CHAPTER XIX

A FIGURE IN THE MOONLIGHT

Experiencing no further inconvenience than the ordinary vicissitudes of traveling without litter or cavalcade, several days of wandering slowly passed. Few people they met, and those, for the most part, various types of vagabonds and nomads; some wild and savage, roaming like beasts from place to place; others, harmless, mere bedraggled birds of passage. In this latter class were the vagrant-entertainers, with dancing rooster or singing dog, who stopped at every peasant's door. To the shrill piping of the flageolet, these merry stragglers added a step of their own, and won a crust for themselves, a bone for the dog or a handful of grain for the performing fowl.

In those days when court ladies rode in carved and gilded coaches, and their escorts on horses covered with silken, jeweled nets, the modest appearance of the jestress and her companion was not calculated to attract especial attention from the yokels and honest peasantry; although their steeds, notwithstanding their unpretentious housings, might still excite the cupidity of highway rogues. As it minimized their risk from this latter class, the young girl was content to wear the cap of the jestress, piquantly perched upon her dark curls, thereby suggesting an indefinable affinity with vagrancy and the itinerant fraternity.

Not only had she donned the symbol of her office, but she endeavored to act up to it, accepting the sweet with the sour, with ever a jest at discomfort and concealing weariness with a smile. Often the fool wondered at her endurance and her calm courage in the face of peril, for although they met with no misadventures, each day seemed fraught with jeopardy. Perhaps it was fortunate their attire, somewhat travel-stained, appeared better suited to the character of poor, migratory wearers of the cap and bells than to the more magnificent roles of fou du roi or folle de la reine. But although they had gone far, the jester knew they had not yet traveled beyond the reach of Francis' arm, and that, while the king might reconcile himself to the escape of the plaisant, he would not so easily tire in seeking the maid.

Once they slept in the fields; again, beside an old ruined shrine, in the shadow of an ancient cross; the third night, on the bank of a stream, when it rained, and she shivered until dawn with no word of complaint. Fortunately the sun arose, bright and warm, drying the garments that clung to her slender figure, At the peasants' houses they paused no longer than necessary to procure food and drink, and, not to awaken suspicion, she preferred paying them with a song of the people rather than from the well-filled purse she had brought with her.

And as the fool listened to a sprightly, contagious carol and noted its effect on clod and hind, he wondered if this could be the same voice he had heard, uplifted in one of Master Calvin's psalms in the solitude of

the forest. She had the gift of music, and, sometimes on the journey, would break out with a catch or madrigal by Marot, Caillette, or herself. It appeared a brave effort to bear up under continued hardship--insufficient rest and sharp riding--and the jester reproached himself for thus taxing her strength; but often, when he suggested a pause, she would shake her head wilfully, assert she was not tired, and ride but the faster.

"No, no!" she would say; "if we would escape, we must keep on. We can rest afterward."

"Where do you wish to go?" he asked her once.

"There is time enough yet to speak of that," she returned, evasively.

"You have some plan, mistress?"

"Perhaps."

This answer forbade his further questioning; offended, possibly, his sense of that confidence which is due comrade to comrade, but she became immediately so propitiative and sweetly dependent--the antithesis to that self-reliance her response implied--he thought no more of it, but remained content with her reticence. Half-shyly, she looked at him beneath her dark lashes, as if to read how deeply he was annoyed, and, seeing his face clear, laughed lightly.

"What are you laughing at, mistress?" he said.

"If I knew I could tell," she replied.

Toward sundown on the fourth day they came to a lonely inn, set in a clearing on the verge of a forest. They had ridden late in the moonlight the night before, and all that morning and afternoon almost without resting, and the first sight of the solitary hostelry was not unwelcome to the weary fugitives. A second inspection of the place, however, awakened misgivings. The building seemed the better adapted for a fortress than a tavern, being heavily constructed with massive doors and blinds, and loopholes above. A brightly painted sign, The Rooks' Haunt, waved cheerily, it is true, above the door, as though to disarm suspicion, but the isolated situation of the inn, and the depressing sense of the surrounding wilderness, might well cause the wayfarer to hesitate whether to tarry there or continue his journey.

A glance at the pale face and unnaturally bright eyes of the girl brought the jester, however, to a quick decision. Springing from his horse, he held out his hand to assist her, but, overcome by weakness, or fatigue, she would have fallen had he not sustained her. Quickly she recovered, and with a faint flush mantling her white cheek, withdrew from his grasp, while at the same time the landlord of the tavern came forward to welcome his guests.

In appearance mine host was round and jovial; his bulk bespoke hearty living; his rosy face reflected good cheer; his stentorian voice, free-and-easy hospitality. His eyes constituted the only setback to this general impression of friendliness and fellow-feeling; they were small, twinkling, glassy.

"Good even to you, gentle folk," he said. "You tarry for the night, I take it?"

"If you have suitable accommodations," answered the jester, reassured by the man's aspect and manner.

"The Rooks' Haunt never yet turned away a weary traveler," answered the landlord. "You come from the palace?"

"Yes," briefly, as a lad led away their horses.

"And have done well? Reaped a harvest from the merry lords and ladies?"

"There were many others there for that purpose," returned the jester, following the proprietor to the door of the hostelry.

"True. Still I'll warrant your fair companion cozened the silver pieces from the pockets of the gentry." And, smiling knowingly, he ushered them into the principal living room of the tavern.

It was a smoke-begrimed apartment, with tables next to the wall, and rough chairs and benches for the guests. Heavy pine rafters spanned the ceiling; the floor was sprinkled with sand; from a chain hung a wrought-iron frame for candles. Upon a shelf a row of battered tankards, suggesting many a bout, shone dully, like a line of war-worn troopers, while a great pewter pitcher, the worse for wear, commanded the disreputable array.

In this room was gathered a nondescript company: mountebanks and buffoons; rogues unclassified, drinking and dicing; a robust vagrant, at whose feet slept a performing boar, with a ring--badge of servitude--through its nose; a black-bearded, shaggy-haired Spanish troubadour, with attire so ragged and worn as to have lost its erstwhile picturesque characteristics. This last far from prepossessing worthy half-started from his seat upon the appearance of fool and jestress; stared at them, and then resumed his place and the ballad he had been singing:

"Within the garden of Beaucaire
He met her by a secret stair,
Said Aucassin, 'My love, my pet,
These old confessors vex me so!
They threaten all the pains of hell
Unless I give you up, ma belle,'--
Said Aucassin to Nicolette."

Watching the nimble fingers of the shabby minstrel with pitiably childish expression of amusement, a half-imbecile morio leaned upon the table. His huge form, for he was a giant among stalwart men, and his great moon-shaped head made him at once an object hideous and miserable to contemplate. But the poor creature seemed unaware of his own deformities, and smiled contentedly and patted the table caressingly to the sprightly rhythm.

Gazing upon this choice assemblage, the plaisant was vaguely conscious that some of the curious and uncommon faces seemed familiar, and the picture of the Franciscan monk whom they had overtaken on the road recurred to him, together with the misgivings he had experienced upon parting from that canting knave. He half-expected to see Nanette; to hear her voice, and was relieved that the gipsy on this occasion did not make one of the unwonted gathering. The landlord, observing the fool's discriminating gaze, and reading something of what was passing in his mind, reassuringly motioned the new-comers to an unoccupied corner, and by his manner sought to allay such mistrust as the appearance of his guests was calculated to inspire.

"We have to take those that come," he said, deprecatorily. "The rascals have money. It is as good as any lord's. Besides, whate'er they do without, here must they behave. And--for their credit--they are docile as children; ruled by the cook's ladle. You will find that, though there be ill company, you will partake of good fare. If I say

it myself, there's no better master of the flesh pots outside of Paris than at this hostelry. The rogues eat as well as the king's gentlemen. Feasting, then fasting, is their precept."

"At present we have a leaning for the former, good host," carelessly answered the fool. "Though the latter will, no doubt, come later."

"For which reason it behooves a man to eat, drink and be merry while he may," retorted the other. "What say you to a carp on the spit, with shallots, and a ham boiled with pistachios?"

"The ham, if it be ready. Our appetites are too sharp to wait for the fish."

"Then shall you have with it a cold teal from the marshes, and I'll warrant such a repast as you have not tasted this many a day. Because a man lives in a retired spot, it does not follow he may not be an epicure," he went on, "and in my town days I was considered a good fellow among gourmands." His eyes twinkled; he studied the new-comers a moment, and then vanished kitchenward.

His self-praise as a provider of creature comforts proved not ill deserved; the viands, well prepared, were soon set before them; a serving lad filled their glasses from a skin of young but sound wine he bore beneath his arm, and, under the influence of this cheer, the young girl's cheek soon lost its pallor. In the past she had become

accustomed to rough as well as gentle company; so now it was disdain, not fear, she experienced in that uncouth gathering; the same sort of contempt she had once so openly expressed for Master Rabelais, whipper-in for all gluttons, wine-bibbers and free-livers.

As the darkness gathered without, the merriment increased within. Over the scene the dim light cast an uncertain luster. Indefatigably the dicers pursued their pastime, with now and then an audible oath, or muttered imprecation, which belied that docility mine host had boasted of. The troubadour played and the morio yet listened. Several of a group who had been singing now sat in sullen silence. Suddenly one of them muttered a broken sentence and his fellows immediately turned their eyes toward the corner where were fool and jestress. This ripple of interest did not escape the young girl's attention, who said uneasily:

"Why do those men look at us?"

"One of them spoke to the others," replied the jester. "He called attention to something."

"What do you suppose it was?" she asked curiously.

"Gladius gemmatus!" ["The jeweled sword."]

Whence came the voice? Near the couple, in a shadow, sat a woebegone

looking man who had been holding a book so close to his eyes as to conceal his face. Now he permitted the volume to fall and the jester uttered an exclamation of surprise, as he looked upon those pinched, worn, but well-remembered features.

"The scamp-student!" he said.

Immediately the reader buried his head once more behind the book and spoke aloud in Latin as though quoting some passage which he followed with his finger; "Did you understand?"

"Yes," answered the plaisant, apparently speaking to the jestress, whose face wore a puzzled expression.

The scamp-student laid the volume on the table. "These men are outlaws and intend to kill you for your jeweled sword," he continued in the language of Horace.

"Why do you tell me this?" asked the fool in the same tongue, now addressing directly the scholar.

"Because you spared my life once; I would serve you now."

"What's all this monk's gibberish about?" cried an angry voice, as the master of the boar stepped toward them.

"A discussion between two scholars," readily answered the scamp-student.

"Why don't you talk in a language we understand?" grumbled the man.

"Latin is the tongue of learning," was the humble response.

"I like not the sound of it," retorted the other, as he retired. From a distance, however, he continued to cast suspicious glances in their direction. Bewildered, the girl looked from one of the alleged controverters to the other. Who was this starveling the jester seemed to know? Again were they conversing in the language of the monastery, and their colloquy led to a conclusion as unexpected as it was startling.

"What if we leave the inn now?" asked the jester.

"They would prevent you."

"Who is the leader?"

"The man with the boar," answered the scamp-student. "But it is the morio who usually kills their victims."

The jester glanced at the colossal monster, repugnant in deformity, and then at the girl, who was tapping impatiently on the table with her white fingers. The fool's color came and went; what human strength

might stand against that frightful prodigy of nature?

"Is there no way to escape?" he asked.

"Alas! I can but warn; not advise," said the scholar. "Already the leader suspects me."

A half-shiver ran through him. In the presence of actual and seemingly assured death he had appeared calm, resigned, a Socrates in temperament; before the mere prospect of danger the apprehensive thief-and-fugitive elements of his nature uprose. He would meet, when need be, the grim-visaged monster of dissolution with the dignity of a stoic, but by habit disdained not to dodge the shadow with the practised agility of a filcher and scamp. So the lower part of his moral being began to cower; he glanced furtively at the company.

"Yes; I am sure I have put my own neck in it," he muttered. "I must devise a way to save it. I have it. We must seem to quarrel." And rising, he closed his book deliberately.

"Fool!" he said in a sharp voice. "Your argument is as scurvy as your Latin. Thou, a philosopher! A bookless, shallow dabbler! So I treat you and your reasonings!"

Whereupon, with a quick gesture, he threw the dregs of his glass in the face of the jester. So suddenly and unexpectedly was it done, the

other sprang angrily from his seat and half drew his sword. A moment they stood thus, the fool with his hand menacingly upon the hilt; the scamp-scholar continuing to confront him with undiminished volubility.

"A smatterer! an ignoramus! a dunce!" he repeated in high-pitched tones to the amusement of the company.

"Make a ring for the two monks, my masters," cried the man with the boar. "Then let each state his case with bludgeon or dagger."

"With bludgeon or dagger!" echoed the excited voice of the morio, whose appearance had undergone a transformation. The indescribable vacancy with which he had listened to the minstrel was replaced by an expression of revolting malignity.

The jestress half-arose, her face once more white, her dark eyes fastened on the fool. But the latter, realizing the purpose of the affront, and the actual service the scamp-student had rendered him, unexpectedly thrust back his blade.

"I'll not fight a puny bookworm," he said, and resumed his seat, although his cheek was flushed.

"You bear a brave sword, fool, for one so loath to draw," sneered the master of the boar.

Disappointed at this tame outcome of an affair which had so spirited a beginning, the company, with derisive scoffing and muttered sarcasm, resumed their places; all save the morio, who stood glaring upon the jester.

"Stab! stab!" he muttered through his dry lips, and at that moment the troubadour played a few chords on his instrument. The passion faded from the creature's face; quietly he turned and sought the chair nearest to the minstrel.

"Sing, master," he said.

"Diable, thou art an insatiable monster!" grumbled the troubadour.

"Insatiable," smilingly repeated the strange being.

"If you went also, ma douce miette!
The joys of heaven I'd forego
To have you with me there below,'--
Said Aucassin to Nicolette."

softly sang the troubadour.

Over the gathering a marked constraint appeared to fall. More soberly the men shook their dice; the scamp-student took up his book, but even Horace seemed not to absorb his undivided attention; a mountebank

attempted several tricks, but failed to amuse his spectators. The candles, burning low, began to drip, and the servant silently replaced them. Beneath lowering brows the master of the boar moodily regarded the young girl, whose face seemed cold and disdainful in the flickering light. The plaisant addressed a remark to her, but she did not answer, and silently he watched the shadow on the floor, of the chandelier swinging to and fro, like a waving sword.

"Will you have something more, good fool?" said the insinuating and unexpected voice of the host at the plaisant's elbow.

"Nothing."

"You were right not to draw," continued the boniface with a sharp look. "What could a jester do with the blade? I'll warrant you do not know how to use it?"

"Nay," answered the fool; "I know how to use it not--and save my neck."

Mine host nodded approvingly. "Ha! a merry fellow," he said. "Come; drink again. 'Twill make you sleep."

"I have better medicine than that," retorted the jester, and yawned.

"Ah, weariness. I'll warrant you'll rest like a log," he added, as he moved away.

At that some one who had been listening laughed, but the fool did not look up. A great clock began to strike with harsh clangor and Jacqueline suddenly arose. At the same time the minstrel, stretching his arms, strolled to the door and out into the open air.

"Good-night, mistress," said the harsh voice of the master of the boar, as his glittering eyes dwelt upon her graceful figure.

The girl responded coldly, and, amid a hush from the company, made her way to the stairs, which she slowly mounted, preceded by the lad who had waited upon them, and followed by the jester.

"A craven fellow for so trim a maid," continued he of the boar, as they disappeared. "She has eyes like friar's lanterns. What a decoy she'd make for the lords in Paris!"

"Yes," assented the landlord, "a pitfall to pill 'em and poll 'em."

At the end of the passage the guide of jestress and fool paused before a door. "Your room, mistress," he said. "And yonder is yours, Master Jester." Then placing the candle on a stand and vouchsafing no further words, he shuffled off in the darkness, leaving the two standing there.

"Lock your door this night, Jacqueline," whispered the fool.

"You submit over-easily to an affront," was her scornful retort, turning upon the jester.

"Perhaps," he replied, phlegmatically. "Yet forget not the bolt."

"It were more protection than you are apt to prove," she answered, and, quickly entering the room closed hard the door.

A moment he stood in indecision; then rapped lightly.

"Jacqueline," he said, in a low voice.

There was no answer.

"Jacqueline!"

The bolt shot sharply into place, fastening the door. No other response would she make, and the jester, after waiting in vain for her to speak, turned and made his way to his own chamber, adjoining hers.

Weary as the young girl was, she did not retire at once, but going to the window, threw wide open the blinds. Bright shone the moon, and, leaning forth, she gazed upon clearing and forest sleeping beneath the soft glamour. A beautiful, yet desolate scene, with not a living object visible--yes, one, and she suddenly drew back, for there, motionless in the full light, and gazing steadfastly toward her room,

stood a figure in whom she recognized the Spanish troubadour.