

CHAPTER XXVI

THE DEBT OF NATURE

Although the daughter of the constable received every attention commensurate with the cheer of the camp, the day passed but slowly. With more or less interest she viewed the diversified group of soldiers, drawn by Charles from the various countries over which he ruled: the brawny troops from Flanders; the alert-looking guards, recruited from the mountains of Spain; the men of Friedwald, with muscles tough as the fibers of the fir in their native forests. Even the Orient--suggestive of many campaigns!--had been drawn upon, and the bright-garbed olive-skinned attendants, moving among the tents of purple or crimson, blended picturesquely with the more solid masses of color.

For the Flemish soldiery, who had brought the fool and herself to the camp, the young girl had a nod and a word, but it was the men of Friedwald who especially attracted her attention, and unconsciously she found herself picturing the land that had fostered this stalwart and rough soldiery. A rocky, rugged region, surely; with vast forests, unbroken brush! Yonder armorer, polishing a joint of steel, seemed like a survivor of that primeval epoch when the trees were roofs and the ground the universal bed. Once or twice she passed him, curiously noting his great beard and giant-like limbs. But he minded her not, and this, perhaps, gave her courage to pause.

"What sort of country is Friedwald?" she said, abruptly.

"Wild," he answered.

"Is the duke liked?" she went on.

"Yes."

"Do you know his--jester?"

"No."

For all the information he would volunteer, the man might have been Doctor Rabelais' model for laconicism, and a moment she stood there with a slight frown. Then she gazed at him meditatively; tap! tap! went the tiny hammer in the mighty hand, and, laughing softly, she turned. These men of Friedwald were not unpleasing in her eyes.

Twice had she approached the tent wherein lay the fool, only to learn that the emperor was with the duke's plaisant. "A slight relapse of fever," had said the Italian leech, as he blocked the entrance and stared at her with wicked, twinkling eyes. She need be under no apprehension, he had added; but to her quick fancy his glance said: "A maid wandering with a fool!"

Apprehension? No; it could not be that she felt but a new sense of loneliness; of that isolation which contact with strange faces emphasized. What had come over her? she asked herself. She who had been so self-sufficient; whose nature now seemed filled with sudden yearnings and restlessness, impatience--she knew not what. She who thought she had partaken so abundantly of life's cup abruptly discovered renewed sources for disquietude. With welling heart she watched the sun go down; the glory of the widely-radiating hues give way to the pall of night. Upon her young shoulders the mantle of darkness seemed to rest so heavily she bowed her head in her hands.

"A maid and a fool! Ah, foolish maid!" whispered the wanton breeze.

The pale light of the stars played upon her, and the dews fell, until involuntarily shivering with the cold, she arose. As she walked by the emperor's quarters she noticed a figure silhouetted on the canvas walls; to and fro the shadow moved, shapeless, grotesque, yet eloquent of life's vexation of spirit. Turning into her own tent, the jestress lighted the wick of a silver lamp; a faint aroma of perfume swept through the air. It seemed to soothe her--or was it but weariness?--and shortly she threw herself on the silken couch and sank to dreamless slumber.

When she awoke, the bright-hued dome of the tent was aglow in the morning sun; the reflected radiance bathed her face and form; her heaviness of heart had taken wings. The little lamp was still burning,

but the fresh fragrance of dawn had replaced the subtle odor of the oriental essence. Upon the rug a single streak of sunshine was creeping toward her. In the brazier which had warmed her tent the glowing bark and cinnamon had turned to cold, white ash.

Through the girl's veins the blood coursed rapidly; a few moments she lay in the rosy effulgence, restfully conscious that danger had fled and that she was bulwarked by the emperor's favor, when a sudden thought broke upon this half-wakeful mood, and caused her to spring, all alert, from her couch. To dress, with her had never been a matter of great duration. The hair of the joculatrix naturally rippled into such waves as were the envy of the court ladies; her supple fingers adjusted garment after garment with swift precision, while her figure needed no device to lend grace to the investment.

Soon, therefore, had she left her tent, making her way through the awakening camp. In the royal kitchen the cook was bending over his fires, while an assistant mixed a beverage of barley-water, yolks of eggs and senna wine for Charles when he should become aroused. Those courtiers, already astir, cast many glances in the girl's direction, as she moved toward the tent of the fool.

But if these gallants were sedulous, she was correspondingly indifferent. Anxiety or loyalty--that stanchness of heart which braved even the ironical eyes of the black-robed master of medicine--drove her again to the ailing jester's tent, and, remembering how she had ridden

into camp--and into the august emperor's favor--these fondlings of fortune looked significantly from one to the other.

"A jot less fever, solicitous maid," said the leech in answer to the inquiries of the jesteress, and she endured the glance for the news, although the former sent her away with her face aflame.

"An the leech let her in, he'd soon have to let the patient out," spoke up a gallant. "Her eyes are a sovereign remedy, where bolus, pills and all vile potions might fail."

"If this be a sample of Francis' damsels, I care not how long we are in reaching the Low Countries," answered a second.

To this the first replied in kind, but soon had these gallants matters of more serious moment to divert them, for it began to be whispered about that Louis of Hochfels had determined to push forward. The unwonted activity in the camp ere long gave credence to the rumor; the troopers commenced looking to their weapons; squires hurried here and there, while near the tents stood the horses, saddled and bridled, undergoing the scrutiny of the grooms.

Some time, however, elapsed before the emperor himself appeared. Nothing in the bead-roll, or devotional offering of the morning, had he overlooked; the divers dishes that followed had been scrupulously partaken of, and then only--as a man not to be hurried from the altar

or the table--had he emerged from his tent. His glance mechanically swept the camp, noting the bustle and stir, the absence of disorder, and finally rested on the girl. For a moment, from his look, it seemed he might have forgotten her, and she who had involuntarily turned to him so solicitously, on a sudden felt chilled, as confronted by a mask. His voice, when at length he spoke, was hard, dry, matter-of-fact, and it was Jacqueline whom he addressed.

"You slept well?"

"Yes, Sire," she answered.

"And have already been to the fool's tent, I doubt not."

The mask became half-quizzical, half-friendly, as her cheeks mantled beneath his regard. Was it but quiet avengement against a jestress whose tongue had been unsparing enough, even to him, the day before? Certes, here stood now only a rosy maid, robbed of her spirit; or a folle, struck witless, and Charles' face softened, but immediately grew stern, as his mind abruptly passed from wandering jestress and fleeing fool to matters of more moment.

Under vow to the Virgin, the emperor had announced he would not draw sword himself that day, but, seated beneath a canopy of velvet, overlooking the valley, he so far compromised with conscience as personally to direct the preparations for the conflict. On his sable

throne, surrounded by funereal hangings, how white and furrowed, how harassed with many cares, he appeared in the glare of the morn to the young girl! Was this he who held nearly all Europe in his palm? who between martial commands talked of Holy Orders, the Apostolic See and the Seven Sacraments to his priestly confessor?

And from aloof she studied him, with new doubts and misgiving, her thoughts running fast; and anon bent her eyes to the hill on the other side of the valley. In her condition of mind, confused as before a crisis, it was a distinct relief when toward noon word was brought that the free baron was approaching. Soon, not far distant, the cortège of Louis of Hochfels was seen; at the front, flashing helmets and breastplates; behind, a cavalcade of ladies on horseback and litters, above which floated many flags and banners.

Would he come on; would he turn back? Many opinions were rife.

"Oh," cried a page with golden hair, "there will be no battle after all."

And truly, confronted by the aspect of the emperor's camp, the marauder had at first hesitated; but if the dangers before him were great, those behind were greater. Accordingly, leaving the cavalcade of the princess, her maids and attendants, the free baron of Hochfels, surrounded by his own trusted troops, dashed forward arrogantly into the valley, bent upon sweeping aside even the opposition of Charles

himself.

"Yonder's a daring knave, your Majesty," with some perturbation observed the prelate who stood near the emperor's chair.

"Certes, he tilts at fame, or death, with a bold lance," replied Charles. "Would that Robert of Friedwald were there to cry him quits."

While thus he spoke, as calm as though secluded in one of his monastery retreats, weighing the affairs of state, nearer and nearer drew the soldiers of the bastard of Pfalz-Urfeld; roughly calculating, a force numerically as strong as the emperor's own guard.

The young girl, her face now white and drawn, watched the approaching band. Would Charles never give the signal? Imperturbable sat the mounted troopers of the emperor, awaiting the word of command. At length, when her breath began to come fast and sharp, Charles raised his arm. In a solid, steady body, his men swept onward. The girl strove to look away, but could not.

Both bands, gaining in momentum, met with a crash. That nice symmetry of form and orderliness of movement was succeeded by a tangle of men and horses; the bristling array of lances had vanished, and swords and weapons for hand-to-hand warfare threw a play of light amid the jumble of troops and steeds, flags and banners. With sword red from carnage, Louis of Hochfels drew his men around him, hurling them against the

firm front of Charles' veterans. It was the crucial moment; the turning point in a struggle that could not be prolonged, but would be rather sharp, short and decisive. If his men failed at the onset, all was lost; if they gained but a little ascendancy now, their mastery of the field became fairly assured. Great would be the reward for success; the fruits of victory--the emperor himself. And savagely the free baron cut down a stalwart trooper; his blade pierced the throat of another.

"Clear the way to Charles!" he cried, exultantly. "He is our guerdon."

So terrible that rush, the guard of Spain on the right and the troops of Flanders on the left began to give way; only the men of Friedwald stood, but with the breaking of the forces on each side it was inevitable they, too, must soon be overwhelmed. Involuntarily, as the quick eye of the emperor detected this sign of impending disaster, he half-started from his chair. His hand sought his side; in his eyes shone a steely light. The prelate quickly crossed himself and raised his head as if in prayer.

"The penance, Sire," he murmured, but his voice trembled.

Mechanically Charles replaced his blade. "Yea; better a kingdom lost," he muttered, "than a broken vow."

Yet, after so many battles won in the field and Diet; after titanic

contests with kings in Christendom, and Solyman in the east, to fall, by the mockery of fate, into the grasp of a thieving mountain rifler--

"Ambition! power! we sow but the sand," whispered satiety.

"Vainglory is a sleeveless errand," murmured the spirit of the flagellant.

Yet he gazed half-fiercely at his priestly adviser, when suddenly his gloomy eye brightened; the inutility of ambition was forgotten; unconsciously he clasped the arm of the jocular, who had drawn near. His grip was like a gauntlet; even in her tense, strained mood she winced.

"The fight is not yet lost!" he exclaimed. As he spoke the figure of a knight, fully armed, who had made his way through the avenue of tents, was seen swiftly descending the hill. Upon his strong Arabian steed, the rider's appearance and bearing signaled him as a soldier apart from the rank and file of the guard. His coat-of-arms, that of the house of Friedwald, was richly emblazoned upon the housings of his courser. Whence had he come? The attendants and equerries had not seen him in the camp. Only the taciturn armorer of Friedwald looked complacently after him, stroking his great beard, as one well satisfied. As this late-comer approached the scene of strife the flanks of the guard were wavering yet more perilously.

"A miracle, Sire!" cried the prelate.

"But one that partakes more of earth than Heaven," retorted Charles, with ready irony.

"Who is he, Sire?" breathlessly asked the young girl. At her feet whimpered the blue-eyed page, holding to her skirt, all his courage gone.

But ere he could answer--if he had seen fit to do so--from below, out of the vortex, came the clamorous shouts:

"The duke! The duke!"

The master of the mountain pass heard also, and felt at that moment a sudden thrill of premonition. The guerdon; the quittance; could it be possible after all, the end was not far? He could not believe it, yet a paroxysm of fury seized him; his strength became redoubled; wherever his sword touched a trooper fell.

But like a wave, recovering from the recoil, the soldiers of Friedwald broke upon his doomed band with a force manifold augmented; broke and carried the flanks with it, for the assaulting parties to the right and left were dismayed by the strength unexpectedly hurled against the center. The bulky Flemish, the lithe Spaniard, the lofty trooper of Friedwald, overflowed the shattered line of the marauders.

"Duke Robert!" and "Friedwald!" shouted the Austrian band.

"Cowards! Would you give way?" cried the free baron, striking among them. "Fools! Better the sword than the rope. Come!"

But in his frenzied efforts to rally his men the master of Hochfels found himself face to face with the leader of the already victorious troops. At the sight of him the bastard paused; his breast rose and fell with his labored breathing; his sword was dyed red, also his arms, his clothes; from his forehead the blood ran down over his beard. His eyes rolled like those of an animal; he seemed something inhuman; an incarnation of baffled purpose.

"If it is reprisal you want, Sir Duke, you shall have it," he panted.

"Reprisal!" exclaimed Robert of Friedwald, scornfully. "The best you can offer is your life."

And with that they closed. Evading the strokes of his more bulky antagonist, the younger man's sword repeatedly sought the vulnerable part of the other's armor. The free baron's strength became exhausted; his blows rang harmlessly, or struck the empty air.

A sensation of pain admonished him of his own disability. About him his band had melted away; doggedly had they given up their lives

beneath sword, mace and poniard. The ground was strewn with the slain; riderless horses were galloping up the road. The free baron breathed yet harder; before his eyes he seemed to see only blood.

Of what avail had been his efforts? He had won the princess, but how brief had been his triumphs! With a belief that was almost superstition, he had imagined his destiny lay thronewards. But the curse of his birth had been a ban to his efforts; the bitterness of defeat smote him. He knew he was falling; his nerveless hand loosened his blade.

"I am sped!" he cried; "sped!" and released his hold, while the tide of conflict appeared abruptly to sweep away.

As he struck the earth an ornament that he had worn about his neck became unfastened and dropped to the ground. But once he moved; to raise himself on his elbow.

"The hazard of the die!" he muttered, striving to see with eyes that were growing blind. A rush of blood interrupted him, he fell back, straightened out, and stirred no more.

Now had the din of strife ceased altogether, when descending the slope appeared a cavalcade, at the head of which rode a lady on a white palfrey, followed by several maids and guarded by an escort of soldiers who wore the king's own colors. A stricken procession it seemed as it

drew near, the faces of the women white with fear; the gay attire and gorgeous trappings--a mockery on that ensanguined arena.

Proudly proceeded the lady on the white horse, although in her eyes shone a look of dread. It was an age when women were accustomed to scenes of bloodshed, inured to conflicts in the lists; yet she shuddered as her palfrey picked its way across that field. At the near side of the hollow her glance singled out a motionless figure among those lying where they had fallen, a thick-set man, whose face was upturned to the sky. One look into those glassy eyes, so unresponsive to her own, and she quickly dismounted and fell on her knees beside the recumbent form. She took one of the cold hands in hers, but dropped it with a scream.

"Dead!" she cried; "dead!"

The lady stared at that terribly repulsive face. For some moments she seemed dazed; sat there dully, the onlookers forbearing to disturb her. Then her gaze encountered that of him who had slain the free baron and she sprang to her feet. On her features an expression of bewilderment had been followed by one of recognition.

"The duke's fool!" she exclaimed wildly. "He is dead, and you have killed him! The fool has murdered his master."

"It is true he is dead," answered the other, leaning heavily on his

sword and surveying the inanimate form, "but he was no master of mine."

"That, Madame la Princesse, we will also affirm," broke in an austere voice.

Behind them rode the emperor, a dark figure among those bright gowns and golden trappings, the saddle cloth and adornments of his steed somber as his own garments. As he spoke he waved back the cavalcade, and, in obedience to the gesture, the ladies, soldiers and attendants withdrew to a discreet distance. Bitterly the princess surveyed the monarch; overwrought, a torrent of reproaches sprang from her lips.

"Why has your Majesty made war on my lord? Why have you countenanced his enemies and harbored his murderers?" And then, drawing her figure to its full height, her tawny hair falling in a cloud about her shoulders: "Be sure, Sire, my kinsman, the king, will know how to avenge my wrongs."

"He can not, Madam," answered Charles coldly. "They are already avenged."

"Already avenged!" she exclaimed, with her gaze upon the prostrate figure.

"Yes, Madam. For he who hath injured you has paid the extreme penalty."

"He who was my husband has been foully murdered!" she retorted, vehemently. "What had the Duke of Friedwald done to bring upon himself your Majesty's displeasure?"

"Nothing," answered the emperor, more gently.

"Nothing! And yet he lies there--dead!"

"He who lies before you is not the duke, but Louis of Hochfels, the bastard of Pfalz-Urfeld."

"Ah," she cried, excitedly, "I see you have been listening to the false fool, his murderer."

An expression of annoyance appeared on the emperor's face. He liked not to be crossed at any time by any one.

"You have well called him the false fool, Madam," said Charles, curtly, "for he is no true fool."

"And yet he rode with your troops!"

"To redeem his honor, Madam."

"His honor!"

With a scornful face she approached nearer to the monarch.

"His honor! In God's name, what mean you?"

"That the false fool, Madam, is himself the Duke of Friedwald!"