

CHAPTER XVII

JACQUELINE'S QUEST

"Truly, are you a right proper fool; for a man, merry in adversity, is as wise as Master Rabelais. Many the time have I heard him say a fit of laughter drives away the devil, while the groans of flagellating saints seem as music to Beelzebub's ears. Thus, a wit-cracker is the demon's enemy, and the band of Pantagruel, an evangelical brotherhood, that with tankard and pot sends the arch-fiend back to the bottomless pit."

And the fool's jailer, seated on the stool within the cell, stretched out his legs and uplifted the bottle to his lips, while, judging from the draft he took and assuming the verity of the theory he advanced, the prince of darkness at that moment must have fled a considerable distance into his chosen realms.

"Ah, you know the great philosopher, then?" commented the jester from the couch, closely watching the sottish, intemperate face of his keeper, and running his glance over the unwieldy form which bade fair to outrival one of the wine butts in the castle cellar.

"Know him!" exclaimed this lowly votary. "I have e'en been admitted to his table--at the foot, 'tis true--when the brave fellows of Pantagruel were at it. Not for my wit was I thus honored"--the plaisant made a

dissenting gesture, the irony of which passed over the head of the speaker--"but because a giant flagon appeared but a child's toy in my hands. The followers of Pantagruel fell on both sides, like wheat before the blade of the reaper, until Doctor Rabelais and myself only were left. From the head to the foot of the table the great man looked. How my heart swelled with pride! 'Swine of Epicurus, are you still there?' he said. And then--and then--"

With a crash the bottle fell from the hand of the keeper to the stone floor. The massive body swayed on the small stool; his eyes stupidly shut and opened.

"Swine of Epicurus," he repeated. "Swine--" and followed the bottle, rolling gently from the stool. He made but one motion, to extend his huge bulk more comfortably, and then was still.

"Why," thought the fool, "if Jacqueline fails me not, all may yet be well."

But even as he thus reflected the door of the cell opened, and a face white as a lily, looked in. Her glance passed hastily to the motionless figure and an expression of satisfaction crossed her features.

"The keys!" she said, and the jester, bending over the prostrate jailer, detached them from his girdle.

"Lock the door when we leave," she continued. "The other keeper does not come to relieve him for six hours."

"It would be an offset for the many times he has locked me in," answered the fool. "A scurvy trick; yet, as Master Rabelais says, Pantagruelians select not their bed."

"Is this a time for jesting?" exclaimed the girl, impatiently.

"He has been treating me to Gargantuan discourse, Jacqueline," said the fool, humbly. "I was but answering him in kind."

"And by delay increasing our danger!"

"Our danger!" He started.

Since she had first broached the subject of escape but one sweet and all-absorbing idea had possessed him--retaliation. Liberty was the means to that end, and every other thought and consideration had given way to this desire. He had fallen asleep with the free baron's dark features imaged on his fevered brain; when he had awakened the morbid fantasy had not left him. But now, at her words, in her presence, a new light was suddenly shed upon the enterprise, and he paused abruptly, even as he turned to leave the cell. With growing wonder she watched his altered features.

"Well," she exclaimed, impatiently, "why do you stand there?"

"Should I escape, you, Jacqueline, would remain to bear the brunt," he said, reflectively. "The jailer, when he awakes, will tell the story: who brought the wine; who succored the prisoner. To go, but one course is open." And he glanced down upon the prostrate man. "To silence him forever!"

She started and half-shrank from him. "Could you do it?"

He shook his head. "In fair contest, I would have slain him. But now--it is not he, but I, who am helpless. And yet what is such a sot's life worth? Nothing. Everything. Farewell, sweet jestress; I must trust to other means, and--thank you."

The outstretched hand she seemed not to see, but tapped the floor of the cell yet more impatiently with her foot, as was her fashion when angered. Here was the prison door open, and the captive enamored of confinement; at the culminating point conjuring reasons why he should not flee. To have gone thus far; to have eliminated the jailer, and then to draw back, with the keys in his hand--truly no scene in a comedy could be more extravagant. The girl laughed nervously.

"What egotists men are!" she said. "Good Sir Jester, in offering you liberty I am serving myself; myself, you understand!" she repeated.

"Let us hasten on, lest in defeating your own purpose, you defeat mine."

"What will you answer when he"--indicating the drugged turnkey--"accuses you?"

"Was ever such perversity!" was all she deigned to reply, biting her lip.

"You are somewhat wilful yourself, Jacqueline," he retorted, with that smile which so exasperated her.

"Listen," she said at length, slowly, impressively. "You need have no fear for me when you go. I tell you that more danger remains to me by your staying than in your going; that your obstinacy leaves me unprotected; that your compliance would be a boon to me. By the memory of my mother, by the truth of this holy book"--drawing a little volume passionately from her bosom--"I swear to what I have told you." Eagerly her eyes met his searching gaze, and he read in their depths only truth and candor. "I have a quest for you. It concerns my life, my happiness. All I have done for you has been for this end."

Her eyes fell, but she raised them again quickly. "Will you accept a mission from one who is not--a princess?"

"Name her not!" exclaimed the jester sharply. And then, recovering himself, added, less brusquely: "What is it you want, mistress?"

"This is no time nor place to tell it," she went on rapidly, seeing by his face that his dogged humor had melted before her appeal, "but soon, before we part, you shall know all; what it is I wish to intrust in your hands."

A moment she waited. "Your argument is unanswerable, Jacqueline," he said finally. "I own myself puzzled, but I believe you, so--have your way."

"This cloak then"--handing him a garment she had brought with her--"throw it over you," she continued hurriedly. "If we meet any one it may serve as a disguise. And here is a sword," bringing forth a weapon that she had carried concealed beneath a flowing mantle. "Can you use it?"

"I can but try, Jacqueline," he replied, fastening the girdle about his waist and half-drawing and then thrusting the blade back into the scabbard. "It seems a priceless weapon," he added, his eye lingering on the richly inlaid hilt, "and has doubtless been wielded by a gallant hand."

"Speak not of that," she retorted, sharply, a strange flash in her eyes. "He who handled it was the bravest, noblest--" She broke off abruptly, and they left the cell, he locking the door behind him.

Down the dimly lighted passage she walked rapidly, while the jester tractably and silently followed. His strength, he found, had come back to him; the joys of freedom imparted new elasticity to his limbs; that narrow, cheerless way looked brighter than a royal gallery, or Francis' Salle des Fêtes. Before him floated the light figure of the jestress, moving faster and ever faster down the dark corridor, now veering to the right or left, again ascending or descending well-worn steps; a tortuous route through the heart of the ancient fortress, whose mystery seemed dread and covert as that of a prison house. Confidently, knowing well the puzzling interior plan of the old pile, she traversed the labyrinth that was to lead them without, finally pausing before a small door, which she tried.

"Usually it is unlocked," she said, in surprise. "I never knew it fastened before."

"Is that our only way out?"

"The only safe way. Perhaps one of the keys--"

But he had already knelt before the door and the young girl watched him with obvious anxiety. He vainly essayed all the keys, save one, and that he now strove to fit to the lock. It slipped in snugly and the stubborn bolt shot back.

Entering, he closed the door behind them and hastily looked around,

discovering that they stood in a crypt, the central part of which was occupied by a burial vault. In the crypt chapels were a number of statues, in marble and bronze, most of them rude, antique, yet not of indifferent workmanship, especially one before which the jestress, in spite of the exigency of the moment, stopped as if impelled by an irresistible impulse. This monument, so read the inscription, had been erected by the renowned Constable of Dubrois to his young and faithful consort, Anne.

But a part of a minute the girl gazed, with a new and softened expression, upon the marble likeness of the last fair mistress of the castle, and then hurriedly crossed the old mosaic pavement, reaching a narrow flight of stairs, which she swiftly ascended. A door that yielded to the fool's shoulder led into a deserted court, on one side of which were the crumbling walls of the chapel. Here several dark birds perched uncannily on the dead branch of a massive oak that had been shattered by lightning. In its desolation the oak might have been typical of the proud family, once rulers of the castle, whose corporeal strength had long since mingled with the elements.

This open space the two fugitives quickly traversed, passing through a high-arched entrance to an olden bridge that spanned a moat. Long ago had the feudal gates been overthrown by Francis; yet above the keystone appeared, not the salamander, the king's heraldic emblem, but the almost illegible device of the old constable. Beyond the great ditch outstretched a rolling country on which the jester gazed with eager

eyes, while his companion swiftly led the way to a clump of willow and aspen on the other side of the moat. Beneath the spreading branches were tethered two horses, saddled and bridled. Wonderingly he glanced from them to her.

"From whence did you conjure them, gentle mistress?" asked the fool.

"Some one I knew placed them there."

"But why--two horses, good Jacqueline?"

"Because I am minded to show you the path through the wood," she replied. "You might mistake it and then my purpose would not be served. Give me your hand, sir. I am wont to have my own way." And as he reluctantly extended his palm she placed her foot upon it, springing lightly to the saddle. "'Tis but a canter through the forest. The day is glorious, and 'twill be rare sport."

Already had she gathered in the reins and turned her horse, galloping down a road that swept through a grove of poplar and birch, and he, after a moment's hesitation, rode after her. Like one born to the chase, she kept her seat, her lithe figure swaying to the movements of the steed. Soon the brighter green of her gown fluttered amid the somber-tinted pines and elms, as the younger forest growth merged into a stern array of primeval monarchs. Here reigned an austere silence--a stillness that now became the more startlingly broken.

"Jacqueline!" said the fool, spurring toward her. "Do you hear?"

"The hunters? Yes," she replied.

"They are coming this way."

"Perhaps it were better to draw back from the road," she suggested, calmly.

"Do you draw back to the castle!" he returned, quickly, his brow overcast.

"And miss the hunt? Not I, Monsieur Spoil-Sport."

"But if they find you with me?"

She only tossed her head wilfully and did not answer.

Nearer came the hue and cry of the chase. A heavy-horned buck sprang into the road and vanished like a flash into the timber on the other side. Shortly afterward, in a compact bunch, with heads downbent and stiffened tails, the pack, a howling, discordant mass, swept across the narrow, open space.

"Quick!" exclaimed the jester, and they turned their horses into the

underbrush.

Scarcely had they done so when, closely following the dogs, appeared the first of the hunters, mounted on a splendid charger, with housings of rose-velvet.

"Pardieu!" muttered the pleasant, "I owe the king no thanks, but he rides well. Do you not think so, Jacqueline?"

Her answering gaze was puzzling. After Francis rode many lords and ladies, a stream of color crossing the road; riding habits faced with gold; satin doublets covered with rivières of diamonds; torsades wherein gold became the foil to precious stones. So near was the gorgeous cavalcade--the grand falconer, whippers-in, and the bearers of hooded birds mingling with the courtiers immediately behind the king--the escaped prisoner and the jesteress could hear the panting of horses. Fleeting, transient, it passed; fainter sounded the din of hounds and horn; now it almost died away in the distance. The last couple had scarcely vanished before the fool and his companion left their ambush.

"You ride farther, Jacqueline?" he said.

"A little farther."

"It will be far to return," he protested.

"I have no fear," she answered, tranquilly.

Again he let her have her way, as one would yield to a wilful child.

On and on they sped; past the place where the deer-run crossed the broader path; through an ever-varying forest; now on one side, a rocky basin overrun with trees and shrubs; again, on the other hand, a great gorge, in whose depths flowed a whispering stream. Yonder appeared the gray walls of an ancient monastery, one part only of which was habitable; a turn in the road swallowed it up as though abruptly to complete the demolition time was slowly to bring about. On and on, until the way became wilder and the wood more overgrown with bushes and tangled shrubbery, when she suddenly stopped her horse.

He understood; at last they were to part. And, remembering what he owed to her, the Jester suddenly found himself regretting that here their paths separated forever. Swiftly his mind flew back to their first meeting; when she had flouted him in Fools' hall. A perverse, capricious maid. How she had ever crossed him, and yet--nursed him.

Attentively he regarded her. The customary pallor of her face had given way to a faint tint; her eyes were humid, dewy-bright; beneath the little cap, the curling tresses would have been the despair of those later-day reformers, the successors of Calvinists and Lutherans.

"A will-o'-the-wisp," he thought. "A man might follow and never grasp

her."

Did she read what he felt? That mingled gratitude and perplexity? Her clear eyes certainly seemed to have a peculiar mastery over the thoughts of others. Now they expressed only mockery.

"The greater danger is over," she said, quietly. "From now on there is less fear of your being taken."

"Thanks to you!" he answered, searching her with his glance.

Here he doubted not she would make known the quest of which she had spoken. Whatever it might be, he would faithfully requite her; even to making his own purpose subservient to it.

"It is now time," she said, demurely, "to acquaint you with the mission. Of course, you will accept it?"

"Can you ask?" he answered, earnestly.

"You promise?"

"To serve you with my life."

"Then we had better go on," she continued.

"But, Mademoiselle, I thought--"

"That we were to part here? Not at all. I am not yet ready to leave you. In fact, good Master Jester, I am going with you. I am the quest; I am the mission. Are you sorry you promised?"