

CHAPTER XXVII

A MAID OF FRANCE

"The Duke of Friedwald!"

It was not the princess who thus exclaimed, but Jacqueline. Charles had spoken loudly, and, drawn irresistibly to the scene, she had caught his significant words at the moment she recognized, in his brave accoutrements, him whom she had known as the duke's fool.

When she had heard, above the din of the fray, the cries with which the new-comer had been greeted, no suspicion of his identity had crossed her mind. She had wondered, been puzzled at the unexpected appearance of Robert, Duke of Friedwald, but that he and the ailing fool were one and the same was wide from her field of speculation. In amazement, she regarded the knight who had turned the tide of conflict, and then started, noticing the colors he wore, a paltry yellow ribbon on his arm, the badge of her office. Much she had not understood now appeared plain. His assurance in Fools' hall; his reckless daring; his skill with the sword. He was a soldier, not a jester; a lord, not a lord's servant.

Lost in no less wonder, the princess gazed from the free baron to Charles, and back again to the lifeless form. Stooping, she looked steadfastly into the face, as though she would read its secret.

Perhaps, too, as she studied those features, piece by piece she patched together the scenes of the past. Her own countenance began to harden, as though some part of that mask of death had fallen upon her, and when she glanced once more at the emperor they saw she no longer doubted. With forced self-control, she turned to the emperor.

"Doubtless, it is some brave pastime," she said to Charles. "Will your Majesty deign to explain?"

"Nay," answered the emperor, dryly; "that thankless task I'll leave to him who played the fool."

Uncovering, the Duke of Friedwald approached. The excitement of the contest over, his pallid features marked the effects of his recent injuries, the physical strain under which he had labored. Her cold eyes swept over him haughtily, inquiringly.

"For the part I have played, Madam," he said, "I ask your forbearance. If we both labored under a delusion, I have only regret--"

"Regret!" Was it an outburst of grief, or wounded pride? He flushed, but continued firmly:

"Madame la Princesse, when first a marriage was proposed between us I was younger in experience if not in years than I am now; more used to the bivouac or hunters' camps than courts. And woman--" he

smiled--"well, she was a vague ideal. At times, she came to me when sleeping before the huntsman's fire in the solitudes of the forest; again, was reflected from the pages of classic lore. She seemed a part of the woods and the streams, for by ancient art had she not been turned into trees and running brooks? So she whispered in the boughs and murmured among the rushes. Mere Schwärmerei. Do you care to hear? 'Tis the only defense I can offer."

Her contemptuous blue eyes remained fastened on him; she disdained to answer.

"It was a dreamer from brake and copse who went in the disguise of a jester to be near her; to win her for himself--and then, declare his identity. Well may you look scornful. Love!--it is not such a romantic quality--at court. A momentary pastime, perhaps, but--a deep passion--a passion stronger than rank, than death, than all--"

Above the face of her whom he addressed his glance rested upon Jacqueline, and he paused. The princess could but note, and a derisive expression crept about her mouth.

"Once I would have told you all," he resumed. "That night--when you were Lady of the Lists. But--"

He broke off abruptly, wishing to spare her the bitter memory of her own acts. Did she remember that day, when she had been queen of the

chaplet? When she had crowned him whom now death and dishonor had overtaken?

"The rest, Madam, you know--save this." And stooping, he picked up the ornament that had dropped from Louis of Hochfels' neck. "Here, Princess, is the miniature you sent me. He, who used you so ill, stole it from me in prison; through it, he recognized the fool for the duke; with an assassin's blow he struck me down."

A moment he looked at that fair painted semblance. Did it recall the past too vividly? His face showed no pain; only tranquillity. His eye was rather that of a connoisseur than a lover. He smiled gently; then held it to her.

Mechanically she let the portrait slip through her fingers, and it fell to the moistened grass near the form of him who had wedded her. Then she drew back her dress so that it might not touch the body at her feet.

"Have I your Majesty's permission to withdraw?" she said, coldly.

"If you will not accept our poor escort to the king," answered Charles.

"My ladies and myself will dispense with so much honor, Sire," she returned.

"Such service as we can command is at your disposal, Madam," he

repeated.

"It is not far distant to the château, Sire."

"As you will," said the emperor.

With no further word she bowed deeply, turned, and slowly retracing her steps, mounted her horse, and rode away, followed by her maids and the troopers of France.

As she disappeared, without one backward glance, the duke gazed quickly toward the spot where Jacqueline had been standing. He remembered the young girl had heard his story; he had caught her eyes upon him while he was telling it; very deep, serious, judicial, they seemed. Were they weighing his past infatuation for the princess; holding the scales to his acts? Swiftly he turned to her now, but she had vanished. Save for rough nurses, companions in arms, moving here and there among the wounded, he and the emperor stood alone. In the bushes a bird which had left a nest of fledglings returned and caroled among the boughs; a clarifying melody after the mad passions of the day. The elder man noted the direction of the duke's glance, the yellow ribbon on his arm.

"So it was a jestress, not a princess you found, thou dreamer," he said, half-ironically.

"The daughter of the Constable of Dubrois, Sire," was the reply.

The emperor nodded. "The family colors have changed," he observed dryly.

"With fortune, Sire."

"Truly," said Charles, "fortune is a jestress. She had like to play on us this day. But your fever?" he added, abruptly, setting his horse's head toward camp.

"Is gone, Sire," answered the duke, riding by his side.

"And your injuries?"

"Were so slight they are forgotten."

"Then is the breath of battle better medicine than nostrum or salve. In youth, 'tis the sword-point; in age, turn we to the hilt-cross. But this maid--have you won her?"

The young man changed color. "Won her, Sire?" he replied. "That I know not--no word has passed--"

"No word," said the emperor, doubtingly. "A knight-errant and a castleless maid!"

The duke vouchsafed no answer.

"Humph!" added Charles. "Thus do our plans come to naught. If you got her, and wore her, what end would be served?"

"No end of state, perhaps, Sire."

"Why," observed the monarch, "the state and the faith--what else is there? But go your way. How smooth it may be no man can tell."

"Is the road like to be rougher than it has been, Sire?"

"The maid belongs to France," answered Charles, "and France belongs to the king."

"The king!" exclaimed the duke, fiercely.

Involuntarily had they drawn rein in the shade of a tiny thicket overlooking the valley. Even from this slight exercise, bowed and weary appeared the emperor's form. The hand which controlled his steed trembled, but the lines of his face spoke of unweakened sinew of spirit, the iron grip of a will that only death might loosen.

"The king!" repeated the young man. "He is no king of mine, nor hers. To you, Sire, only, I owe allegiance, or my life, at your need."

A gentler expression softened the emperor's features, as a gleam of sunshine forces itself into the somberest forest depths.

"We have had our need," he said. "Not long since."

His glance swept the outlook below. "Heaven watches over monarchs," he added, turning a keen, satirical look on the other, "but through the vigilance of our earthly servitors."

The duke's response was interrupted by the appearance below of a horseman, covered with dust, riding toward them, and urging his weary steed up the incline with spur and voice. Deliberately the monarch surveyed the new-comer.

"What make you of yonder fellow?" he said. "He is not of the guard, nor of the bastard's following."

"His housings are the color of France, Sire."

"Then can I make a shrewd guess of his purpose," observed the monarch.

As he spoke the horseman drew nearer and a moment later had stopped before the emperor.

"A message from the king, Sire!" exclaimed the man, dismounting and kneeling to present a formidable-looking document, with a great disk of

lead through which a silken string was drawn.

Breaking the seal, the emperor opened the missive. "It is well," he said at length, folding the parchment. "The king was even on his way to the château to await our coming, when he met Caillette and received our communication. Go you to the camp"--to the messenger--"where we shall presently return." And as the man rode away: "The king begs we will continue our journey at our leisure," he added, "and announces he will receive us at the château."

"And have I your permission to return to Friedwald, Sire?" asked the other in a low voice.

"Alone?"

"Nay; I would conduct the constable's daughter there to safety."

"And thus needlessly court Francis' resentment? Not yet."

The young man said no word, but his face hardened.

"Tut!" said the emperor, dryly, although not unkindly. "Where's fealty now? Fine words; fine words! A slender chit of a maid, forsooth. Without lands, without dowry; with naught--save herself."

"Is she not enough, Sire?"

"Francis is more easily disarmed in his own castle by his own hospitality than in the battle-field," observed Charles, without replying to this question. "In field have we conquered him; in palace hath he conquered himself, and our friendship. Therefore you and the maid return in our train to the king's court."

"At your order, Sire."

But the young man's voice was cold, ominous.