

## CHAPTER XXV

### IN THE TENT OF THE EMPEROR

On an eminence commanding the surrounding country an unwonted spectacle that same day had presented itself to the astonished gaze of the workers in a neighboring vineyard. Gleaming with crimson and gold, a number of tents had appeared as by magic on the mount, the temporary encampment of a rich and numerous cavalcade. But it was not the splendent aspect of this unexpected bivouac itself so much as the colors and designs of the flags and banners floating above which aroused the wonderment of the tillers of the soil. Here gleamed no salamander, with its legend, "In fire am I nourished; in fire I die," but the less magniloquent and more dreaded coat of arms of the emperor, the royal rival and one-time jailer of the proud French monarch.

The sunlight, reflected from the golden tassels and ornamentation of the tents, threw a flaming menace over the valley, and the peasants in subdued tones talked of the sudden coming of the dreaded foeman. *Mère de Dieu!* what did it portend! *Ventre Saint Gris!* were they going to storm the fortresses of the king? Was an army following this formidable retinue of nobles, soldiers and servants?

Above, on the mount, as the sun climbed toward the meridian, was seated in one of the largest of the tents a man of resolute and stern mien who gazed reflectively toward the fertile plain outstretching in the

distance. His grizzled hair told of the after-prime of life; he was simply, even plainly, dressed, although his garments were of fine material, and from his neck hung a heavy chain of gold. His doublet lacked the prolonged and grotesque peak, and was less puffed, slashed and banded than the coat worn by those gallants of the day who looked to Italy for the latest extravagances of fashion. His hat, lying carelessly on the table at his elbow, was devoid of aigrette, jewels or plume; a head-covering for the campaign rather than the court. Within reach of his hand stood a heavy golden goblet of massive German workmanship, the solid character of which contrasted with the drinking vessels after Cellini's patterns affected by Francis. This he raised to his lips, drank deeply, replaced the goblet on the table, and said as much to himself as to those around him:

"A fair land, this of our brother! Small wonder he likes to play the host, even to his enemies. We may conquer him on the ensanguined field, but he conquers us--or Henry of England!--on a field of cloth of gold!"

"But for your Majesty to put yourself in the king's power?" ventured a courtier, who wore a begemmed torsade and a cloak of Genoa velvet.

The monarch leaned back in his great chair and his face grew harsh. As he sat there musing, his virility and iron figure gave him rather the appearance of the soldier than the emperor. This impression his surroundings further emphasized, for the walls of the tent were

covered, not with the gorgeous-colored Gobelins of the pleasure-loving French, but with severe and stately tapestries from his native Flanders, depicting in somber shades various scenes of martial triumph. When he raised his head he cast a look of ominous displeasure upon the last speaker.

"Had he not once the English king beneath his roof?" answered the monarch. "At Amboise, where we visited Francis some years ago, was there any restraint put upon us?"

A grim smile crossed his features at the recollection of the gorgeous fêtes in his honor on that other occasion. Perhaps, too, he thought of the excitements held out by those servitors of the king, the frail and fair ladies of the court, for he added:

"Saints et saintes! 'twas a palace of pleasure, not a dungeon, he prepared for us. But enough of this! It is time we rode on. Let the cavalcade, with the tents, follow behind."

"Think you, your Majesty, if the princess be not yet married to the bastard, she is like to espouse the true duke?" asked the courtier, as a soldier left the tent to carry out the orders of the emperor.

Charles arose abruptly. "Of a surety! He must have loved her greatly, else--"

The clattering of hoofs, drawing nearer, interrupted the emperor's ruminations, and, wheeling sharply, he gazed without. A band of horsemen appeared on the mount.

"The outriders!" he said in surprise. "Why have they returned?"

"They are bearing some one on a litter," answered the attendant noble, "and--cap de Dieu--there is a woman with them!"

As the troops approached, the emperor strode forward. Out in the sunlight his face appeared older, more careworn, but although it cost him an effort to walk, his step was unflinching. A moment he surveyed the men with peremptory glance, and then, casting one look at their burden, uttered an exclamation. His surprise, however, was of short duration. At once his features resumed their customary rigor.

"What does this mean?" he asked, shortly, addressing the leader of the soldiers. "Is he badly hurt?"

"That I can not say, your Majesty," replied the man. "A horse fell upon his leg, which is badly bruised, and there may be other injuries."

"Where did you find him?" continued the emperor, still regarding the pale face of the plaisant.

"Not far from here, your Majesty. The woman was sitting in the road,

holding his head."

Charles' glance swiftly sought the jestress and then returned.

"They were being pursued, for shortly after we came a squad of men appeared from the opposite direction. When they saw us they fled. The woman insisted upon being brought here, when she learned of your Majesty's presence."

"Take the injured man into the next tent and see he has every care. As for the woman, I will speak with her alone."

"Your Majesty's orders to break camp--" began the courtier.

"We have changed our mind and will remain here for the present." And the emperor, without further words, turned and reëntered his pavilion.

With his hands behind him, he stood thoughtfully leaning against a table; his countenance had become somber, morose. The twinges of pain from a disease which afterward caused him to abdicate the throne and relinquish all power and worldly vanities for a life of religious meditation began to make themselves felt. Love--ambition--what were they? The perishable flesh--was it the all-in-all? Those sudden pangs of the body seemed like over-forward confessors abruptly admonishing him.

The jester and the woman--Francis and the princess--what had they become to him now? Figures in an intangible, illusory dream. Deeply religious, repentant, perhaps, for past misdeeds at such a moment as this, the soldier-emperor stood before a silver crucifix.

"Credo in sanctum," he murmured, with contrite glance. "How repugnant is human glory! to conquer the earth; to barter what is immortal! Carnis resurrectionem--"

A shadow fell across the tapestry, and glancing from the blessed symbol, he saw before him, kneeling on the rug, the figure of a woman. For her it was an inauspicious interruption. With almost a frown, Charles, recalled from an absorbing period of oblation and self-examination, surveyed the young girl. The reflection of dark colors from the hangings and tapestries softened the pallor of her face; her hair hung about her in disorder; her figure, though meanly garbed, was replete with youth and grace. Silent she continued in the posture of a suppliant.

"Well?" said the monarch finally, in a harsh voice.

Slowly she lifted her head; her dark eyes rested on the ruler steadfastly, fearlessly. "Your Majesty commanded my presence," she answered.

"Who are you?" he asked coldly.

"I am called Jacqueline; my father was the Constable of Dubrois."

Incredulity replaced every other emotion on the emperor's features, and, approaching her, he gazed attentively into the countenance she so frankly uplifted. With calmness she bore that piercing scrutiny; his dark, troubled soul, looking out of his keen gray eyes, met an equally lofty spirit.

"The Constable of Dubrois! You, his daughter!" he repeated.

His thoughts swiftly pierced the shadows of the past; that umbrageous past, darkened with war and carnage; the memory of triumphs; the bitterness of defeats! And studying her eyes, her face, as in a vision he recalled the features, the bearing, of him who had held himself an equal to his old rival, Francis. A red spot rose to his cheek as he reviewed the martial, combative days; the game of arms he had played so often with Francis--and won! Not always by daring, or courage--rather by sagacity, clear-headedness, more potent than any other force!

But a pang of bodily suffering reminded him of the present and its ills, and the vainglory of brief exultation faded as quickly as it had assailed him; involuntarily his glance sought the sacred emblem of intercession. When he regarded her once more his face had resumed its severe, uncompromising aspect.

"The constable was a proud, haughty man," he said, brusquely. "Yea, over-proud, in fact. You know why he fled to me?"

"Yes, Sire," she answered, flushing resentfully.

"To persuade me to espouse his cause against the king. Many times have my good brother, Francis, and myself gone to war," he added, reflectively and not without a certain complacency, "but then were we engaged in troubles in the east; to keep the Mohammedans from overrunning our Christian land. How could I oblige the constable by fighting the heathen and the believers in the gospel in one breath? Your father--for I am ready to believe him such, by the evidence of your face, and, especially, your eyes--accused me of little faith. But I had either to desert him, or Europe. His cause was lost; 'twas the fortune of war; the fate of great families becomes subservient to that of nations."

He spoke as if rather presenting the case to himself than to her; as though he sought to analyze his own action through the medium of time and the trend of larger events. Attentively she watched him with deep, serious eyes, and, catching her almost accusing look and knowing how, perhaps, he shuffled with history, his brow grew darker; he was visibly annoyed at her--his own conscience--he knew not what!

"I did not complain, your Majesty," she said proudly.



Her answer surprised him. Again he observed her attire; the pallor of her face; the dark circles beneath her eyes. Grimly he marked these signs of poverty; those marks of the weariness and privations she had undergone.

"Was it not your intention to seek me? To beg an asylum, perhaps?" he went on, less sternly.

"Not to beg, your Majesty! To ask, yes! But now--not that!"

"Vrai Dieu!" muttered Charles. "There is the father over again! It is strange this maiden clothed almost in rags should claim such illustrious parentage," he continued to himself, as he walked restlessly to and fro. "It is more strange I ask no other proofs than herself--the evidence of my eyes! Where did you come from?" he added, aloud, pausing before her. "The court of Francis?"

"Yes, Sire."

"Why did you leave the king?"

"Why--because--" Her hands clenched. The gray eyes continued to probe her. "Because I hate him!"

The emperor's face relaxed; a gleam of humor shone in his glance.

"Hate him whom so many of your sex love?" he replied.

Through her tresses he saw her face turn red; passionately she arose.

"With your Majesty's permission, I will go."

"Go?" he said abruptly. "Where can you go? You are somewhat quick of temper, like--. Have I refused you aught? I could not serve your father," he continued, taking her hand, and, not ungently, detaining her, "but I may welcome his daughter--though necessity, the ruler of kings, made me helpless in his behalf!"

As in a flash her resentment faded. Half-paternally, half-severely, he surveyed her.

"Sit down here," he went on, indicating a low stool. "You are weary and need refreshment."

Silent she obeyed, and the emperor, touching a bell, gave a low command to the servitor who appeared. In a few moments meat, fruits and wine were set before her, and Charles, from his point of vantage--no throne of gold, but a chair lined with Cordovan leather, watched her partake. The pains had again left him; the monk gave way to the ruler; he thought of no more phrases of the Credo, but with impassive face listened to her story, or as much as she cared to relate. When she had finished, for some time he offered no comment.

"A strange tale," he said finally. "But what will our nobles do when

ladies take mere fools for knight-errants?"

"He is no mere fool!" she spoke up, impulsively.

The emperor shot a quick look at her from beneath his lowering brows.

"I mean--he is brave--and has protected me many times," she explained in some confusion.

"And so you, knowing what you were, remained--with a poor jester--a clown--rather than leave him to his fate?" continued Charles, inexorably, recalling the words of the outriders.

Her face became paler, but she held her head more proudly; the spirit of the jestress sprang to her lips, "It is only kings, Sire, who fear to cling to a forlorn cause!"

His eyes grew dark and gloomy; morosely he bent his gaze upon her. No one had ever before dared to speak to him like that, for Charles had no love for jesters, and kept none in his court. Unsparing, iron-handed, he had gone his way. But, perhaps, in her very fearlessness he recognized a touch of his own inflexible nature. At any rate, his sternness soon gave way to an expression of melancholy.

"God alone knows the hearts of monarchs!" he said, somberly, and directed his glance toward the crucifix.

Moved by his unexpected leniency and the aspect of his cheerlessness, she immediately repented of her response. He looked so old, and melancholy, this great monarch. When he again turned to her his face and manner expressed no further cognizance of her reply.

"You need rest," he said, "and shall have a tent to yourself. Now go!" he continued, placing his hand for a moment, not unkindly, on her head. "I shall give orders for your entertainment. It will be rough hospitality, but--you are used to that. I am not sorry, child, you hate our brother Francis, if it has driven you to our court."