

## CHAPTER XX

### AN UNEQUAL CONFLICT

Surveying his room carefully in the dim light of a candle, the fool discovered he stood in a small apartment, with a single window, whose barren furnishings consisted of a narrow couch, a chair and a massive wardrobe. Unlike the chamber assigned to Jacqueline, the door was without key or bolt; a significant fact to the jester, in view of the warning he had received. Nor was it possible to move wardrobe or bed, the first being too heavy and the last being screwed to the floor, had the occupant desired to barricade himself from the anticipated danger without. A number of suspicious stains enhanced the gruesome character of the room, and as these appeared to lead to the wardrobe, the jester carried his investigation to a more careful survey of that imposing piece of furniture. Opening the door, although he could not find the secret of the mechanism, the fool concluded that the floor of this ponderous wooden receptacle was a trap through which the body of the victim could be secretly lowered.

This brief exploration of his surroundings occupied but a few moments, and then, after blowing out the candle and heaping the clothes together on the bed into some resemblance of a human figure lying there, the jester drew his sword and softly crept down the passage toward the stairs, at the head of which he paused and listened. He could hear the voices and see the shadows of the men below, and, with beating heart,

descended a few steps that he might catch what they were saying. Crouching against the wall, with bated breath, he heard first the landlord's tones.

"Well, rogues, what say you to another sack of wine?" asked the host, cheerily.

"It will serve--while we wait," ominously answered the master of the boar.

"Haven't we waited long enough?" said an impatient voice.

"Tut! tut! young blood," growled another, reprovingly. "Would you disturb him at his prayers?"

"The landlord is right," spoke up the leader. "We have the night before us. Bring the wine."

In stentorian tones the host called the serving-man, and soon from the clinking of cups, the clearing of throats, and the exclamations of satisfaction, fowly expressed, the listening jester knew that the skin had been circulated and the tankards filled. One man even began to sing again an equivocal song, but was stopped by a warning imprecation to which he ill-naturedly responded with a half-defiant curse.

"Knaves! knaves!" cried the reproachful voice of the landlord. "Can

you not drink together like honest men?"

This mild expostulation of the host seemed not without its effect, for the impending quarrel passed harmlessly away.

"Where, think you, he got the sword?" asked one of the gathering, reverting to the enterprise in hand.

"Stole it, most likely," replied the leader. "It is booty from the palace."

"And therefore is doubly fair spoils," laughed another.

"Remember, rogues," interrupted the host, "one-third is my allotted portion. Else we fall out."

"Art so solicitous, thou corpulent scrimp!" grumbled he of the boar.

"Have you not always had the hulking share? Pass the wine!"

"Foul names break no bones," laughed the host. "You were always a churlish, ungentle knave. There's the wine, and it's not better than your temper, beshrew me for the enemy of true hospitality. But to show I am none such, here's something to sup withal; prime head of calf. Bolt and swig, as ye will."

The rattle of dishes and the play of forks succeeded this good-natured

suggestion. It was truly evident mine host commanded the good will and the services of the band by appealing to their appetites. An esculent roast or pungent stew was his cure for uprising or rebellion; a high-seasoned ragout or fricassee became a sovereign remedy against treachery or defection. He could do without them, for knaves were plentiful, but they could not so easily dispense with this fat master of the board who had a knack in turning his hand at marvelous and savory messes, for which he charged such full reckoning that his third of the spoils, augmented by subsequent additions, was like to become all.

A wave of anger against this unwieldy hypocrite and well-fed malefactor swept over the jester. The man's assumed heartiness, his manner of joviality and good-fellowship, were only the mask of moral turpitude and blackest purpose. But for the lawless scholar, the fool would probably have retired to his bed with full confidence in the probity and honesty of the greatest delinquent of them all.

"What shall we do with the girl?" asked one of the outlaws, interrupting this trend of thought in the listener's mind.

"Serve her the same as the fool," answered the landlord, carelessly.

"But she's a handsome wench," retorted the leader, thoughtfully.

"Straight as a poplar; eyes like a sloe. With the boar and the jade, I should do well, when I become tired resting here."

"If she's as easily tamed as the boar?" suggested the host, significantly.

"Devil take me, if her nails are as long as his tusks," retorted the fellow, with a coarse laugh.

"An I had a hostelry in town, she could bait the nobles thither," commented the host, thoughtfully.

"Give her to the scamp-student," remarked the fellow who had first spoken.

"Nay, since Nanette ran off with a street singer and left me spouseless, I have made a vow of celibacy," hastily answered the piping voice of the lank scholar.

A series of loud guffaws greeted the scamp-student's declaration, while the subsequent rough humor of the knaves made the listener's cheek burn with indignation. Yet forced to listen he was, knowing that the slightest movement on his part would quickly seal the fate of himself and the young girl. But every fiber of his being revoked against that ribald talk; he bit his lip hard, hearing her name bandied about by miscreants and wretches of the lowest type, and even welcomed a startling change in the discourse, occasioned by the leader.

"Enough, rogues. We must settle with the jester first. Afterward, it will be time enough to deal with the maid. Hast done feeding and tippling yet, morio?"

"Yes, master," said the suspiciously muffled voice of the imbecile.

"Here's the knife then. You shall have another tankard when you come back."

"Another tankard!" muttered the creature.

At these significant words, knowing that the crucial moment had come, the jester retreated rapidly, and, making his way down the passage, stood in a dark corner near his room. As of one accord the voices ceased below; a heavy creaking announced the approach of the morio; nearer and nearer, first on the stairs, then in the upper corridor. From where he remained concealed the fool dimly discerned the figure of the would-be assassin.

At the door of the jestress' room it paused. The fool lifted his blade; the form passed on. Before the chamber of the plaisant its movements became more stealthy; it bent and listened. Should the jester spring upon it now? A strange loathing made him hesitate, and, before he had time to carry his purpose into execution, the creature, throwing aside further pretense of caution, swung back the door and

launched himself across the apartment. A heavy blow, swiftly followed by another; afterward, the stillness of death.

Every moment the jester expected an outcry; the announcement of the fruitlessness of the attack, but the morio made no sound. The silence became oppressive; the plaisant felt almost irresistibly impelled toward that terrible chamber, when with heavy, lumbering step, the creature reappeared, traversed the hall like a huge automaton and mechanically descended the stairs. Recovering from his surprise, the fool again resumed his position commanding the scene below, and breathlessly awaited the sequel to the singular pantomime he had witnessed.

"Well, is it done?" asked the harsh voice of the master of the boar.

"Yes; done!" was the submissive answer.

"Good! Now to get the sword."

"Not so fast," broke in the landlord. "Do you kill, morio, without drawing blood? Look at his dagger."

The leader took the blade, examined it, and then began to call down curses on the head of the imbecile monster. "Clean, save for a thread of cotton," he cried angrily. "You never went near him."

"Yes, yes, master!" replied the creature, eagerly.

"Then, perhaps, you strangled him?" suggested the man.

"No; stab! stab!" reiterated the morio, in an almost imploring tone, shrinking from the glances cast upon him.

"Bah! You stabbed the bed, fool; not the man," roughly returned the other. "The rogue has guessed our purpose and left the room," he continued, addressing the others. "But he's skulking somewhere. Well, knaves, here's a little coursing for us all. Up with you, morio, and find him. Perhaps, though, he may prefer to come down." And the leader called out: "Give yourself up, rascal, or it will be the worse for you."

To this paradoxical threat no answer was returned. Standing in the shadow at the head of the stairs, the jester only gripped tighter the hilt of the coveted sword, while across his vision flashed the picture of the young girl, left helpless, alone! What mercy would they show? The coarse words of the master of the boar and the gibing, loose responses of the company recurred to him, and, setting his jaw firmer, the plaisant peered, with gleaming eyes, down into the semi-gloom.

"You won't answer?" cried the leader, after a short interval. "Smell him out then, rogues."



Knife in hand, the others at his heels, the morio slowly made his way up the stairs. Goaded by the taunts of the outlaws, his face was distorted with ferocity; through his lips came a fierce, sibilant breathing; in the dim light his colossal figure and enormous head seemed in no wise human, but rather a murderous phantasm. With head rolling from side to side, stabbing in the air with his knife, he continued to approach,--an object calculated to strike terror into any breast.

"Oh! oh!" murmured a voice behind the jester, and, turning, he saw Jacqueline. Disturbed by the tumult and the loud voices, the jestress had left her room to learn the cause of the unusual din, and now, with her dark hair a cloud around her, stood gazing fearfully over the fool's shoulder.

At the sound of the young girl's voice, so near, the plaisant's hand, which for the moment had been unsteady, became suddenly steel. Almost impatiently he awaited the coming of the morio; at last he drew near, but, as if instinctively realizing the presence of danger, paused, his arm ceasing to strike, but remaining stationary in the air.

"Go on!" impatiently shouted those behind him.

At the command the creature sprang forward furiously, when the sword of the jester shot out; once, twice! From the morio's grip fell the

dagger; over his face the lust for killing was replaced by a look of surprise; with a single moan, he threw both arms on high, and, tottering like an oak, the monster fell backward with a crash, carrying with him the rogues behind. Imprecations, threats and cries of pain ensued; several knaves went limping away from the struggling group; one lay prostrate as the morio himself; the master of the boar rubbed his shoulder, anathematizing roundly the cause of the disaster.

"I think my arm's put out!" he said. "Is the creature dead?" he added, viciously.

"Dead as a herring," answered the landlord, bending over the motionless figure.

"Beshrew me, I thought the jester was a craven," growled he of the boar. "What does it mean?"

"That he saw the snare and spread another," replied the host.

"Go back to your room, mistress," whispered the plaisant to the young girl, "and lock yourself in."

"Nay; I'll not leave you," she replied. "Do you think they will return?" she added in a voice she strove to make firm.

"I am certain of it. Go, I beg you--to your window and call out. It

is a slender hope, but the best we have. Fear not; I can hold the stairs yet a while."

A moment she hesitated, then glided away. At the same time he of the boar grasped a sword in his left hand, and, with his right hanging useless, rushed up the stairs.

"Oh, there you are, my nimble wit-cracker!" he cried, as the jester stepped boldly out. "'Twas a pretty piece of foolery you played on the monster and us, but quip for quirk, my merry wag!" And, so speaking, he directed a violent thrust which, had it taken effect, would, indeed, have made good the leader's threat.

But the plaisant stepped aside, the blow grazed his shoulder, while his own blade, by a rapid counter, passed through the throat of his antagonist. With a shriek, the blood gushing from the wound, the master of the boar fell lifeless on the stairs, his sword clattering downward. At that gruesome sight, his fellows paused irresolute, and, seeing their indecision, the jester rushed headlong upon them, striking fiercely, when their hesitation turned into panic and the knaves fairly fled. Below, the irate landlord stamped and fumed, cuffing and striking as he moved among them with threats and abuse.

"White-livered varlets! Pigeon-hearted rogues! Unmanned by a motley fool! A witling the lords beat with their slippers! Because of a chance blow against an imbecile, or a disabled man, you hesitate. A

fig for them! What if they be dead? The spoil will be the greater for the rest."

Thus exhorted, the knaves once more took heart and gathered for the attack. Glaves were provided for those in front, and the plaisant waited, grimly determined, yet liking little the aspect of those terrible weapons and feeling the end of the unequal contest was not far distant, when a light hand was laid on his arm.

"Follow me quickly," said Jacqueline. "We may yet escape. Don't question me, but come!" she went on hurriedly.

Impressed by her earnestness, the jester, after a moment's hesitation, obeyed. She led him to her room, closed and locked the door--but not before a scampering of feet and sound of voices told them the rogues had gained the upper passage--and drew him hastily to the window.

"See," she said eagerly. "A ladder!"

"And at the foot of the ladder, our horses!" he exclaimed, in surprise.

"Who has done this?"

Her response was interrupted by a hand at their door and a clamor without, followed by heavy blows.

"Quick, Jacqueline!" he cried, and helped her to the long ladder, set,

as it seemed, providentially against the wall.

"Can you do it?" he asked, yet holding her hand. Her eyes gave him answer, and he released her, watching her descend.

The door quivered beneath the general onslaught of the now exultant outlaws, and, as a glave shattered the panel the jester threw himself over the casement. A deafening hubbub ensued; the door suddenly gave way, and the band rushed into the room. At the same time the plaisant ran down the ladder and sprang to the ground at the young girl's side. From above came exclamations of wonder and amazement, mingled with invective.

"They're gone!" cried one.

"Here they are!" exclaimed another, looking down from the window.

The jester at once seized the means of descent, but not before the man who had discovered them was on the upper rounds; a quick effort on the fool's part, and ladder and rogue toppled over together. The enterprising knave lay motionless where he fell.

"Vrai Dieu! He wanted to come down," said an approving voice.

Turning, the jester beheld the Spanish troubadour, who was composedly engaged in placing bundles of straw against the wall of the inn.

"I don't think he'll bother you any more," continued the minstrel in his deep tones. "If you'll ride down the road, I'll join you in a moment."

So saying, he knelt before the combustible accumulation he had been diligently heaping together and struck a spark which, seizing on the dry material, immediately kindled into a great flame.

"What are you doing, villain?" roared the landlord from the window, discovering the forks of fire, already leaping and crackling about the tavern.

"Only making a bonfire of a foul nest," lightly answered the minstrel, standing back as though to admire his handiwork. "Your vile hostelry burns well, my dissembling host."

"Hell-dog! varlet!" screamed the proprietor, overwhelmed with consternation.

"Is it thus you greet your guests?" replied the troubadour, throwing another bundle of straw upon the already formidable conflagration. "You were not wont to be so discourteous, my prince of bonifaces."

But recovering from his temporary stupor, the landlord, without reply, disappeared from the window.

"Now may we safely leave the flames to the wind," commented the minstrel, as he sprang upon a small nag which had been fastened to a shed near by. "As we have burned the roof over our heads," he continued, addressing the wondering jester and his companion, who had already mounted and were waiting, "let us seek another hostelry."

Swiftly the trio rode forth from the tavern yard, out into the moonlit road.

"Not so quickly, my friends," commented the troubadour. "As I fastened the doors and blinds without, we may proceed leisurely, for it will be some time before mine host and his friends can batter their way from the inn. Besides, it goes against the grain to run so precipitously from my fire. Such a beautiful auto da fé, as we say in Spain."

"Who are you, sir?" asked the fool.

The minstrel laughed, and answered in his natural voice.

"Don't you know me, mon ami?" he said, gaily. "What a jest this will be at court? How it will amuse the king--"

"Caillette!" exclaimed the plaisant, loudly. "Caillette!"