

## CHAPTER XXIX

### THE FAVORITE IS REASSURED

The young man's brow drew dark; tumultuous thoughts filled his brain; Caillette's words, Brusquet's rhymes, confirming his own conviction, rankled in his mind. This king dared arrogate a law absolute unto himself; its statutes, his own caprices; its canons, his own pretensions? The duke remembered the young girl's outburst against the monarch and a feeling of hatred arose in his breast; his hand involuntarily sought his sword, the blade of Francis' implacable enemy.

"We have heard your story, my child, from our brother, the emperor," the king was saying, "and although your father rebelled against his monarch, we harbor it not against the daughter."

"Sire," she answered, in a low tone, "I regret the emperor should have acquainted you with this matter."

"You have no cause for fear," Francis replied, misinterpreting her words. She offered no response, and the duke, moving into the light, observed the king was regarding the young girl intently, his tall figure conspicuous above the courtiers.

Flushed, Jacqueline looked down; the white-robed form, however, very straight and erect; her hair, untrammelled with the extreme conventions

of the day; a single flower a spot of color amid its abundance. Even the duchess--bejeweled, bedecked, tricked out--in her own mind had pronounced the young girl beautiful, and there surely was no mistaking the covert admiration of the monarch as his glance encompassed her. Despite her assumed composure, it was obvious to the duke, however, that only by a strong effort had she nerved herself to that evening's task; the red hue on her cheeks, the brightness of her eyes, told of the suppressed excitement her manner failed to betray.

"Why should you leave with Charles?" continued Francis. "Perhaps were we over-hasty in confiscating the castle of the constable. Vrai Dieu," he added, meditatively. "Had he unbent but a little! Marguerite told us we were driving him to despair, but the queen regent and the rest of our counselors prevailed--" He broke off abruptly and directed a bolder gaze to hers. "May not a monarch, Mademoiselle, undo what he has done?"

"Even a king can not give life to the dead," she replied, and her voice sounded hard and unyielding.

"No," he assented, moodily, "but it would not be impossible to restore the castle--to his daughter."

"Sire!" she exclaimed in surprise; then shook her head. "With your Majesty's permission, I shall leave with the emperor."

Francis made an impatient movement; her inflexibility recalled one who long ago had renounced his fealty to the throne; her resistance kindled the flame that had been smoldering in his breast.

"But if I have pointed out to the emperor that your proper station is here?" he went on. "If he recognizes that it would be to your disadvantage to divert that destiny which lies in France?"

His words were measured; his manner tinged with seeming paternal interest; but, as through a mask, she discerned his face, cynical, libidinous, the countenance of a Sybarite, not a king. The air became stifling; the ribaldry of laughter enveloped her; instinctively she glanced around, and her restless, troubled gaze fell upon the duke.

What was it he read in her eyes? A confession of insecurity, fear; a mute appeal? Before it all his doubts and misgivings vanished; the look they exchanged was like that when she had stood on the staircase in the inn.

Upon the monarch, engrossed in his purpose, it was lost. If silence give consent, then had she already acquiesced in a wish which, from a king, became a demand. But Francis, ever complaisant, with an inconsistent chivalry worthy of the subterfuge of his character, desired to appear forbearing, indulgent.

"For your own sake," he added, "must we refuse that permission you ask

of us."

She did not answer, and, noting the direction of her gaze, the eager expectancy written on her face, Francis turned sharply. At the same time the duke stepped forward.

The benignity faded from the king's manner; his countenance, which "at no time would have made a man's fortune," became rancorous, caustic; the corners of his mouth appeared almost updrawn to his nostrils. He had little reason to care for the duke, and this interruption, so flagrant, menacing almost, did not tend to enhance his regard. In nowise daunted, the young man stood before him.

"I trust, Sire, your Majesty will reconsider your decision?"

With a strained look the young girl regarded them. To what new dangers had she summoned him? Was not she, the duke, even the emperor himself, in the power of the king, for the present at least? And knowing well Francis' headstrong passions, his violence when crossed, it was not strange at that moment her heart sank; she felt on the brink of an abyss; a nameless peril toward which she had drawn the companion of her flight. It seemed an endless interval before the monarch spoke.

"Ah, you heard!" remarked Francis at length, satirically.

"Inadvertently, Sire," answered the duke. His voice was steady, his

face pale, but in his blue eyes a glint as of fire came and went.

Self-assurance marked his bearing; dignity, pride. He looked not at the young girl, but calmly met the scrutiny of the king. The latter surveyed him from head to foot; then suddenly stared hard at a sword whose hilt gleamed even brighter than his own, and was fashioned in a form that recalled not imperfectly a hazard of other days.

"Where did you get that blade?" he asked, abruptly.

"From the daughter of the Constable of Dubrois."

"Why did she give it to you?"

"To protect her, Sire."

The monarch's countenance became more thoughtful; less acrimonious. How the present seemed involved in the past! Were kings, then, enmeshed in the web of their own acts? Were even the gods not exempt from retributory justice? Those were days of superstition, when a coincidence assumed the importance of inexorable destiny.

"Once was it drawn against me," said Francis, reflectively.

"I trust, Sire, it may never again be drawn by an enemy of your Majesty."

The king did not reply, but stood as a man who yet took counsel with himself.

"By what right," he asked, finally, "do you speak for the lady?"

A moment the duke looked disconcerted. "By what right?"

Then swiftly he regarded the girl. As quickly--a flash it seemed--her dark eyes made answer, their language more potent than words. He could but understand; doubt and misgiving were forgotten; the hesitation vanished from his manner. Hastily crossing to her side, he took her hand and unresistingly it lay in his. His heart beat faster; her sudden acquiescence filled him with wonder; at the same time, his task seemed easier. To protect her now! The king coughed ironically, and the duke turned from her to him.

"By what right, your Majesty?" he said in a voice which sounded different to Francis. "This lady is my affianced bride, Sire."

Pique, umbrage, mingled in the expression which replaced all other feeling on the king's countenance as he heard this announcement. With manifest displeasure he looked from one to the other.

"Is this true, Mademoiselle?" he asked, sternly.

Her cheek was red, but she held herself bravely.

"Yes, Sire," she said.

A new emotion leaped to the duke's face as he heard her lips thus fearlessly confirm the answer of her eyes. And so before the monarch--in that court which Marguerite called the Court of Love--they plighted their troth.

Something in their manner, however, puzzled the observant king; an exaltation, perhaps, uncalled for by the simple telling of a secret understanding between them; that rapid interchange of glances; that significance of manner when the duke stepped to her side. Francis bit his lips.

"Ma foi!" he exclaimed, sharply. "This is somewhat abrupt. How long, my Lord, since she promised to be your wife?"

"Since your Majesty spoke," returned the duke, tranquilly.

"And before that?"

"Before? I only knew that I loved her, Sire."

"And now you know, for the first time, that she loves you?" added the king, dryly. "But the emperor--are you not presuming overmuch that

he will give his consent? Or think you"--with fine irony--"that marriages of state are made in Heaven?"

"It was once my privilege, Sire, so to serve the emperor, as his Majesty thought, that he bade me ask of him what I would, when I would. Heretofore have I had nothing to ask; now, everything."

Some of the asperity faded from Francis' glance. The situation appealed to his strong penchant for merry plaisanterie.

Besides--such was his overweening pride--to hear a woman confess she cared for another dampened his own ardor, instead of stimulating it.

"None but himself could be his parallel;" the royal lover could brook no rival. Had she merely desired to marry the former fool--the Countess of Châteaubriant had had a husband--but to love him!

After all, she was but an audacious slip of a girl; a dark-browed, bold gipsy; by nature, intended for the motley--yes, the Duchesse d'Etampes was right. Then, he liked not her parentage; she was a constant reminder of one who had been like to make vacant the throne of France, and to destroy, root and branch, the proud house of Orleans. Moreover, whispered avarice, he would save the castle for himself; a stately and right royal possession. He had, indeed, been over-generous in proffering it. Love, said reason, was unstable, flitting; woman, a will-o'-the-wisp; but a castle--its noble solidity would endure. At the same time, policy admonished the king that the duke was a subject of his good brother, the emperor, and a rich, powerful noble withal.



So with such grace as he could command Francis greeted one whom he preferred to regard as an ally rather than an enemy.

"Truly, my Lord," he said not discourteously, masking in a courtly manner his personal dislike for him whose sharp criticism he once had felt in Fools' hall, "a nimble-witted jester was lost when you resumed the dignity of your position. But," he added cautiously, as a sudden thought moved him, "this lady has appeared somewhat unexpectedly; the house of Friedwald is not an inconsequential one."

"What mean you, Sire?" asked the young man, as the king paused.

Francis studied him shrewdly. "Why," he replied at length, hesitatingly, "there is that controversy of the Constable of Dubrois; certain lands and a castle, long since rightly confiscated."

"Your Majesty, there is another castle, and lands to spare, in a distant country," returned the duke quickly. "These will suffice."

"As you will," said the king in a livelier tone. "For the future, command our good offices--since you have made us sponsor of your fortunes."

With which well-covered confession of his own defeat, Francis strode away. As he turned, however, he caught the smile of the Duchesse d'Etampes and crossed to her graciously.

"Your dress becomes you well, Anne," he said.

She glanced down at herself demurely; her lashes veiled a sudden gleam of triumph. "How kind of you, Sire, to notice--my poor gown."

"I was right," murmured Triboulet, joyfully, as he saw king and favorite walking together. "No one will ever replace the duchess."

Silent, hand in hand, the duke and the joculatrix stood upon the balcony. Below them lay the earth, wrapped in hazy light. Behind them, the court, with its glamour.

"Have I done well, Jacqueline, to answer the king as I have done?" he said finally. "Are you content to resign all--forever--here in France? To go with me--"

"Into a new world," she interrupted. "Once I asked you to take me, but you hesitated, and were like to leave me behind you."

"But now 'tis I who ask," he answered.

"And I--who hesitate?" looking out over the valley, where the shadow of a cloud crossed the land.

"Do you hesitate, Jacqueline?"

She turned. About her lips trembled the old fleeting smile.

"What woman knows her mind, Sir Fool? Yet if it were not so--"

"If it were not so?" he said, eagerly.

Her eyes became grave on a sudden. "I might believe I had been of one mind--long."

"Jacqueline!--sweet jestress!--"

He caught her suddenly in his arms, his fine young features aglow.

This then was the goal of his desires; a goal of delight, far, far beyond all youthful dreams or early imaginings. With drooping eyelids, she stood in his embrace; she, once so proud, so self-willed. He drew her closer--kissed her hair!--the rose!--

She raised her head, and--sweeter still--he kissed her lips.

Across the valley the shadow receded; vanished. In the full glory of nightly splendor lay the earth, and as the mystic radiance lighted up a world of beauty, it seemed at last they beheld their world; the light more beautiful for the shade and the purple mists.