

CHAPTER XVIII

THE SECRET OF THE JESTRESS

She, the quest, the mission! With growing amazement he gazed at her, but she returned his look, as though enjoying his surprise.

"You do not seem overpleased with the prospect of my company?" she observed. "Or perhaps you fear I may encumber you?" With mock irony. "Confess, the service is more onerous than you expected?"

Beneath her flushed, yet smiling face lay a nervous earnestness he could divine, but not fathom.

"Different, certainly," he answered, brusquely.

Her eyes flashed. "How complimentary you are!"

"For your own sake--"

"My sake!" she exclaimed, passionately. Her little hand closed fiercely; proudly her eyes burned into his. "Think you I have taken this step idly? That it is but the caprice of a moment? Oh, no; no! It was necessary to flee from the court. But to whom could a woman turn? Not to any of the court--tools of the king. One person only was there; he whose life was as good as forfeited. Do you understand?"

"That my life belongs to you? Yes. But that you should leave the court--where you have influence, friends--"

"Influence! friends!"

He was startled by the bitterness of her voice.

"Tell me, Jacqueline--why do you wish to go?" he said, wonderingly.

"Because I wish to," she returned, briefly, and stroked the shining neck of her horse.

Indeed, how could she apprise him of events which were now the talk of the court? How Francis, evincing a sudden interest as strong as it was unexpected, had exchanged Triboulet for herself, and the princess, at the king's request, had taken the buffoon with her, and left the girl behind. The jestress' welcome to the household of the Queen of Navarre; a subsequent bewildering shower of gifts; the complacent, although respectful, attentions of the king. How she had endured these advances until no course remained save the one she had taken. No; she could not tell the duke's fool all this.

Between folle and fugitive fell a mutual reserve. Did he divine some portion of the truth? Are there moments when the mind, tuned to a tension, may almost feel what another experiences? Why had the girl

not gone with her mistress? He remembered she had evaded this question when he had asked it. Looking at her, for the first time it crossed his mind she would be held beautiful; an odd, strange beauty, imperious yet girlish, and the conviction crept over him there might be more than a shadow of excuse for her mad flight.

Beneath his scrutiny her face grew cold, disdainful. "Like all men," she said, sharply, as though to stay the trend of his thoughts, "you are prodigal in promises, but chary in fulfilment."

"Where is it your pleasure to go?" he asked quietly.

"That we shall speak of hereafter," she answered, haughtily.

"Forward then."

"I can ride on alone," she demurred, "if--"

"Nay; 'tis I who crave the quest," he returned, gravely.

Her face broke into smiles, "What a devoted cavalier!" she exclaimed.

"Come, then. Let us ride out into the world. At least, it is bright and shining--to-day. Do you fear to follow me, sir? Or do you believe with the hunchback that I am an enchantress and cast over whom I will the spell of diablerie?"

"You may be an enchantress, mistress, but the spell you cast is not diablerie," he answered in the same tone.

"Fine words!" she said, mockingly. "But it remains to be seen into what a world I am going to lead you!" And rode on.

The rush of air, the swift motion, the changing aspect of nature were apparently not without their effect on her spirits, for as they galloped along she appeared to forget their danger, the certainty of pursuit and the possibility of capture. Blithesome she continued; called his attention to a startled hare; pointed with her whip to a red-eyed boar that sullenly retreated at their approach; laughed when an overhanging branch swept her little cap from her head and merrily thanked him when he hastily dismounted and returned it to her.

"You see, fool, what a burden I am like to prove!" she said, readjusting the cap, and, ere he could answer, had passed on, as if challenging him to a test of speed.

"Have a care!" he cried warningly, as they came to a rough stretch of ancient highway, but she seemed not to hear him.

That she could ride in such madcap fashion, seemingly oblivious of the gravity of their desperate fortunes, was not ill-pleasing to the jester; no timorous companion, shrinking from phantoms, he surmised she would prove. Thus mile after mile they covered and the shadows had

reached their minimum length, when, coming to a clear pool of water, they drew rein to refresh themselves from the provisions in the saddle-bags. Bread and wine--sumptuous fare for poor fugitives--they ate and drank with keen relish. Dreamily she watched the green insects skimming over the surface of the shimmering water. On the bank swayed the rushes, as though making obeisance to a single gorgeous lily, set like a queen in the center of this little shining kingdom.

"Was the repast to your liking?" she asked, suddenly looking from the pool to him.

"Entirely, fair Jacqueline. The wine was excellent. Hunger gave it bouquet, and appetite aged it. Never did bread taste so wholesome, and as for the service--"

"It was perfect--lacking grand master, grand chamberlain, grand marshals, grand everybody," she laughed.

In the reflected glow from pool and shining leaves, her eyes were so full of light he could but wonder if this were the same person who had so gravely stood by his bedside in the cell. That she should thus seem carelessly to dismiss all thought of danger appeared the more surprising, because he knew she was not one to lull herself with the assurance of a false security. To him her bright eyes said: "I am in your care. Be yours the task now." And thus interpreting, he broke in upon her thoughts.

"Having dined and wined so well, shall we go on, Jacqueline?"

To which she at once assented by rising, and soon they had left the principality of the lily far in the distance. Now the road so narrowed he fell behind. The character of the country had changed; some time ago they had passed out of the wild forest, and had begun to traverse a great, level plain, broken with stubble. As far as the eye could reach, no other human figures were visible; the land outstretched, apparently without end; no habitations dotted the landscape, and, the sole signs of life, wheeling birds of prey, languidly floated in the air. At length she glanced around. Was it to reassure herself the jester rode near; that she had not, unattended, entered that forbidding territory? Then she paused abruptly and the fool approached.

"By this time the turnkey should be relieved," she said.

"But not released," he answered, holding up the keys which he yet wore at his girdle. "They will have to come a long distance to find them," he continued, and threw the keys far away upon the sward.

"They may not think of following on this road at all," she returned.

"It is the old castle thoroughfare, long since disused."

"And leads where?"

"Southward, to the main road."

"How came you to know it?" he asked, quickly.

"How--because I lived in the castle before the king built the palace and the new thoroughfare," she answered slowly.

"You lived in the castle, then, when it was the residence of the proud Constable of Dubrois? You must have been but a child," he added, reflectively.

"Yes; but children may have long memories."

"In your case, certainly. How well you knew all the passages and corridors of the castle!"

She responded carelessly and changed the conversation. The thoroughfare broadening, for the remainder of the day they pressed forward side by side. But a single human figure, during all those hours, they encountered, and that when the afternoon had fairly worn away. For some time they had pursued their journey silently, when at a turn in the road the horse of the jester shied and started back.

At the same time an unclean, offensive-looking monk in Franciscan attire arose suddenly out of the stubble by the wayside. In his hand he held a heavy staff, newly cut from the forest, a stock which in his

brawny arms seemed better adapted for a weapon than as a prop for his sturdy frame. From the rope girdle about his waist depended a rosary whose great beads would have served the fingers of a Cyclops, and a most diminutive, leathern-bound prayer-book. At the appearance of the fool and his companion, he opened an enormous mouth, and in a voice proportionately large began to whine right vigorously:

"Charity, good people, for the Mother Church! Charity in the name of the Holy Mother! In the name of the saints, the apostles and the evangelists! St. John, St. Peter, St.--" Then broke off suddenly, staring stupidly at the jester.

"The duke's fool!" he exclaimed. "What are you doing here? A plague upon it! You have as many lives as a monk."

"Call you yourself a monk, rascal?" asked the jester, contemptuously.

"At times. Charity, good fool!" the canting rogue again began to whine, edging nearer. "Charity, mistress! For the sake of the prophets and the disciples! The seven sacraments, the feast of the Pentecost and the Passover! In the name of the holy Fathers! St. Sebastian! St. Michael! St.--"

But the fugitives had already sped on, and the unregenerate knave turned his pious eloquence into an unhallowed channel of oaths, waving his staff menacingly after them.

"I fear me," said the jester, when they had put a goodly distance between themselves and the solitary figure, "yonder brother craves almsgiving with his voice, and enforces the bounty with his staff. Woe betide the good Samaritan who falls within reach of his pilgrim's prop."

"You knew him?" she asked.

"I had the doubtful pleasure," he answered. "He was hired to kill me."

"Why?" in surprise.

"Because the--duke wanted me out of the way."

She asked no further questions, although he could see by her brow she was thinking deeply. Was the duke then no better than a common assassin? She frowned, then gave an impatient exclamation.

"It is inexplicable," she said, and rode the faster.

The jester, too, was silent, but his mind dwelt upon the future and its hazards. He little liked their meeting with the false monk. Why was the Franciscan traveling in their direction? Had others of that band of pillagers, street-fools and knave-minstrels, formerly infesting the neighborhood of the palace, gone that way? He did not believe the monk would long pursue a solitary pilgrimage, for varlets of that kind have

common haunts and byways. The encounter suggested hazard ahead as well as the danger of pursuit from the palace. But this apprehension of a new source of peril he kept from his companion; since go on they must, there was no need to disquiet her further.

The mystic silver light of the day had now become golden; the sky, brilliant, many-colored, overdomed the vast, sullen earth; between two roseate streamers a whitish crescent unobtrusively was set. Seemingly misplaced in a sanguinary sea, passionless it lay, but as the ocean of light grew dull the crescent kindled. Over a thick patch of pine trees in the distance myriads of dark birds hovered and screamed in chorus. Now they circled restlessly above that shaded spot; then darted off, a cloud against the sky, and returned with renewed cawing and discord. As the riders approached the din abruptly ceased, the creatures mysteriously and suddenly vanishing into the depths of the thicket below.

In the fading light, fool and jestress drew rein, and, moved by the same purpose, looked about them. On the one hand was the deserted, desolate plain over which lay a sullen, gathering mist; on the other, the sombrous obscurity of the wood. Everywhere, an ominous silence, and overhead the crescent growing in luster.

"Do you see any sign of house or inn?" said the girl, peering afar down the road, which soon lost itself in the general monotony of the landscape.

"None, mistress; the country seems alike barren of farmhouse or tavern."

"What shall we do? I am full weary," she confessed.

"The forest offers the best protection," he reluctantly suggested.

Little as he favored delay, he realized the wisdom of sparing their

horses. Moreover, her appeal was irresistible.

She gazed half-dubiously into that woody depth. "Why not rest by the wayside--in the moonlight?"

"I like not the open road," he answered. "But if you fear the darkness--"

For answer she guided her horse to the verge of the forest and lightly sprang to the ground. Upon a grassy knoll, but a little way within, he spread his cloak.

"There, Jacqueline, is your couch," he said.

"But you?" she asked. "To rob you thus of your cloak seems ill-comradeship."

"The cloak is yours," he returned. "As it is, you will find it but a

hard bed."

"It will seem soft as down," she replied, and seated herself on the hillock. In the gloom he could just distinguish the outline of her figure, with her elbow on her knee, and her hair blacker than the shadows themselves. A long-drawn, moaning sound, coming without warning behind her, caused the girl to turn.

"What is that?" she said, quickly.

"The wind, Jacqueline. It is rising."

As he spoke, like a monster it entered the forest; about them branches waved and tossed: a friendly star seen through the boughs lost itself behind a cloud. Yet no rain fell and the air seemed hot and dry, despite the mists which clung to the ground. A crash of thunder or a flash of lightning would have relieved that sighing dolor which filled the little patch of timber with its melancholy sounds.

Suddenly, above the plaint and murmur of wind and forest, the low, clear voice of the girl arose; the melody was no ballad, arietta or pastoral, such as he had before heard from her lips, but a simple hymn, the setting by Calvin. The jester started. How came she to know that forbidden music? Not only to know, but to sing it as he had never heard it sung before. Sweetly it vibrated, her waywardness sunk in its swelling rhythm; its melody freighted with the treasure of her trust.

As he listened he felt she was betraying to him the hidden well of her faith; the secret of her religion; that she, his companion, was proclaiming herself a heretic, and, therefore, doubly an outcast.

A stanza, and the melody died away on the wings of the tempest. His heart was beating violently; he looked expectantly toward her. Even more gently, like a lullaby to the turbulent night, the full-measured cadence of the majestic psalm was again heard. Then another voice, deeper, fuller, blended with that of the first singer. Unwavering, she continued the song, as though it had been the most natural matter he should join his voice with hers. Fainter fell the harmony; then ceased altogether--a hymn destined to become interwoven with terrible memories, the tragic massacre of the Huguenots on the ill-fated night of St. Bartholomew. Again prevailed the tristful dirge of the pines.

"You sing well, mistress," said the jester, softly. "Is it true you are one of a hated sect?"

"As true as that you did not deny the heretic volume found in your room," she replied.

A silence ensued between them. "It was Marot placed the horses there for us," she said, at length. "He, too, is a heretic, and would have saved you."

Thereafter the silence remained unbroken for some moments, and then--

"God keep you, mistress," he said.

"God keep you," she answered, softly.

Soon her deep breathing told him she was sleeping, and, as he listened, in fancy he could hear the faint echoes of her voice, accompanied by the sighing wind. How intrepid had she seemed; how helpless was she now; and, as he bent over her, divining yet not seeing, he asked himself whence had come this faith in him, that like a child she slumbered amid the unrest of nature? What had her life been, who her friends, that she should thus have chosen a jester as comrade? What had driven her forth from the court to nameless hazards? Had he surmised correctly? Was it--

"The king," she murmured, with sudden restlessness in her sleep.

"The king," she repeated, with aversion.

In the jester's breast upheaped a fierce anger. This was the art-loving monarch who burned the fathers and brothers of the new faith; this, the righteous ruler who condemned men to death for psalm-singing or for listening to grave discourse; this the Christian king, the brilliant patron of science and learning.

The storm had sighed itself to rest, the stars had come out, but

leaning with his back against a tree, the fool still kept vigil.