CHAPTER XXII

THE TALE OF THE SWORD

The slanting rays of the sinking sun shot athwart the valley, glanced from the tile roofs of the homes of the peasantry, and illumined the lofty towers of a great manorial château. To the rider, approaching by the road that crossed the smiling pasture and meadow lands, the edifice set on a mount--another of Francis' transformations from the gloomy fortress home--appeared regal and splendid, compared with the humbler houses of the people lying prostrate before it. Viewed from afar, the town seemed to abase itself in the presence of the architectural preëminence of that monarch of buildings. Even the sun, when it withdrew its rays from the miscellaneous rabble of shops and dwellings, yet lingered proudly upon the noble structure above, caressing its imposing and august outlines and surrounding it with the glamour of the afterglow, when the sun sank to rest.

Into the little town, at the foot of the big house, rode shortly before nightfall the jester and his companion. During the day the young girl had seemed diffident and constrained; she who had been all vivacity and life, on a sudden kept silence, or when she did speak, her tongue had lost its sharpness. The weapons of her office, bright sarcasm and irony, or laughing persiflage, were sheathed; her fine features were thoughtful; her dark eyes introspective. In the dazzling sunshine, the memory of their ride through the gorge; the awakening at the shepherd's

hut; something in his look then, something in his accents later, when he spoke her name while she professed to sleep--seemed, perhaps, unreal, dream-like.

His first greeting that morning had been a swift, almost questioning, glance, before which she had looked away. In her face was the freshness of dawn; the grace of spring-tide. Overhead sang a lark; at their feet a brook whispered; around them solitude, vast, infinite. He spoke and she answered; her reserve became infectious; they ate their oaten cakes and drank their wine, each strongly conscious of the presence of the other. Then he rose, saddled their horses, and assisted her to mount. She appeared over-anxious to leave the shepherd's hut; the jester, on the other hand, cast a backward glance at the poplar, the hovel, the brook. A crisp, clear caroling of birds followed them as they turned from the lonely spot.

So they rode, pausing betimes to rest, and even then she had little to say, save once when they stopped at a rustic bridge which spanned a stream. Both were silent, regarding the horses splashing in the water and clouding its clear depths with the yellow mud from its bed. From the cool shadows beneath the planks where she was standing, tiny fish, disturbed by this unwonted invasion, shot forth like darts and vanished into the opaque patches. Half-dreamily watching this exodus of flashing life from covert nook and hole, she said unexpectedly:

"Who is it that has wedded the princess?"

For a moment he did not answer; then briefly related the story.

"And why did you not tell me this before?" she asked when he had finished.

"Would you have credited me--then?" he replied, with a smile.

Quickly she looked at him. Was there that in her eyes which to him robbed memory of its sting? At their feet the water leaped and laughed; curled around the stones, and ran on with dancing bubbles. Perhaps he returned her glance too readily; perhaps the recollection of the ride the night before recurred over-vividly to her, for she gazed suddenly away, and he wondered in what direction her thoughts tended, when she said with some reserve:

"Shall we go on?"

They had not long left the brook and the bridge, when from afar they caught sight of the regal château and the clustering progeny of red-roofed houses at its base. At once they drew rein.

"Shall we enter the town, or avoid it by riding over the mead?" said the plaisant.

"What danger would there be in going on?" she asked. "Whom might we

meet?"

Thoughtfully he regarded the shining towers of the royal residence. "No one, I think," he at length replied, and they went on.

Around the town ran a great wall, with watch-towers and a deep moat, but no person questioned their right to the freedom of the place; a sleepy soldier at the gate merely glancing indifferently at them as they passed beneath the heavy archway. Gabled houses, with a tendency to incline from the perpendicular, overlooked the winding street; dull, round panes of glass stared at them, fraught with mystery and the possibility of spying eyes behind; but the thoroughfare in that vicinity appeared deserted, save for an old woman seated in a doorway. Before this grandam, whose lack-luster eyes were fastened steadfastly before her, the fool paused and asked the direction of the inn.

"Follow your nose, if nature gave you a straight one," cried a jeering voice from the other side of the thoroughfare. "If it be crooked, a blind man and a dog were a better guide."

The speaker, a squat, misshapen figure, had emerged from a passage turning into the street, and now stood, twirling a fool's head on a stick and gazing impudently at the new-comers. The crone whom the plaisant had addressed remained motionless as a statue.

"Ha! ha!" laughed the oddity who had volunteered this malapert response

to the jester's inquiry, "yonder sign-post"--pointing to the aged dame--"has lost its fingers--or rather its ears. Better trust to your nose."

"Triboulet!" exclaimed Jacqueline.

"Is it you, lady-bird?" said the surprised dwarf, recognizing in turn the maid. "And with the plaisant," staring hard at the fool. Then a cunning look gradually replaced the wonder depicted on his features. "You are fleeing from the court; I, toward it," he remarked, jocosely.

"What mean you, fool?" demanded the horseman, sternly.

"That I have run away from the duke, fool," answered the hunchback. "The foreign lord dared to beat me--Triboulet--who has only been beaten by the king. Sooner or later must I have fled, in any event, for what is Triboulet without the court; or the court, without Triboulet?" his indignation merging into arrogant vainglory.

"When did you leave the--duke?" asked the other, slowly.

"Several days ago," replied the dwarf, gazing narrowly at his questioner. "Down the road. He should be far away by this time."

Suspiciously the duke's jester regarded the hunchback and then glanced dubiously toward the gate through which they had entered the town. He

had experienced Triboulet's duplicity and malice, yet in this instance was disposed to give credence to his story, because he doubted not that Louis of Hochfels would make all haste out of Francis' kingdom. Nor did it appear unreasonable that Triboulet should pine for the excitement of his former life; the pleasures and gaiety which prevailed at Fools' hall. If the hunchback's information were true, they need now have little fear of overtaking the free baron and his following, as not far beyond the château-town the main road broke into two parts, the one continuing southward and the other branching off to the east.

While the horseman was thus reflecting, Triboulet, like an imp, began to dance before them, slapping his crooked knees with his enormous hands.

"A good joke, my master and mistress in motley," he cried. "The king was weak enough to exchange his dwarf for a demoiselle; the latter has fled; the monarch has neither one nor the other; therefore is he, himself, the fool. And thou, mistress, art also worthy of the madcap bells," he added, his distorted face upturned to the jestress.

"How so?" she asked, not concealing the repugnance he inspired.

"Because you prefer a fool's cap to a king's crown," he answered, looking significantly at her companion. "Wherein you but followed the royal preference for head-coverings. Ho! ho! I saw which way the wind blew; how the monarch's eyes kindled when they rested on you; how the

wings of Madame d'Etampes's coif fluttered like an angry butterfly. Know you what was whispered at court? The reason the countess pleaded for an earlier marriage for the duke? That the princess might leave the sooner--and take the jestress, her maid, with her. But the king met her manoeuver with another. He granted the favorite's request--but kept the jestress."

"Silence, rogue!" commanded the duke's fool, wheeling his horse toward the dwarf.

"And then for her to turn from a throne-room to a dungeon," went on Triboulet, satirically, as he retreated. "As Brusquet wrote; 'twas:

"'Morbleu! A merry monarch and a jestress fair;
A jestress fair, I ween!'--"

But ere the hunchback could finish this scurrilous doggerel of the court, over which, doubtless, many loose witlings had laughed, the girl's companion placed his hand on his sword and started toward the dwarf. The words died on Triboulet's lips; hastily he dodged into a narrow space between two houses, where he was safe from pursuit. Jacqueline's face had become flushed; her lips were compressed; the countenance of the duke's plaisant seemed paler than its wont.

"Little monster!" he muttered.

But the hunchback, in his retreat, was now regarding neither the horseman nor the young girl. His glittering eyes, as if fascinated, rested on the weapon of the plaisant.

"What a fine blade you've got there!" he said curiously. "Much better than a wooden sword. Jeweled, too, by the holy bagpipe! And a coat of arms!"--more excitedly--"yes, the coat of arms of the great Constable of Dubrois. As proud a sword as that of the king. Where did you get it?" And in his sudden interest, the dwarf half-ventured from his place of refuge.

"Answer him not!" said the girl, hastily.

"Was it you, mistress, gave it him?" he asked, with a sudden, sharp look.

Her contemptuous gaze was her only reply.

"By the dust of kings, when last I saw it, the haughty constable himself it was who wore it," continued Triboulet. "Aye, when he defied Francis to his face. I can see him now, a rich surcoat over his gilded armor; the queen-mother, an amorous Dulcinea, gazing at him, with all her soul in her eyes; the brilliant company startled; even the king overawed. 'Twas I broke the spell, while the monarch and the court were silent, not daring to speak."

"You!" From the young woman's eyes flashed a flame of deepest hatred.

The hunchback shrank back; then laughed. "I, Triboulet!" he boasted. "'Ha!' said I, 'he's greater than the king!' whereupon Francis frowned, started, and answered the constable, refusing his claim. Not long thereafter the constable died in Spain, and I completed the jest. 'So,' said I, 'he is less than a man.' And the king, who remembered, laughed."

"Let us go," said the jestress, very white.

Silently the plaisant obeyed, and Triboulet once more ventured forth. "Momus go with you!" he called out after them. And then:

"'Morbleu! A merry monarch and a jestress fair;'"

More quickly they rode on. Furtively, with suppressed rage in his heart, the duke's fool regarded his companion. Her face was cold and set, and as his glance rested on its pale, pure outline, beneath his breath he cursed Brusquet, Triboulet and all their kind. He understood now--too well--the secret of her flight. What he had heretofore been fairly assured of was unmistakably confirmed. The sight of the tavern which they came suddenly upon and the appearance of the innkeeper interrupted this dark trend of thought, and, springing from his horse,

the jester helped the girl to dismount.

The house, being situated in the immediate proximity of the grand château, received a certain patronage from noble lords and ladies. This trade had given the proprietor such an opinion of his hostelry that common folk were not wont to be overwhelmed with welcome. In the present instance the man showed a disposition to scrutinize too closely the modest attire of the new-comers and the plain housings of their chargers, when the curt voice of the jester recalled him sharply from this forward occupation.

With a shade less of disrespect, the proprietor bade them follow him; rooms were given them, and, in the larger of the two chambers, the plaisant, desiring to avoid the publicity of the dining and tap-room, ordered their supper to be served.

During the repast the girl scarcely spoke; the capon she hardly touched; the claret she merely sipped. Once when she held the glass to her lips, he noticed her hand trembled just a little, and then, when she set down the goblet, how it closed, almost fiercely. Beneath her eyes shadows seemed to gather; above them her glance shone ominously.

"Oh," she said at length, as though giving utterance to some thought, which, pent-up, she could no longer control; "the irony; the tragedy of it!"

"What, Jacqueline?" he asked, gently, although he felt the blood surging in his head.

"'Morbleu! A merry monarch'--"

she began, and broke off abruptly, rising to her feet, with a gesture of aversion, and moving restlessly across the room. "After all these years! After all that had gone before!"

"What has gone before, Jacqueline?"

"Nothing," she answered; "nothing."

For some time he sat with his sword across his knees, thinking deeply. She went to the window and looked out. When she spoke again her voice had regained its self-command.

"A dark night," she said, mechanically.

"Jacqueline," he asked, glancing up from the blade, "why in the crypt that day we escaped did you pause at that monument?"

Quickly she turned, gazing at him from the half-darkness in which she stood.

"Did you see to whom the monument was erected?" she asked in a low

voice.

"To the wife of the constable. But what was Anne, Duchess of Dubrois, to you?"

"She was the last lady of the castle," said the girl softly.

Again he surveyed the jeweled emblem on the sword, mocking reminder of a glory gone beyond recall.

"And how was it, mistress, the castle was confiscated by the king?" he continued, after a pause.

"Shall I tell you the story?" she asked, her voice hardening.

"If you will," he answered.

"Triboulet's description of the scene where the constable braved the king, insisting on his rights, was true," she observed, proudly.

"But why had the noble wearer of this sword been deprived of his feudality and tenure?"

"Because he was strong and great, and the king feared him; because he was noble and handsome, and the queen-regent loved him. It was not her hand only, Louise of Savoy, Francis' mother, offered, but--the throne."

"The throne!" said the wondering fool.

Quickly she crossed the room and leaned upon the table. In the glimmer of the candles her face was soft and tender. He thought he had never seen a sweeter or more womanly expression.

"But he refused it," she continued, "for he loved only the memory of his wife, Lady Anne. She, a perfect being. The other--what?"

On her features shone a fine contempt.

"Then followed the endless persecution and spite of a woman scorned," she continued, rapidly. "One by one, his honors were wrested from him. He who had borne the flag triumphantly through Italy was deprived of the government of Milan and replaced by a brother of Madame de Châteaubriant, then favorite of the king. His castle, lands, were confiscated, until, driven to despair, he fled and allied himself with the emperor. 'Traitor,' they called him. He, a Bayard."

A moment she stood, an exalted look on her features; tall, erect; then stepped toward him and took the sword. With a bright and radiant glance she surveyed it; pressed the hilt to her lips, and with both hands held it to her bosom. As if fascinated, the fool watched her. Her countenance was upturned; a moment, and it fell; a dark shadow crossed it; beneath her lashes her eyes were like night.

"But he failed because Charles, the emperor, failed him," she said, almost mechanically, "and broken in spirit, met his death miserably in exile. Yet his cause was just; his memory is dearer than that of a conqueror. She, the queen-mother, is dead; God alone may deal with her."

More composed, she resumed her place in the chair on the other side of the table, the sword across her arm.

"And how came you, mistress," he asked, regarding her closely, "in the pleasure palace built by Francis?"

"When the castle was taken, all who had not fled were a gamekeeper and his little girl--myself. The latter"--ironically--"pleased some of the court ladies. They commended her wit, and gradually was she advanced to the high position she occupied when you arrived," with a strange glance across the board at her listener.

"And the gamekeeper--your father--is dead?"

"Long since."

"The constable had no children?"

"Yes; a girl who, it is believed, died with him in Spain."

The entrance of the servant to remove the dishes interrupted their further conversation. As the door opened, from below came the voices of new-comers, the impatient call of tipplers for ale, the rattle of dishes in the kitchen. Wrapped in the recollections the conversation had evoked, to Jacqueline the din passed unnoticed, and when the rosy-cheeked lass had gone--it was the jester who first spoke.

"What a commentary on the mockery of fate that the sword of such a man, so illustrious, so unfortunate, should be intrusted to a fool!"

"Why," she said, looking at him, her arms on the table, "you drew it bravely, and--once--more bravely--kept it sheathed."

His face flushed. She half smiled; then placed the blade on the board before him.

"There it is."

Above the sword he reached over, as if to place his hand on hers, but she quickly rose. Absently he returned the weapon to his girdle. She took a step or two from him, nervously; lifted her hand to her brow and breathed deeply.

"How tired I feel!" she said.

Immediately he got up. "You are worn out from the journey," he observed, quickly.

But he knew it was not the journey that had most affected her.

"I will leave you," he went on. "Have you everything you need?"

"Everything," she answered carelessly.

He walked to the door. The light was on his face; hers remained shaded.

"Good-night," she said.

"Good-night, Jacqueline, Duchess of Dubrois," he answered, and, turning, disappeared down the corridor.