

CHAPTER XXI

THE DESERTED HUT

"Himself!" laughed the minstrel. "Did I not tell you I should become a Spanish troubadour?" Then, reaching out his hand, he added seriously: "Right pleased am I to meet you. But how came you here?"

"I have fled from the keep of the old castle, where I lay charged with heresy," answered the jester, returning the hearty grip.

"The keep!" exclaimed Caillette in surprise. "You are fortunate not to have been brought to trial," he added, thoughtfully. "Few get through that seine, and his Holiness, the pope, I understand, has ordered the meshes made yet smaller."

They had paused on the brow of a hill, commanding the view of road and tavern. Dazed, the young girl had listened to the greeting between the two men. This ragged, beard-begrown troubadour, the graceful, elegant Caillette of Francis' court? It seemed incredible. At the same time, through her mind passed the memory of the plaisant's reiterated exclamation in prison: "Caillette--in Spain!"--words she had attributed to fever, not imagining they had any foundation in fact.

But now this unexpected encounter abruptly dispelled her first supposition and opened a new field for speculation. Certainly had he

been on a mission of some kind, somewhere, but what his errand she could not divine. A diplomat in tatters, serving a fellow-jester. Fools had oft intruded themselves in great events ere this, but not those who wore the motley; heretofore had the latter been content with the posts of entertainers, leaving to others the more precarious offices of intrigant.

But if she was surprised at Caillette's unexpected presence and disguise, that counterfeit troubadour had been no less amazed to see her, the jocular of the princess, in the mean garb of a wayside ministrissa, wandering over the country like one born to the nomadic existence. That she had a nature as free as air and the spirit of a gipsy he well believed, but that she would forego the security of the royal household for the discomforts and dangers of a vagrant life he could not reconcile to that other part of her character which he knew must shrink from the actualities of the straggler's lot. He had watched her at the inn; how she held herself; how she was a part of, and yet apart from, that migratory company; and what he had seen had but added to his curiosity.

"Have you left the court, mistress?" he now asked abruptly.

"Yes," she answered, curtly.

Caillette gazed at her and her eyes fell. Then put out with herself and him, she looked up boldly.

"Why not?" she demanded.

"Why not, indeed?" he repeated, gently, although obviously wondering.

The constraint that ensued between them was broken by a new aspect of the distant conflagration. Fanned by the breeze, the flames had ignited the thatched roof of the hostelry and fiery forks shot up into the sky, casting a fierce glow over the surrounding scene. Through the glare, many birds, unceremoniously routed from their nests beneath the eaves, flew distractedly. Before the tavern, now burning on all sides, could be distinguished a number of figures, frantically running hither and thither, while above the crackling of the flames and the clamorous cries of the birds was heard the voice of the proprietor, alternately pleading with the knaves to save the tavern and execrating him who had applied the torch.

"Cap de Dieu! the landlord will snare no more travelers," said Caillette. "My horse had become road-worn and perforce I had tarried there sufficient while to know the company and the host. When you walked in with this fair maid, I could hardly believe my eyes. 'Twas a nice trap, and the landlord an unctuous fellow for a villain. Assured that you could not go out as you came, I e'en prepared a less conventional means of exit."

He had scarcely finished this explanation when, with a shower of sparks

and a mighty crash, the heavy roof fell. A lambent flame burst from the furnace; grew brighter, until the clouds became rose-tinted; a glory as brilliant as short-lived, for soon the blaze subsided, the glow swiftly faded, and the sky again darkened.

"It is over," murmured Caillette; and, as they touched their horses, leaving the smoldering ruins behind them, he added: "But how came the scamp-student to serve you? I was watching closely, and listening, too; so caught how 'twas done."

"I spared his life once," answered the jester.

"And he remembered? 'Tis passing strange from such a rogue. A clever device, to warn you in Latin that his friends intended to kill one or both of you for the jeweled sword."

"Why," spoke up the young girl, her attention sharply arrested, "was it not a mere discussion of some kind? And--the quarrel?"

"A pretense on the rogue's part to avert the suspicion of the master of the boar. I could but marvel"--to the jester--"at your forbearance."

"I fear me Jacqueline had the right to a poor opinion of her squire," replied the duke's fool. "Nor do I blame her," he laughed, "in esteeming a stout bolt more protection than a craven blade."

But the girl did not answer. Through her brain flashed the recollection of her cold disdain; her scornful words; her abrupt dismissal of the jester at her door. Weighing what she had said and done with what he had not said and done, she turned to him quickly, impulsively. Through the semi-darkness she saw the smile around his mouth and the quizzical look with which he was regarding her. Whereupon her courage failed. She bit her lip and remained silent. They had now passed the brow of the hill; on each side of the highway the forests parted wider and wider, and the thoroughfare was bathed in a white light.

As they rode along on this clearly illumined highway, Caillette glanced interrogatively at the plaisant. The outcome of his journey--should he speak now? Or later--when they were alone? Heretofore neither had made reference to it; Caillette, perhaps, because his mind had been surprised into another train of thought by this unexpected encounter; the duke's fool because the result of the journey was no longer momentous. Since the other had left, conditions were different. The good-natured scoffing and warnings of his fellow-jester had proved not unwarranted.

The answer of the duke's fool to his companion's glance was a direct inquiry.

"You found the emperor?" he said.

"Yes; and presented your message with some misgiving."

"And did he treat it with the scant consideration you expected?"

"On the contrary. His Majesty read it not once, but twice, and changed color."

"And then?"

The narrator paused and furtively surveyed the jestress. Her face was pale, emotionless; as they sped on, she seemed riding through no volition of her own, the while she was vaguely conscious of the dialogue of her companions.

"Whatever magic your letter contained," resumed Caillette, "it seemed convincing to Charles. 'My brother Francis must be strangely credulous to be so cozened by an impostor,' quoth he, with a gleam of humor in his gaze."

"Impostor!" It was the young girl who spoke, interrupting, in her surprise, the troubadour's story.

"You did not know, mistress?" said Caillette.

"No," she answered, and listened the closer.

"When I left, two messages the emperor gave me," went on the other; "one for the king, the other for you." And taking from his doublet a document, weighted with a ponderous disk, the speaker handed it to the duke's fool, who silently thrust it in his breast. "Moreover, unexpectedly, but as good fortune would have it, his Majesty was even then completing preparations for a journey through France to the Netherlands, owing to unlooked-for troubles in that part of his domains, and had already despatched his envoys to the king. Charles assured me that he would still further hasten his intended visit to the Low Countries and come at once. Meanwhile his communication to the king"--tapping his breast--"will at least delay the nuptials, and, with the promise of the emperor's immediate arrival, the marriage can not occur."

"It has occurred," said the jester.

The other uttered a quick exclamation. "Then have I failed in my errand," he muttered, blankly. "But the king--had he no suspicion?"

"It was through the Countess d'Etampes the monarch was led to change the time for the festivities," spoke up Jacqueline, involuntarily.

"She!" exclaimed the poet, with a gesture of half-aversion. For some time they went on without further words; then suddenly Caillette drew rein.

"This news makes it the more necessary I should hasten to the king," he said. "The emperor's message--Francis should receive it at once. Here, therefore, must I leave you. Or, why do you not return with me?"--addressing the jester. "The letter from Charles will exonerate you and Francis will reward you in proportion to the injuries you have suffered. What say you, mistress?"

"That I will never go back," she answered, briefly, and looked away.

Caillette's perplexity was relieved by the pleasant. "Farewell, if you must leave," said the latter. "We meet again, I trust."

"The fates willing," returned the poet. "Farewell, and good fortune go with you both." And wheeling abruptly, he rode slowly back. The jester and the girl watched him disappear over the road they had come.

"A true friend," said the pleasant, as Caillette vanished in the gloom.

"You regret not returning with him, perhaps?" she observed quickly.

"Honors and offices of preferment are not plentiful."

"I want none of them from Francis," he returned, as they started slowly on their way.

The road before them descending gradually, passed through a gulch,

where the darkness was greater, and such light as sifted through the larch and poplar trees rested in variable spots on the earth. Overhead the somber obscurity appeared touched with a veil of shimmer or sheen like diamond dust floating through the mask of night. Their horses but crept along; the girl bent forward wearily; heretofore the excitement and danger had sustained her, but now the reaction from all she had endured bore down upon her. She thought of calling to the fool; of craving the rest she so needed; but a feeling of pride, or constraint, held her silent. Before her the shadows danced illusively; the film of brightness changed and shifted; then all glimmering and partial shade were swallowed up in a black chasm.

Riding near, the jester observed her form sway from side to side, and spurred forward. In a moment he had clasped her waist, then lifted her from the saddle and held her before him.

"Jacqueline!" he cried.

She offered no resistance; her head remained motionless on his breast. Sedulously he bent over her; the warm breath reassured him; tired nature had simply succumbed. Irresolute he paused, little liking the sequestered gulch for a resting-place; divining the prickly thicket and almost impenetrable brushwood that lined the road. An unhealthy miasma seemed to ascend from below and clog the air; through the tangle of forest, phosphorus gleamed and glowworms flitted here and there.

Gathering the young form gently to him, the jester rode slowly on, and the horse of his companion followed. So he went, he knew not how long; listening to her breathing that came, full and deep; half-fearing, half-wondering at that relaxation. For the first time he forgot about the emperor and his purpose; the free baron and the desires of sweet avengement. He thought only of her he held; how courageous yet alone she was in the world; how she had planned the service which won her the right to his protection; her flight from Francis--but where? To whom could she go? To whom could she turn? Unconscious she lay in his arms in that deep sleep, or heavy inertia following exhaustion, her pale face against his shoulder; and as the young plaisant bent over her his heart thrilled with protecting tenderness.

"Why, what other maid," he thought, "would ride on until she dropped? Would meet discomfort at every turn with a jest or a merry stave?"

And, but for him, whom else had she? This young girl, had she not become his burden of responsibility; his moral obligation? For the first time he seemed to realize how the fine tendrils of her nature had touched his; touched and clung, ever so gently but fast. Her fine scorn for dissimulation; her answering integrity; the true adjustment of her instinct--all had been revealed to him under the test of untoward circumstances.

He saw her, too, secretly and silently cherishing a new faith in her bosom, amid a throng, lax and infirm of purpose, and wonderment gave

way to another emotion, as his mind leaped from that past, with its covert, inner life, to the untrammelled moment when she had thrown off the mask in the solitude of the forest. Had some deeper chord of his nature been struck then? Their aspirations of a kindred hope had mingled in the majestic psalm; a larger harmony, remote from roundelay, or sparkling cadenza, that drew him to this Calvin maid. A solemn earnestness fell upon his spirits; the starlight bathed his brow, and he found the mystery of the night and nature inexplicably beautiful.

Afar the bell of some wanderer from the herd tinkled drowsily, arousing him from his reverie. The horses were ascending; the road emerged into a plain, set with bracken and gorse, with here and there a single tree, whose inclining trunk told of storms braved for many seasons. Near the highway, in the shadow of a poplar, stood a shepherd's hut, apparently deserted and isolated from human kind. The fool reined the horse, which for some time had been moving painfully, and at that abrupt cessation of motion the jestress looked up with a start.

Meeting his eyes, at first she did not withdraw her own; questioningly, her bewildered gaze encountered his; then, with a quick movement, she released herself from his arm and sprang to the ground. He, too, immediately dismounted. She felt very wide-awake now, as though the sudden consciousness of that encircling grasp, or something in his glance before she slipped from him, had startled away the torpor of somnolence.

"You fainted, or fell asleep, mistress," he said, quietly.

"Yes--I remember--in the gorge."

"It was impossible to stop there, so--I rode on. But here, in this shepherd's hut, we may find shelter."

And turning the horses, he would have led them to the door, but the animals held back; then stood stock-still. Striding to the hut, the jester stepped in, but quickly sprang to one side, and as he did so some creature shot out of the door and disappeared in the gloom.

"A wolf!" exclaimed the plaisant.

Entering the hut once more, he struck a light. In a corner lay furze and firewood, and from this store he drew, heaping the combustible material on the hearth, until a cheering blaze fairly illumined the worn and dilapidated interior. Near the fireplace were a pot and kettle, whose rusted appearance bespoke long disuse; but a trencher and porridge spoon on a stool near by seemed waiting the coming of the master. A couch of straw had been the lonely shepherd's bed--and later the lodgment of his enemy, the wolf. Above it, on the wall, hung a small crucifix of wood. For the fugitives this mean abode appeared no indifferent shelter, and it was with satisfaction the jester arranged a couch for the girl, before the fire, a rude pallet, yet--

"Here you may rest, Jacqueline, without fear of being disturbed again this night," he said.

She sank wearily upon the straw; then gave him her hand gratefully. Her face looked rosy in the reflection from the hearth; a comforting sense of warmth crept over her as she lay in front of the blaze; her eyes were languorous with the luxury of the heat after a chilling ride. Drawing the cloak to her chin, she smiled faintly. Was it at his solicitude? He noticed how her hair swept from the saddle pillowing her head, to the earth; and, sitting there on the stool, wondering, perhaps, at its abundance, or half-dreaming, he forgot he yet held her hand. Gently she withdrew it, and he started; then, realizing how he had been staring at her, with somewhat vacant gaze, perhaps, but fixedly, he made a motion to rise, when her voice detained him.

"Why did you not tell me it was not a discussion with the scamp-student?" she asked. "Why did you let me imagine that you--" Her eyes said the rest. "You should not have permitted me to--to think it," she reiterated.

He was silent. She closed her eyes; but in a moment her lashes uplifted. Her glance flashed once more upon him.

"And I should not have thought it," she said.

"Jacqueline!" he cried, starting up.

She did not answer; indeed, seemed sleeping; her face turned from him.

Through the open doorway a streak of red in the east heralded the coming glory of the morn. "Peep, peep," twittered a bird on the roof of the hovel. From the poplar it was answered by a more melodious phrase, a song of welcome to the radiant dawn. A moment the jester listened, his head raised to the growing splendor of the heavens, then threw himself on the earthen floor of the hut and was at once overcome with sleep.