

CHAPTER XXIII

THE DWARF MAKES AN EARLY CALL

From one of the watch-towers of the town rang the clear note of a trumpet, a tribute of melody, occasioned by the awakening in the east. As the last clarion tones reëchoed over the sleeping village, a crimson rim appeared above the horizon and soon the entire wheel of the chariot of the sun-god rolled up out of the illimitable abyss and began its daily race across the sky. The stolid bugler yawned, tucked his trumpet under his arm, and, having perfunctorily performed the duties of his office, tramped downward with more alacrity than he had toiled upward.

About the same time the sleepy guard at the town gate was relieved by an equally drowsy-appearing trooper; here and there windows were flung open, and around the well in the small public square the maids began to congregate. In the tap-room of the tavern the landlord moved about, setting to rights the tables and chairs, or sprinkling fresh sand on the floor. The place had a stale, close odor, as though not long since vacated by an inabstinent company, a supposition further borne out by the disorder of the furniture, and the evidence the gathering had not been over-nice about spilling the contents of their toss-pots. The host had but opened the front door, permitting the fresh, invigorating air from without to enter, when the duke's plaisant, his cloak over his arm, descended the stairs, and, addressing the landlord, asked when

he and his companion could be provided with breakfast.

"Breakfast!" grumbled the proprietor. "The maids are hardly up and the fires must yet be started. It will be an hour or more before you can be served."

The jester appeared somewhat dissatisfied, but contented himself with requesting the other to set about the meal at once.

"You ride forth early," answered the man, in an aggrieved tone.

The plaisant made no reply as he strode to the door and looked out; noted sundry signs of awakening life down the narrow street, and then returned to the tap-room.

"You had a noisy company here last night, landlord?" he vouchsafed, glancing around the room and recalling the laughter and shouts he had heard below until a late hour.

"Noisy company!" retorted the innkeeper. "A goodly company that ate and drank freely. Distinguished company that paid freely. The king's own guards who are acting as escort to Robert, the Duke of Friedwald, and his bride, the princess. Noisy company, forsooth."

The young man started. "The king's guards!" he said. "What are they doing here?"

The other vigorously rubbed the top of a table with a damp cloth.

"Acting as escort to the duke, as I told you," he replied.

"The duke is here, also?"

"Yes; at the château. The princess had become weary of travel; besides, had sprained her ankle, I heard, and would have it the cavalcade should tarry a few days. They e'en stopped at my door," he went on ostentatiously, "and called for a glass of wine for the princess. 'Tis true she took it with a frown, but the hardships of journeying do not agree with grand folks."

These last words the jester, absorbed in thought, did not hear. With his back to the man, he stood gazing through the high window, apparently across the street. But between the two houses on the other side of the thoroughfare was a considerable open space, and through this, far away, on the mount, could be seen the château. The sunlight shone bright on turret and spire; its walls were white and glistening; its outlines, graceful and airy as a fabric of imagination.

"And yet it was a handsome cavalcade," continued the proprietor, his predilection for pomp overcoming his churlishness. "The princess on a steed with velvet housings, set with precious stones. Her ladies attired in eastern silks. Behind the men of arms; Francis' troops in rich armor; the duke's soldiers more simply arrayed. At the head of

the procession rode--"

"Have the horses brought out at once."

Thus brusquely interrupted, the innkeeper stared blankly at his guest, who had left the window and now stood in the center of the room confronting him. "And the breakfast?" asked the man.

"I have changed my mind and do not want it," was the curt response.

The host shrugged his shoulders disagreeably, as the plaisant turned and ascended the stairs. "Unprofitable travelers," muttered the landlord, following with his gaze the retreating figure.

Hastily making his way to the room of the young girl, the jester knocked on the door.

"Are you awake, Jacqueline?"

"Yes," answered a voice within.

"We must ride forth as soon as possible. The duke is at the château."

"At the château!" she exclaimed in surprise. Then after a pause: "And Triboulet saw us. He will tell that you are here. I will come down at once. Wait," she added, as an afterthought seized her.

He heard her step to the window. "I think the gates of the château are open," she said. "I am not sure; it is so far."

"Do you see any one on the road leading down?"

"No," came the answer.

"Nor could I. But perhaps they have already passed."

Again the jester returned to the tap-room, where he found the landlord polishing the pewter tankards.

"The horses?" said the fool sharply.

"The stable boy will bring them to the door," was the response, and the innkeeper held a pot in the air and leisurely surveyed the shining surface.

"The reckoning?"

Deliberately the man replaced the receptacle on the table, and, pressing his thumbs together, began slowly to calculate: "Bottle of wine, ten sous; capon, twenty sous; two rooms--" when the jester took from his coat the purse the young girl had given him, and, selecting a coin, threw it on the board. At the sight of the purse and its golden

contents the countenance of the proprietor mollified; his price forthwith varied with his changed estimate of his guest's condition. "Two rooms, fifty sous; fodder, forty sous"--he went on. "That would make--"

"Keep the coin," said the plaisant, "and have the stable boy make haste."

With new alacrity, the innkeeper thrust the pistole into a leathern pouch he carried at his girdle. A guest who paid so well could afford to be eccentric, and if he and the young lady chose to travel without breakfast, it was obviously not for the purpose of economy. Therefore, exclaiming something about "a lazy rascal that needed stirring up," the now interested landlord was about to go to the barn himself, when, with a loud clattering, a party of horsemen rode up to the tavern; the door burst open and Triboulet, followed by a tall, rugged-looking man and a party of troopers, entered the hall.

Swiftly the jester glanced around him; the room had no other door than that before which the troopers were crowded; he was fairly caught in a trap. Remorsefully his thoughts flew to the young girl and the trust she had imposed in him. How had he rewarded that confidence? By a temerity which made this treachery on the part of the hunchback possible. Even now before him stood Triboulet, bowing ironically.

"I trust you are well?" jeered the dwarf, and with a light, dancing

step began to survey the other from side to side. "And the lady--is she also well this morning? How pleased you both were to see me yesterday!" assuming an insolent, albeit watchful, pose. "So you believed I had run away from the duke? As if he could get on without me. What would be a honeymoon without Triboulet! The maids of honor would die of ennui. One day they trick me out with true-lovers' knots! the next, give me a Cupid's head for a wand. Leave the duke!" he repeated, bombastically. "Triboulet could not be so unkind."

"Enough of this buffoonery!" said a decisive voice, and the dwarf drew back, not without a grimace, to make room for a person of soldierly mien, who now pushed his way to the front. Over his doublet this gentleman wore a somewhat frayed, but embroidered, cloak; his broad hat was fringed with gold that had lost its luster; his countenance, deeply burned, seemed that of an old campaigner. He regarded the fool courteously, yet haughtily.

"Your sword, sir!" he commanded, in the tone of one accustomed to being obeyed.

"To whom should I give it?" asked the duke's jester.

"To the Vicomte de Gruise, commandant of the town. I have a writ for your arrest as a heretic."

"Who has lodged this information against me?"

"Triboulet. That is, he procured the duke's signature to the writ."

"And you think the duke a party to this farce, my Lord?" said the fool, with assumed composure. "It has not occurred to you that before the day is over all the village will be laughing at the spectacle of their commandant--pardon me--being led by the nose by a jester?"

The officer's sun-burned face became yet redder; he frowned, then glanced suspiciously at Triboulet, whose reputation was France-wide.

"This man was the duke's fool," screamed the dwarf, "and was imprisoned by order of the king. His companion who is here with him was formerly jestress to the princess. She is a sorceress and bewitched the monarch. Then her fancy seized upon the heretic, and, by her dark art, she opened the door of the cell for him. Together they fled; she from the court, he from prison."

The commandant looked curiously from the hunchback to the accused. If this were acting, the dwarf was indeed a master of the art.

"Besides, his haste to leave the village," eagerly went on Triboulet.

"Why was he dressed at this hour? Ask the landlord if he did not seem unduly hurried?"

At this appeal the innkeeper, who had been an interested spectator, now

became a not unwilling witness.

"It is true he seemed hurried," he answered. "When he first came down he ordered breakfast. I happened to mention the duke was at the château, whereupon he lost his appetite with suspicious suddenness, called for his horses, and was for riding off with all haste."

From the commandant's expression this testimony apparently removed any doubts he may have entertained. Above the heads of the troopers massed in the doorway the duke's plaisant saw Jacqueline, standing on the stairs, with wide-open, dark eyes fastened upon him. Involuntarily he lifted his hand to his heart; across the brief space glance melted into glance.

Persecuted Calvin maid--had not her fate been untoward enough without this new disaster? Had not the king wrought sufficient ill to her and hers in the past? Would she be sent back to the court; the monarch? For himself he had no thought, but for her, who was nobler even than her birthright. He had been thrice a fool who had not heeded portentous warnings--the sight of Triboulet, the clamor of the troopers--and had failed to flee during the night. As he realized the penalty of his negligence would fall so heavily upon her, a cry of rage burst from the fool's lips and he sprang toward his aggressors. The young girl became yet whiter; a moment she clung to the baluster; then started to descend the stairs. A dozen swords flashed before her eyes.

She drew in her breath sharply, when as if by some magic, the anger faded from the face of the duke's fool; the hand he had raised to his breast fell to his side; his blade remained sheathed.

"Your pardon, my Lord," he said to the commandant. "I have no intention of resisting the authority of the law, but if you will grant me a few moments' private audience in this room, I promise to convince you the Duke of Friedwald never signed that writ."

"Let him convince the council that examines heretics," laughed Triboulet. "I'll warrant they'll make short work of his arguments."

"I will give you my sword, sir," went on the jester. "Afterward, if you are satisfied, you shall return it to me. If you are not, on my word as a man of honor, I will go with you without more ado."

"A Calvinist, a jester, a man of honor!" cried the dwarf.

But narrowly the vicomte regarded the speaker. "Pardieu!" he exclaimed gruffly. "Keep your sword! I promise you I can look to my own safety." And in spite of Triboulet's remonstrance, he waved back the troopers and closed the door upon the plaisant and himself.

Outside the dwarf stormed and stamped. "The jester is desperate. It is the noble count who is a nonny. Open, fool-soldiers!"

This command not being obeyed by the men who guarded the entrance, the dwarf began to abuse them. A considerable interval elapsed; the hunchback, who dared not go into the room himself, compromised by kneeling before the keyhole; at the foot of the stairs stood the girl, her strained gaze fastened upon the door.

"They must be near the window," muttered Triboulet in a disappointed tone, rising. "What can they be about? Surely will he try to kill the commandant."

But even as he spoke the door was suddenly thrown open and the vicomte appeared on the threshold.

"Clear the hall!" he commanded sharply to the surprised soldiers. "If I mistake not," he went on, addressing the duke's jester, "your horses are at the door."

"You are going to let them go?" burst forth Triboulet.

"I trust you and this fair lady"--turning to the wondering girl, who now stood expectantly at the side of the foreign fool--"will not harbor this incident against our hospitality," went on the vicomte, without heeding the dwarf.

"The king will hang you!" exclaimed Triboulet, his face black with disappointment and rage, as he witnessed the pleasant and the

jestress leave the tavern together. "Let them go and you must answer to the king. One is a heretic who threw down a cross; the other I charge with being a sorceress."

A terrible arraignment in those days, yet the vicomte was apparently deaf. Hat in hand, he waved them adieu; the steeds sprang forward, past the soldiers, and down the street.

"After them!" cried the dwarf to the troopers, "Dolts! Joltheads!"

Whereupon one of the men, angered at this baiting, reaching out with his iron boot, caught the dwarf such a sharp blow he staggered and fell, striking his head so violently he lay motionless on the walk. At the same time, far above, a body of troopers might have been seen issuing from the gates of the château and leisurely wending their way downward.