed, and still the vital spark burned; perhaps it wavered, but in this extremity the jester had not been entirely neglected; but who had befriended him, assisting the spirit and the flesh to maintain their unification, he did not learn until some time later. Youth and a strong constitution were also a shield against the final change, and when he began to mend, and his heart-beats grew stronger, even the jailer, his erstwhile assailant, the most callous of his several keepers, exhibited a stony interest in this unusual convalescence.

The touch of a hand was the plaisant's first impression of returning consciousness, and then into his throbbing brain crept the outlines of the prison walls and the small window that grudgingly admitted the light. To his confused thoughts these surroundings recalled the

struggle with the free baron and the jailer. As across a dark chasm, he saw the face of the false duke, whereon wonder and conviction had given way to brutal rage, and, with the memory of that treacherous blow, the fool half-started from his couch.

A low voice carried him back from the past to a vague cognizance of a woman's form, standing at the head of the bed, and two grave, dark eyes looking down upon him which he strove in vain to interrogate with his own. He would have spoken, but the soothing pressure of the hand upon his forehead restrained him, and, turning to the wall, sleep overcame him; a slumber long, sound and restorative. Motionless the figure remained, listening for some time to his deep breathing and then stole away as silently as she had come.

Amid a solitude like that of a catacomb the hours ran their course; the day grew old, and eventide replaced the waning flush in the west. The shadows deepened into night, and the first kisses of morn again merged into the brighter prime. Near the cell the only sound had been the footstep of the warder, or the scampering of a rat, but now from afar seemed to come a faint whispering, like the murmur of the ocean. It was the voice of awakened nature; the wind and the trees; the whirl of birds' wings, or the sound of other living creatures in the forest hard by. A song of life and buoyancy, it breathed just audibly its cheering intonation about the prison bars, when the captive once more stirred and gazed around him. As he did so, the figure of the woman, who had again noiselessly entered the cell, stepped forward and stood near the

couch.

"Are you better?" she asked.

He raised himself on his elbow, surprised at the unexpected appearance of his visitor.

"Jacqueline!" he said, wonderingly, recognizing the features of the jocolatrix. "I must have been unconscious all night." And he stared from her toward the window.

"Yes," she returned with a peculiar smile; "all night." And bending over him, she held a receptacle to his lips from which he mechanically drank a broth, warm and refreshing, the while he endeavored to account for the strangeness of her presence in the cell. She placed the bowl on the floor and then, straightening her slim figure, again regarded him.

"You are improving fast," she commented, reflectively.

"Thanks to your sovereign mixture," he answered, lifting a hand to his bandaged head, and striving to collect his scattered ideas which already seemed to flow more consecutively. The pain which had racked his brow had grown perceptibly less since his last deep slumber, and a grateful warmth diffused itself in his veins with a growing assurance of physical relief. "But may I ask how you came here?" he continued,

perplexity mingling with the sense of temporary languor that stole over him.

"I heard the duke tell the king you had attacked him and he had struck you down," she replied, after a pause.

His face darkened; his head throbbed once more; with his fingers he idly picked at the straw.

"And the king, of course, believed," he said. "Oh, credulous king!" he added scornfully. "Was ever a monarch so easily befooled? A judge of men? No; a ruler who trusts rather to fortune and blind destiny. Unlike Charles, he looks not through men, but at them."

"Think no more of it," she broke in, hastily, seeing the effect of her words.

"Nay, good Jacqueline," quickly retorted the jester; "the truth, I pray you. Believe me, I shall mend the sooner for it. What said the duke--as he calls himself?"

"Why, he shook his head ruefully," answered the girl, not noticing his reservation. "'Your Majesty,' he said, 'for the memory of bygone quibbles I sought him, but found him not--alack!--on the stool of repentance.'"

About the fool's mouth quivered the grim suggestion of a half-smile.

"He is the best jester of us all," he muttered. "And then?" fastening his eyes upon hers.

"No sooner, Sire," went on the duke, "had I entered the cell than he rushed upon me, and, it grieves me, I used the wit-snapper roughly." So"--folding her hands before her and gazing at the plaisant--"I e'en came to see if you were killed."

"You came," he said. "Yes; but how?"

"What matters it?" she answered. "Perhaps it was magic, and the cell-doors flew open at my touch."

"I can almost believe it," he returned.

And his glance fell thoughtfully from her to the couch. Before the assault he had lain at night upon the straw on the floor, and this unhoped-for immunity from the dampness of the stones or the scampering of occasional rats suggested another starting point for mental inquiry. She smiled, reading the interrogation on his face.

"One of the turnkeys furnished the bed," she remarked, shrewdly. "Do you like it?"

"It is a better couch than I have been accustomed to," he replied, in no wise misled by her response, and surmising that her solicitation had procured him this luxury. "Nevertheless, the night has seemed strangely long."

"It has been long," she returned, moving toward the window. "A week and more."

Surprise, incredulity, were now written upon his features. That such an interval should have elapsed since the evening of the free baron's visit appeared incredible. He could not see her countenance as she spoke; only her figure; the upper portion bright, the lower fading into the deep shadows beneath the aperture in the wall.

"You tell me I have lain here a week?" he asked finally, recalling obscure memories of faintly-seen faces and voices heard as from afar.

"And more," she repeated.

For some moments he remained silent, passing from introspection to a current of thought of which she could know nothing; the means he had taken to thwart the ambitious projects of the king's guest.

"Has Caillette returned?" he continued, with ill-disguised eagerness.

"Caillette?" she answered, lifting her brows at the abruptness of the

inquiry. "Has he been away? I had not noticed. I do not know."

"Then is he still absent," said the jester, decisively. "Had he come back, you would have heard."

Quickly she looked at him. Caillette!--Spain!--these were the words he had often uttered in his delirium. Although he seemed much better and the hot flush had left his cheeks, his fantasy evidently remained.

"A week and over!" resumed the fool, more to himself than to his companion. "But he still may return before the duke is wedded."

"And if he did return?" she asked, wishing to humor him.

"Then the duke is not like to marry the princess," he burst out.

"Not like--to marry!" she replied, suddenly, and moved toward him. Her clear eyes were full upon him; closely she studied his worn features.

"Not like--but he has married her!"

The jester strove to spring to his feet, but his legs seemed as relaxed as his brain was dazed.

"Has married!--impossible!" he exclaimed fiercely.

"They were wedded two days since," she went on quietly, possibly

regretting that surprise, or she knew not what, had made her speak.

"Wedded two days since!"

He repeated it to himself, striving to realize what it meant. Did it mean anything? He remembered how mockingly the jestress' face had shone before him in the past; how derisive was her irony. From Fools' hall to the pavilion of the tournament had she flouted him.

"Wedded two days since!"

"You must have your drollery," he said, unsteadily, at length.

She did not reply, and he continued to question her with his eyes.

Quite still she remained, save for an almost imperceptible movement of breathing. Against the dull beams from the aperture above, her hair darkly framed her face, pale, dim with half-lights, illusory. When he again spoke his voice sounded new to his own ears.

"How could the princess have been married? Even if I have lain here as long as you say, the day for the wedding was set for at least a week from now."

"But changed!" she responded, unexpectedly.

"Changed!" he cried, sitting on the edge of the couch, and regarding



her as though he doubted he had heard aright. "Why should it have been changed?"

"Because the duke became a most impatient suitor," she answered.

"Daily he grew more eager. Finally, to attain his end, he importuned the countess. She laughed, but good-naturedly acceded to his request, and, in turn importuned the king--who generously yielded. It has been a rare laughing matter at court--that the duke, who appeared the least passionate adorer, should really have been such a restless one."

"Dolt that I have been!" exclaimed the jester, with more anger, it seemed to the girl, than jealousy. "He knew about Caillette, but professed to be ignorant that the emperor was in Spain. And I believed his words; thought I was holding something from him; let myself imagine he could not penetrate my designs. While all the time he was intriguing with the king's favorite and felt the sense of his own security. What a cat's paw he made of me! And so he--they are gone, Jacqueline?"

"Yes," she returned, surprised at his language, and, for the first time, wondering if the duke's wooing admitted of other complications than she had suspected. "They are on their way to the duke's kingdom."

"His kingdom!" said the fool, with derision. "But go on. Tell me about it, Jacqueline. Their parting with the court? How they set out on their journey. All, Jacqueline; all!"

"They were married in the Chapelle de la Trinité," responded the girl, hesitating. Then with an odd side look, she went on rapidly: "The bridal party made an imposing cavalcade: the princess in her litter, behind a number of maids on horseback. At the castle gates several pages, dressed as Cupids, sent silver arrows after the bridal train. 'Hymen; Io Hymen!' cried the throng. 'Godspeed!' exclaimed Queen Marguerite, and threw a parchment, tied with a golden ribbon, into the princess' litter; an epithalamium, in verse, written in her own fair hand. 'Esto perpetua!' murmured the red cardinal. Besides the groom's own men, the king sent a strong escort to the border, and thus it was a numerous company that rode from the castle, with colors flying and the princess' handkerchief fluttering from her litter a last farewell."

"A last farewell!" repeated the fool. "A splendid picture, Jacqueline. They all shouted Te Deum, and none stood there to warn her."

"To warn!" retorted the jestress. "Not a maid but envied her that spectacle; the magnificence and splendor!"

"But not what will follow," he said, and, lying back on his couch, closed his eyes.

Rapidly the scene passed before him; the false duke at the head of the

cavalcade, elate, triumphant; the princess in her litter, brilliant, dazzling; the laughter, the hurried adieus; tears and smiles; the smart sayings of the jesters, a bride their legitimate prey, her blushes the delight of the facetious nobles; the complacency of the pleasure-loving king--all floated before his eyes like the figment of a dream. How mocking the pomp and glitter! For the princess, what an awakening was to ensue! The free baron must have known the emperor was in Spain, and had met the fool's stratagem with a final masterly manoeuver. The bout was over; the first great bout; but in the next--would there be a next? Jacqueline's words now implied a doubt.

"You are soon to leave here," she said. "For Paris."

Seated on the stool, her hands crossed over her knees, Jacqueline seemed no longer a creature of indefinite or ambiguous purpose. On the contrary, her profile was rimmed in light, and very matter-of-fact and serious it seemed.

"Why am I to leave for Paris?" he remarked, absently.

"Because they are going to take you there," she returned, "to be tried as a heretic." He started and again sat up. "In your room was found a book by Calvin. Of course," she went on, "you will deny it belonged to you?"

"What would that avail?" he said, indifferently. "But have the

followers of Luther, or Calvin, no friends in Francis' court?"

"Have they in Charles' domains?" she asked quickly.

"The Protestants in Germany are a powerful body; the emperor is forced to bear with them."

"Here they have no friends--openly," she went on.

"Secretly--Marguerite, Marot; others perhaps. But these will not serve you; could not, if they would. Besides, this heresy of which you are accused is but a pretext to get rid of you."

"And how, good Jacqueline, has the king treated the new sect?"

She held her hand suddenly to her throat; her face went paler, as from some tragic recollection.

"Oh," she answered, "do not speak of it!"

"They burned them?" he persisted.

"Before Notre Dame!"

Her voice was low; her eyes shone deep and gleaming.

"You are sorry, then, for those vile heretics?" asked the fool,

curiously.

She raised her head, half-resentfully. "Their souls need no one's pity," she retorted, proudly.

"And you think mine is soon like to be beyond earthly caring?"

Her glance became impatient. "Most like," she returned, curtly.

"But what excuse does the king give for his cruelty?" he continued, musingly.

"They threw down the sacred images in one of the churches. Now a heretic need expect no mercy. They are placed in cages--hung from beams--over the fire. The court was commanded to witness the spectacle--the king jested--the countess laughed, but her features were white--" Here the girl buried her face in her hands. Soon, however, she looked up, brushing back the hair from her brow. "Marguerite has interposed, but she is only a feather in the balance." Abruptly she arose. "Would you escape such a fate?" she said.

He remained silent, thinking that if the mission to the emperor miscarried, his own position might, indeed, be past mending. If the exposure of the free baron were long delayed, the fool's assurance in his own ultimate release might prove but vain expectation. In Paris the trial would doubtless not be protracted. From the swift tribunal

to the slow fire constituted no complicated legal process, and appeal there was none, save to the king, from whom might be expected little mercy, less justice.

"Escape!" the jester answered, dwelling on these matters. "But how?"

"By leaving this prison," she answered, lowering her voice.

He glanced significantly at the walls, the windows and the door, beyond which could be heard the tread of the jailer and the clanking of the keys hanging from his girdle.

"I would have done that long since, Jacqueline, if I had had my will," he replied.

"Are you strong enough to attempt it?" she remarked, doubtfully, scanning the thin face before her.

"Your words shall make me so," he retorted, and looking into his glittering eyes, she almost believed him.

"Not to-day, but to-morrow," the girl added, thoughtfully. "Perhaps then--"

"I shall be ready," he broke in impatiently. "What must I do?"

"Not drink this wine I have brought, but give it to the turnkey in the morning. Invite him to share it, but take none yourself, feigning sudden illness. He will not refuse, being always sharp-set for a cup. Nothing can be done with the other jailers, but this one is a thirsty soul, ever ready to bargain for a dram. Your couch cost I know not how many flagons. Although he drinks many tankards and pitchers every day, yet will this small bottle make him drowsy. You will leave while he is sleeping."

"In the daylight, mistress?" he asked, eagerly. "Why not wait--"

"No," she said, decisively; "there is no other way. This turnkey is only a day watchman. It is dangerous, but the best plan that suggested itself. I know many unfrequented corridors and passages through the old part of the castle the king has not rebuilt, and a road at the back, now little used, that runs through the wood and thicket down the hill. It is a desperate chance, but--"

"The danger of remaining is more desperate," he interrupted, quickly.

"Besides, we shall not fail. It is in the book of fate." His expression changed; became fierce, eager. "Are you, indeed, the arbiter of that fate; the sorceress Triboulet feared?"

"You are thinking of the duke," she answered, with a frown, "and that if you escape--"

"Truly, you are a sorceress," he replied, with a smile. "I confess life has grown sweet."

She moved abruptly toward the door. "Nay, I meant not to offend you," he spoke up, more gently.

"It is your own fortunes you ever injure," she retorted, gazing coldly back at him.

"One moment, sweet Jacqueline. Why did you not go with the princess?"

Her face changed; grew dark; from eyes, deep and gloomy, she shot a quick glance upon him.

"Perhaps--because I like the court too well to leave it," she answered mockingly, and, vouchsafing no further word, quickly vanished. It was only when she had gone the jester suddenly remembered he had forgotten to thank her for what she had done in the past or what she proposed doing on the morrow.