

## CHAPTER XXVIII

### THE FAVORITE IS ALARMED

Thus it befell that both Robert of Friedwald and Jacqueline accompanied the emperor to the little town, the scene of their late adventures, and that they who had been fool and jocularatrix rode once more through the street they had ne'er expected to see again. The flags were flying; cannon boomed; they advanced beneath wreaths of roses, the way paved with flowers. Standing at the door of his inn, the landlord dropped his jaw in amazement as his glance fell upon the jestress and her companion behind the great emperor himself. His surprise, too, was abruptly voiced by a ragged, wayworn person not far distant in the crowd, whose fingers had been busy about the pockets of his neighbors; fingers which had a deft habit of working by themselves, while his eyes were bent elsewhere and his lips joined in the general acclaim; fingers which like antennas seemed to have a special intelligence of their own. Now those long weapons of abstraction and appropriation ceased their deft work; he became all eyes.

"Good lack! Who may the noble gentleman behind the emperor be?" he exclaimed. "Surely 'tis the duke's fool."

"And ride with the emperor?" said a burly citizen at his elbow. "'Tis thou who art the fool."

"Truly I think so," answered the other. "I see; believe; but may not understand."

At that moment the duke's gaze in passing chanced to rest upon the pinched and over-curious face of the scamp-student; a gleam of recollection shone in his glance. "Gladius gemmatus!" cried the scholar, and a smile on the noble's countenance told him he had heard. Turning the problem in his mind, the vagrant-philosopher forgot about pilfering and the procession itself, when a soldier touched him roughly on the shoulder.

"Are you the scamp-student?" said the trooper.

"Now they'll hang me with these spoils in my pockets," thought the scholar. But as bravely as might be, he replied: "The former I am; the latter I would be."

"Then the Duke of Friedwald sent me to give you this purse," remarked the man, suiting the action to the word. "He bade me say 'tis to take the place of a bit of silver you once did not earn." And the trooper vanished.

"Well-a-day!" commented the burly citizen, regarding the gold pieces and the philosopher in wonderment of his own. "You may be a fool, but you must be an honest knave."

At the château the meeting between the two monarchs was unreservedly cordial on both sides. They spoke with satisfaction of the peace now existing between them and of other matters social and political. The emperor deplored deeply the untimely demise of Francis' son, Charles, who had caught the infection of plague while sleeping at Abbeville. Later the misalliance of the princess was cautiously touched upon. That lady, said Francis gravely, to whom the gaities of the court at the present time could not fail to be distasteful, had left the château immediately upon her return. Ever of a devout mind, she had repaired to a convent and announced her intention of devoting herself, and her not inconsiderable fortune, to a higher and more spiritual life. Charles, who at that period of his lofty estates himself hesitated between the monastery and the court, applauded her resolution, to which the king perfunctorily and but half-heartedly responded.

Shortly after, the emperor, fatigued by his journey, begged leave to retire to his apartments, whither he went, accompanied by his "brother of France" and followed by his attendants. At the door Francis, with many expressions of good will, took leave of his royal guest for the time being, and, turning, encountered the Duke of Friedwald.

Francis, himself once accustomed to assume the disguise of an archer of the royal guard the better to pursue his love follies among the people, now gazed curiously upon one who had befooled the entire court.

"You took your departure, my Lord," said the king, quietly, "without

waiting for the order of your going."

"He who enacts the fool, your Majesty, without patent to office must needs have good legs," replied the young man. "Else will he have his fingers burnt."

"Only his fingers?" returned the monarch with a smile, somewhat sardonic.

"Truly," thought the other, as Francis strode away, "the king regrets the fool's escape from Notre Dame and the fagots."

During the next day Charles called first for his leech and then for a priest, but whether the former or the latter, or both, temporarily assuaged the restlessness of mortal disease, that night he was enabled to be present at the character dances given in his honor by the ladies of the court in the great gallery of the château.

At a signal from the cornet, gitterns, violas and pipes began to play, and Francis and his august guest, accompanied by Queen Eleanor, and the emperor's sister, Marguerite of Navarre, entered the hall, followed by the dauphin and Catharine de Medici, Diane de Poitiers, the Duchesse d'Etampes; marshal, chancellor and others of the king's friends and counselors; courtiers, poets, jesters, philosophers; a goodly company, such as few monarchs could summon at their beck and call. Charles' eye lighted; even his austere nature momentarily kindled amid that

brilliant spectacle; Francis' palace of pleasure was an intoxicating antidote to spleen or hypochondria. And when the court ladies, in a dazzling band, appeared in the dance, led by the Duchesse d'Etampes, he openly expressed his approval.

"Ah, Madam," he said to the Queen of Navarre, "there is little of the monastery about our good brother's court."

"Did your Majesty expect we should cloister you?" she answered, with a lively glance.

He gazed meditatively upon the "Rose of Valois," or the "Pearl of the Valois," as she was sometimes called; then a shadow fell upon him; the futility of ambition; the emptiness of pleasure. In scanty attire, the Duchesse d'Etampes, with the king, flashed before him; the former, all beauty, all grace, her little feet trampling down care, so lightly.

Somberly he watched her, and sighed. Mentally he compared himself to Francis; they had traveled the road of life together, discarding their youth at the same turn of the highway; yet here was his French brother, indefatigable in the pursuit of merriment, while his own soul sang *miséréré* to the tune of Francis' fiddles. Yet, had he overheard the conversation of the favorite and the king, the emperor's moodiness would not, perhaps, have been unmixed with a stronger feeling.

"Sire," the duchess was saying in her most persuasive manner, "while you have Charles--once your keeper--in your power, here in the château,

you will surely punish him for the past and avenge yourself? You will make him revoke the treaty of Madrid, or shut him up in one of Louis XI's oubliettes?"

"I will persuade him if I can," replied the king coldly, "but never force him. My honor, Madam, is dearer to me than my interests."

The favorite said no more of a cherished project, knowing Francis' temper and his stubbornness when crossed. She merely shrugged her white shoulders and watched him closely. The monarch had not scrupled once to break his covenant with Charles, holding that treaties made under duress, by force majeure, were legally void, while now-- But the king was composed of contradictions, or--was her own influence waning?

She had observed a new expression cross his countenance when in the retinue of the emperor he had noted the daughter of the constable; such a tenderness as she remembered at Bayonne when the king had looked upon her, the duchess, for the first time. When she next spoke her words were the outcome of this train of thought.

"To think the jestress, Jacqueline, should turn out the daughter of that traitor, the Constable of Dubrois," she observed, keenly.

"A traitor, certainly," said Francis, "but also a brave man. Perhaps we pressed him too hard," he added retrospectively. "We were young in

years and hot-tempered."

"Your Majesty remembers the girl--a dark-browed, bold creature?" remarked the duchess, smiling amiably.

"Dark-browed, perhaps, Madam; but I observed nothing bold in her demeanor," answered the king.

"What! a jestress and not bold! A girl who frequented Fools' hall; who ran away from court with the plaisant!" She glanced at him mischievously, like a wilful child, but before his frown the smile faded; involuntarily she clenched her hands.

"Madam," he replied cynically, "I have always noticed that women are poor judges of their own sex."

And conducting her to a seat, he raised her jeweled fingers perfunctorily to his lips, and, wheeling abruptly, left her.

"Ah!" thought Triboulet, ominously, who had been closely observing them, "the king is much displeased."

Had the duchess observed the monarch's lack of warmth? At any rate, somewhat perplexedly she regarded the departing figure of the king; then humming lightly, turned to a mirror to adjust a ringlet which had fallen from the golden net binding her tresses.

"Mère de Dieu! woman never held man--or king--by sighing," she thought, and laughed, remembering the Countess of Châteaubriant; a veritable Niobe when the monarch had sent her home.

But Triboulet drew a wry face; his little heart was beating tremulously; dark shadows crossed his mind. Two portentous stars had appeared in the horoscope of his destiny: he who had been the foreign fool; she who was the daughter of the constable. Almost fiercely the hunchback surveyed the beautiful woman before him. With her downfall would come his own, and he believed the king had wearied of her. How hateful was her fair face to him at that moment! Already in imagination he experienced the bitterness of the fall from his high estates, and shudderingly looked back to his own lowly beginning: a beggarly street-player of bagpipes; ragged, wretched, importuning passers-by for coppers; reviled by every urchin. But she, meeting his glance and reading his thought, only clapped her hands recklessly.

"How unhappy you look," she said.

"Madam, do you think the duke--" he began.

"I think he will cut off your head," she exclaimed, and Triboulet turned yellow; but a few moments later took heart, the duchess was so lightsome.



"By my sword--if I had one--our jestress has made a triumphant return," commented Caillette as he stood with the Duke of Friedwald near one of the windows, surveying the animated scene. "Already are some of the ladies jealous as Barbary pigeons. Her appearance has been remarked by the Duc de Montrin and other gentlemen in attendance, and--look! Now the great De Guise approaches her. Here one belongs to everybody."

The other did not answer and Caillette glanced quickly at him. "You will not think me over-bold," he went on, after a moment's hesitation, "if I mention what is being whispered--by them?" including in a look and the uplifting of his eyebrows the entire court. The duke laid his hand warmly on the shoulder of the poet-fool. "Is there not that between us which precludes the question?"

"I should not venture to speak about it," continued Caillette, meeting the duke's gaze frankly, "but that you once honored me with your confidence. That I was much puzzled when I met you and--our erstwhile jestress--matters not. 'Twas for me to dismiss my wonderment, and not strive to reconcile my neighbor's affairs. But when I hear every one talking about my--friend, it is no gossip's task to come to him with the unburdening of the prattle."

"What are they saying, Caillette?" asked the duke, in his eyes a darker look.

"That you would wed this maid, but that the king will use his friendly

offices with Charles to prevent it."

"And do they say why Francis will so use his influence?" continued the other.

"Because of the claim such a union might give an alien house to a vast estate in France; the confiscated property of the Constable of Dubrois. And--but the other reason is but babble, malice--what you will." And Caillette's manner quickly changed from grave to frivolous. "Now, au revoir; I'm off to Fools' hall," he concluded. "Whenever it becomes dull for you, seek some of your old comrades there." And laughing, Caillette disappeared.

Thoughtfully the duke continued to observe the jestress. Between them whirled the votaries of pleasure; before him swept the fragrance of delicate perfumes; in his ears sounded the subtile enticement of soft laughter. Her face wore a proud, self-reliant expression; her eyes that look which had made her seem so illusive from the inception of their acquaintance. And now, since his identity had been revealed, she had seemed more puzzling to him than ever. When he had sought her glance, her look had told him nothing. It was as though with the doffing of the motley she had discarded its recollections. In a tentative mood, he had striven to fathom her, but found himself at a loss. She had been neither reserved, nor had she avoided him; to her the past seemed a page, lightly read and turned. Had Caillette truly said "now she belonged to the world"?

Stepping upon one of the balconies overlooking the valley, the duke gazed out over the tranquil face of nature, his figure drawn aside from the flood of light within. Between heaven and earth, the château reared its stately pile, and far downward those twinkling flashes represented the town; yonder faint line, like a dark thread, the encircling wall. Above the gate shone a glimmer from the narrow casement of some officer's quarters; and the jester's misgivings when they had ridden beneath the portcullis into the town for the first time, recurred to him; also, the glad haste with which they had sped away.

Memories of dangers, of the free and untrammelled character of their wandering, that day-to-day intimacy, and night-to-night consciousness of her presence haunted him. Her loyalty, her fine sense of comradeship, her inherent tenderness, had been revealed to him. Still he seemed to feel himself the jester, in the gathering of fools, and she a ministrallissa, with dark, deep eyes that baffled him.

The sound of voices near the window aroused him from this field of speculation, voices that abruptly riveted his attention and held it: the king's and Jacqueline's.