

CHAPTER XXIV

AN ENCOUNTER AT THE BRIDGE

Some part of the interview with the commandant which had resulted in their release the jester told his companion as they sped down the sloping plain in the early silvery light which transformed the dew-drops and grassy moisture into veils of mist. Behind them the château was slowly fading from view; the town had already disappeared. Around them the singing of the birds, the cooing of the cushat doves and the buzzing of the bees, mingled in dreamy cadence. On each side stretched the plain which, washed by recent heavy rains, was now spangled with new-grown flowers; here, far apart in sequestered beauty; there, clustering companionably in a mass of color.

"Upon the strength of the letter from the emperor, the vicomte took the responsibility of allowing us to depart," explained the fool. "In it his Majesty referred to his message to the king, to the part played by him who took the place of the duke, and what he was pleased to term my services to Francis and himself."

So much the pleasant related, but he did not add that the commandant, with Triboulet's words in mind, had at first demurred about permitting the jesteress to go. "Vrai Dieu!" that person had exclaimed. "If what the dwarf said be true? To cross the king!--and yet," he had added cynically, "it sounds most unlike. Did Aladdin flee from the

genii of the lamp? Such a magician is Francis. Châteaux, gardens--'tis clearly an invention of Triboulet's!" And the fallacy of this conclusion the duke's plaisant had not sought to demonstrate.

Without question, the young girl listened, but when he had finished her features hardened. Intuitively she divined a gap in the narrative; herself! From the dwarf's slur to Caillette's gentle look of surprise constituted a natural span for reflection. And the duke's fool, seeing her face turn cold, attributed it, perhaps, to another reason. Her story recurred to him; she was no longer a nameless jestress; an immeasurable distance separated a mere plaisant from the survivor of one of the noblest, if most unfortunate, families of France. She had not answered the night before when he had addressed her as the daughter of the constable; motionless as a statue had she gazed after him; and, remembering the manner of their parting, he now looked at her curiously.

"All's well that ends well," he said, "but I must crave indulgence, Lady Jacqueline, for having brought you into such peril."

She flushed. "Do you persist in that foolishness?" she returned quickly.

"Do you deny the right to be so called?"

"Did I not tell you--the constable's daughter is dead?"

"To the world! But to the fool--may he not serve her?"

His face was expectant; his voice, light yet earnest. Her answer was half-sad, half-bright, as though her tragedy, like those acted dramas, had its less somber lines. And in the stage versions of those dark, mournful pieces were not the softer bits introduced with cap and bell? The fool's stick and the solemn march of irresistible and lowering destiny went hand in hand. Everywhere the tinkle of the tiny bells.

"Poor service!" she retorted. "A discredited mistress!"

"One I am minded for," he replied, a sudden flash in his eyes.

She looked away; her lips curved.

"For how long?" she said, half-mockingly, and touched her horse before he could reply.

What words had her action checked on his lips? A moment was he disconcerted, then riding after her, he smiled, thinking how once he had carelessly passed her by; how he had looked upon her but as a wilful child.

A child, forsooth! His pulses throbbed fast. Life had grown strangely sweet, as though from her look, when she had stood on the stairs, he had drawn new zest. To serve her seemed a happiness that drowned all

other ills; a selfish bond of subordination. Her misfortunes dignified her; her worn gown was dearer in his eyes than courtly splendor; the disorder of her hair more becoming than nets of gold and coifs of jewels. He forgot their danger; the broad plain lay like a pleasure garden before them; fairer in natural beauty than Francis' conventional parks.

And she, too, had ceased to remember the dwarf's words, for the joy of youth is strong, and the sunshine and air were rarely intoxicating. There was a stirring rhythm in the movement of the steeds; noiselessly their hoofs beat upon the soft earth and tender mosses. The rains which elsewhere had flooded the lowlands here but enlivened the vernal freshness of the scene. The air was full of floating thistle-down; a cloud of insects dancing in the light, parted to let them pass.

At the sight of a bush, white with flowers, she uttered an exclamation of pleasure, and broke off a branch covered with fragrant blossoms, as they rode by. Out of the depths of this store-house of sweets a plundering humming-bird flashed and vanished, a jewel from nature's crown! She held the branch to her face and he glanced at her covertly; she was all jestress again. The cadence of that measured motion shaped itself to an ancient lyric in keeping with the song of birds, the blue sky, and the wild roses.

"Hark! hark!

Pretty lark!

Little heedest thou my pain."

He bent his head listening; he could scarcely hear the words. Was it a sense of new security that moved her; the reaction of their narrow escape; the knowledge they were leaving the château and all danger behind them?

"Hark! hark!

Pretty lark!--"

Boom! Far in the distance sounded the discharge of a cannon--its iron voice the antithesis to the poet's dainty pastoral. As the report reverberated over the valley, from the grass innumerable insects arose; the din died away; the disturbed earth-dwellers sank back to earth again. The song ceased from the young girl's lips, and, gazing quickly back, she could just distinguish, above one of the parapets of the château, a wreath, already nearly dissolved in the blue of the sky. The jester, who had also turned in his saddle, met her look of inquiry.

"It sounds like a signal of some kind--a salute, perhaps," he said.

"Or a call to arms?" she suggested, and he made no answer. "It means--pursuit!"

Silent they rode on, but more rapidly. With pale face and composed

mien she kept by his side; her resolute expression reassured him, while her glance said: "Do not fear for me." Gradually had they been descending from the higher slopes of the country of which the château-mount was the loftiest point and now were passing through the lower stretches of land.

Here, the highway ran above fields, inundated by recent rains, and marshes converted into shining lakes. Out of the water uprose a grove of trees, spectral-like; screaming wild-fowl skimmed the surface, or circled above. The pastoral peace of the meadows, garden of the wild flower and home of the song-bird, was replaced by a waste of desolation and wilderness. Long they dashed on through the loneliness of that land; a depressing flight--but more depressing than the abandoned and forlorn aspect of the scene was the consciousness that their steeds had become road-worn and were unable to respond. Long, long, they continued this pace, a strained period of suspense, and then the fool drew rein.

"Look, Jacqueline," he said. "The river!"

Before them, fed by the rivulets from the distant hills, the foaming current threatened to overflow its banks. Already the rising waters touched the flimsy wooden structure that spanned the torrent. Contemplatively he regarded it, and then placing his hand for a moment on hers, said encouragingly:

"Perhaps, after all, we are borrowing trouble?"

She shook her head. "If I could but think it," she answered.

Something seemed to rise in her throat. "A moment I forgot, and--was not unhappy! But now I feel as though the end was closing about us."

He tightened his grasp. "You are worn with fatigue; fanciful!" he replied.

"The end!" she repeated, passionately. "Yes; the end!" And threw off his hand. "Look!"

He followed her eyes. "Waving plumes!" he cried. "And drawing nearer! Come, Jacqueline! let us ride on!"

"How?" she answered, in a lifeless tone. "The bridge will not hold."

For answer he turned his horse to it; proceeded slowly across. It wavered and bent; her wide-opened eyes followed him; once she lifted her hand to her breast, and then became conscious he stood on the opposite bank, calling her to follow. She started; a strange smile was on her lips, and touching her horse sharply, she obeyed.

"Is it to death he has called me?" she asked herself.

In her ears sounded the swash and eddying of the current; she closed

her eyes to keep from falling, when she felt a hand on the bridle, and in a moment had reached the opposite shore. The jester made no motion to remount, but remained at her horse's head, closely surveying the road they had traveled.

"Must we go on?" she said, mechanically.

"Only one of them can cross at a time," he answered, without stirring.

"It is better to meet them here."

"Oh," she spoke up, "if the waters would only rise a little more and carry away the bridge."

He glanced quickly around him, weighing the slender chance for success if he made that last desperate stand, and then, grasping a loose plank, began using it as a lever against one of the weakened supports of the bridge. Soon the beam gave way, and the structure, now held but at the middle and one side, had already begun to sag, when from around the curve of the highway appeared Louis of Hochfels, and a dozen of his followers.

The free baron rode to the brim of the torrent, regarded the flood and the bridge, and stopped. He was mounted on a black Spanish barb whose glistening sides were flecked with foam; a cloak of cloth of gold fell from his brawny shoulders; his heavy, red face looked out from beneath a sombrero, fringed with the same metal. A gleam of grim recollection

shone from his bloodshot eyes as they rested on the fool.

"Oh, there you are!" he shouted, with savage satisfaction. "Out of the frying-pan into the fire! Or rather--for you escaped the fagots at Notre Dame--out of the fire into the frying-pan!"

Above the tumult of the torrent his stentorian tones were plainly heard. Without response, the jester inserted the plank between the structure and the middle support. The other, perceiving his purpose, uttered an execration that was drowned by the current, and irresolutely regarded the means of communication between the two shores, obviously undetermined about trusting his great bulk to that fragile intermedium. Here was a temporary check on which he had not calculated. But if he demurred about crossing himself, the free baron did not long display the same infirmity of purpose regarding his followers.

"Over with you!" he cried angrily to them. "The lightest first! Fifty pistoles to the first across!" And then, calling out to the fool: "In half an hour, you, my fine wit-cracker, shall be hanging from a branch. As for the maid, she is a witch, I am told--we will test her with drowning."

Tempted by their leader's offer, one of the troopers, a lank, muscular-looking fellow, at once drove the spurs into his horse. Back and forth moved the lever in the hands of the jester; the soldier was midway on the bridge, when it sank suddenly to one side. A moment it

acted as a dam, then bridge, horse and rider were swept away with a crash and carried downward with the driving flood. Vainly the trooper sought to turn his steed toward the shore; the debris from the structure soon swept him from his saddle. Striking out strongly, he succeeded in catching a trailing branch from a tree on the bank, but the torrent gripped his body fiercely, and, after a desperate struggle, tore him away.

As his helpless follower disappeared, the free baron gave a brief command, and he and his troops posted rapidly down the bank. The young girl breathed a sigh of relief; her eyes were yet full of awe from the death struggle she had witnessed. Fascinated, her gaze had rested on the drowning wretch; the pale face, the look of terror; but now she was called to a realization of their own situation by the abrupt departure of the squad on the opposite shore.

"They have gone," she cried, in surprise, as the party vanished among the trees.

"But not far." The jester's glance was bent down the stream. "See, where the torrent broadens. They expect to find a fording place."

Once more they set forth; he knowing full well that the free baron and his men, accustomed to the mountain torrents, unbridled by the melting snows, would, in all likelihood, soon find a way to cross the freshet. His mind misgave him that he had loosened the bridge at all. Would it

not have been better to force the conflict there, when he had the advantage of position? But right or wrong, he had made his choice and must abide by it.

To add to his discomfiture, his horse, which at first had lagged, now began to limp, and, as they proceeded, this lameness became more apparent. With a twinge of heart, he plied the spur more strongly, and the willing but broken creature responded as best it could. Again it hastened its pace, seeming in a measure to recover strength and endurance, then, without warning, lurched, fell to its knees and quickly rolled over on its side. Jacqueline glanced back; the animal lay motionless; the rider was vainly endeavoring to rise. Pale with apprehension she returned, and, dismounting, stood at the head of the prostrate animal. Determinedly the jester struggled, the perspiration standing on his brow in beads. At length, breathing hard, he rested his head on his elbow.

"Here am I caught to stay, Jacqueline!" he said. "The horse is dead. But you--you must still go on."

With clasped hands she stood looking down at him. She scarcely knew what he was saying; her mind seemed in a stupor; with apathetic eyes she gazed down the road. But the accident had happened in a little hollow, so that the outlook in either direction along the highway was restricted.

"My emperor is both chivalrous and noble," continued the pleasant, quickly. "Go to him. You must not wait here longer. I did not tell you, but I think the free baron will have no difficulty in crossing. You have no time to lose. Go; and--good-by!"

"But--he had a long way to ride--even if he could cross," she said slowly, passing her hand over her brow.

"Jacqueline!" he cried out, impatiently.

She made no motion to leave, and, reading in her face her determination, angered by his own helplessness, he strove violently to release himself, until wrenching his foot in his frantic efforts, he sank back with a groan. At that sound of pain, wrung from him in spite of his fortitude, all her seeming apathy vanished. With a low cry, she dropped on her knees in the road and swiftly took his head in her arms.

It was he, not the young girl, who spoke first. He forgot all peril--hers and his. He only knew her warm, young arms were about him; that her heart was throbbing wildly.

"Jacqueline!" he cried, passionately. "Jacqueline!" And threw an arm about her, drawing her closer, closer.

Did she hear him? She did not reply. Nor did she release him. She did not even look down. But he felt her bosom rising and falling

faster than its wont.

"Jacqueline," he repeated, "are you listening?"

She stirred slightly; the pallor left her face. In her gaze shone a light difficult to divine--pity, tenderness, a warmer passion? Where had he seen it before? In the cell when he lay injured; in his waking dreams? It seemed the sudden dawn of the full beauty of her eyes; a half-remembered impression which now became real. Yet even as she looked down his face changed; his eager glance grew dark; he listened intently.

The sound of horses' hoofs beat upon the air.

"Jacqueline!--go!--there is yet time!"

Abruptly she arose. He held out his hand for a last quick pressure; a God-speed to this stanch maid-comrade of the motley.

"God keep you, mistress!"

Standing in the road, gazing up the hollow, she neither saw his hand nor caught his words of farewell. An expression of bewilderment had overspread her features; quickly she glanced in the opposite direction.

"See! see!" she exclaimed, excitedly.

But he was past response; overcome by pain, in a last desperate attempt to regain his feet, he had lost consciousness. As he fell back, above the hill in the direction she was looking, appeared the black plumes of a band of horsemen.

"No; they are not--"

Her glance rested on the jester, lying there motionless, and hastening to his side, she lifted his head and placed it in her lap. So the troopers of the Emperor Charles--a small squad of outriders--found her sitting in the road, her hair disordered about her, her face the whiter against that black shroud.