Under the Rose

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CHAPTER XXIV.

SOME part of the interview with the commandant which had resulted in their release the jester told his companion as they sped down the sloping plain in the early silvery light which transformed the dewdrops and grassy moisture into veils of mist. Behind them the chateau was slowly fading from view; the town had already disappeared.

"Upon the strength of the letter from the emperor the vicomte took the responsibility of allowing us to depart," explained the fool. "In it his majesty referred to his message to the king, to the part played by him who took the place of the duke, and what he was pleased to term my services to Francis and himself."

So much the plaisant related, but he did not add that the commandant, with Triboulet's words in mind, had at first demurred about permitting the jestress to go. "Vrai Dieu!" that person had exclaimed. "If what the dwarf said be true? To cross the king! And yet," he had added cynically, "it sounds most unlike. Did Aladdin flee from the genii of the lamp? Such a magician is Francis. Chateau, gardens—'tis clearly an invention of Triboulet's!" And the fallacy of this conclusion the duke's plaisant had not sought to demonstrate.

Without question the young girl listened, but when he had finished her features hardened. Intuitively she divined a gap in the narrative—herself! From the dwarf's slur to Caillette's gentle look of surprise constituted a natural span for reflection. And the duke's fool, seeing her face turn cold, attributed it perhaps to another reason. Her story recurred to him: she was no longer a nameless jestress; an immeasurable distance separated a mere plaisant from the survivor of one of the noblest, if most unfortunate, families of France. She had not answered the night before when he had addressed her as the daughter of the constable; motionless as a statue had she gazed after him, and, remembering the manner of their parting, he now looked at her curiously.

"All's well that ends well," he said, "but I must crave indulgence, Lady Jacqueline, for having brought you into such peril."

She flushed. "Do you persist in that foolishness?" she returned quickly.

"Do you deny the right to be so called?"

"Did I not tell you the constable's daughter is dead?"

"To the world! But to the fool—may he not serve her?"

"Poor service!" she retorted. "A discredited mistress!"

"One I am minded for," he replied, a sudden flash in his eyes.

She looked away. Her lips curved.

"For how long?" she said, half mockingly, and touched her horse before he could reply.

What words had her action checked on his lips?

To serve her seemed a happiness that drowned all other ills; a selfish bond of subordination. Her misfortunes dignified her. Her worn gown was dearer in his eyes than courtly splendor, the disorder of her hair more becoming than nets of gold and coifs of jewels. He forgot their danger. The broad plain lay like a pleasure garden before them.

At the sight of a bush, white with flowers, she uttered an exclamation of pleasure and broke off a branch covered with fragrant blossoms as they rode by. Out of the depths of this storehouse of sweets a plundering humming bird flashed and vanished, a jewel from nature's crown! She held the branch to her face, and he glanced at her covertly. She was all jestress again. The cadence of that measured motion shaped itself to an ancient lyric in keeping with the song of birds, the blue sky and the wild roses.

"Hark, hark!
Pretty lark!
Little heedest thou my pain."

He bent his head, listening. He could scarcely hear the words. Was it a sense of new security that moved her, the reaction of their narrow escape, the knowledge they were leaving the chateau and all danger behind them?

"Hark, hark!
Pretty lark!"

Boom! Far in the distance sounded the discharge of a cannon, its iron voice the antithesis to the poet's dainty pastoral. As the report reverberated over the valley, from the grass innumerable insects arose; the din died away, the disturbed earth dwellers sank back to earth again. The song ceased from the young girl's lips, and, gazing quickly back, she could just distinguish above one of the parapets of the chateau a wreath, already nearly dissolved in the blue of the sky. The jester, who had also turned in his saddle, met her look of inquiry.

"It sounds like a signal of some kind, a salute, perhaps," he said.

"Or a call to arms?" she suggested. And he made no answer. "It means—pursuit!"

Silent they rode on, but more rapidly. With pale face and composed mien she kept by his side; her resolute expression reassured him, while her glance said, "Do not fear for me." Gradually had they been descending from the higher slopes of the country of which the chateau mount was the loftiest point and now were passing through the lower stretches of land.

Here the highway ran above fields inundated by recent rains and marshes converted into shining lakes. Out of the water uprose a grove of trees, spectral-like; screaming wild fowl skimmed the surface or circled above. The pastoral peace of the meadows, garden of the wild flower and home of the song bird, was replaced by a waste of desolation and wilderness. Long they dashed on through the loneliness of that land—a depressing flight. But more depressing than the abandoned and forlorn aspect of the scene was the consciousness that their steeds had become road worn and were unable to respond. Long, long, they continued this pace, a strained period of suspense, and then the fool drew rein.

"Look, Jacqueline," he said. "The river!"

Before them, fed by the rivulets from the distant hills, the foaming current threatened to overflow its banks. Already the rising waters touched the flimsy wooden structure that spanned the torrent. Contemplatively he regarded it and then, placing his hand for a moment on hers, said encouragingly:

"Perhaps, after all, we are borrowing trouble?"

She shook her head. "If I could but think it," she answered. Something seemed to rise in her throat. "A moment I forgot and—was not unhappy! But now I feel as though the end was closing about us."

He tightened his grasp. "You are worn with fatigue—fanciful," he replied.

"The end!" she repeated passionately. "Yes, the end!" and threw off his hand. "Look!"

He followed her eyes. "Waving plumes!" he cried. "And drawing nearer! Come, Jacqueline, let us ride on!"

"How?" she answered in a lifeless tone. "The bridge will not hold."

For answer he turned his horse to it; proceeded slowly across. It wavered and bent. Her wide opened eyes followed him. Once she lifted her hand to her breast and then became conscious he stood on the opposite bank, calling her to follow. She started. A strange smile was on her lips, and, touching her horse sharply, she obeyed.

"Is it to death he has called me?" she asked herself.

In her ears sounded the swash and eddying of the current. She closed her eyes to keep from falling, when she felt a hand on the bridle, and in a moment had reached the opposite shore. The jester made no motion to remount, but remained at her horse's head, closely surveying the road they had traveled.

"Must we go on?" she said mechanically.

"Only one of them can cross at a time," he answered, without stirring. "It is better to meet them here."

"Oh," she spoke up, "if the waters would only rise a little more and carry away the bridge!"

He glanced quickly around him, weighing the slender chance for success if he made that last desperate stand, and then, grasping a loose plank, began using it as a lever against one of the weakened supports of the bridge. Soon the beam gave way and the structure, now held but at the middle and one side, had already begun to sag when from around the curve of the highway appeared Louis of Hochfels and a dozen of his followers.

The free baron rode to the brim of the torrent, regarded the flood and the bridge and stopped. He was mounted on a black Spanish barb whose glistening sides were flecked with foam. A cloak of cloth of gold fell from his brawny shoulders; his heavy, red face looked out from beneath a sombrero fringed with the same metal. A gleam of grim recollection shone from his bloodshot eyes as they rested on the fool.

"Oh, there you are!" he shouted, with savage satisfaction. "Out of the frying pan into the fire, or, rather—for you escaped the fagots at Notre Dame—out of the fire into the frying pan!"

Above the tumult of the torrent his stentorian tones were plainly heard. Without response the jester inserted the plank between the structure and the middle support. The other, perceiving his purpose, uttered an execration that was drowned by the current and irresolutely regarded the means of communication between the two shores, obviously undetermined about trusting his great bulk to that fragile intermedium. Here was a temporary check on which he had not calculated. But if he demurred about crossing himself the free baron did not long display the same infirmity of purpose regarding his followers.

"Over with you!" he cried angrily to them. "The lightest first! Fifty pistoles to the first across!" And then calling out to the fool: "In half an hour you, my fine wit cracker, shall be hanging from a branch. As for the maid—she is a witch, I am told—we will test her with drowning."

Tempted by their leader's offer, one of the troopers, a lank, muscular looking fellow, at once drove the spurs into his horse. Back and forth moved the lever in the hands of the jester. The soldier was midway on the bridge when it sank suddenly to one side. A moment it acted as a dam; then bridge horse and rider were swept away with a crash and carried downward with the driving flood. Vainly the trooper sought to turn his steed toward the shore; the debris from the structure soon swept him from his saddle. Striking out strongly, he succeeded in catching a trailing branch from a tree on the bank, but the torrent gripped his body fiercely and, after a desperate struggle, tore him away.

As his helpless follower disappeared the free baron gave a brief command and he and his troops posted rapidly down the bank. The young girl breathed a sigh of relief. Her eyes were yet full of awe from the death struggle she had witnessed. Fascinated, her gaze had rested on the drowning wretch—the pale face, the look of terror—but now she was called to a realization of their own situation by the abrupt departure of the squad on the opposite shore.

"They have gone!" she cried in surprise as the party vanished among the trees.

"But not far." The jester's glance was bent down the stream. "See where the torrent broadens. They expect to find a fording place."

Once more they set forth; he knowing full well that the free baron and his men, accustomed to the mountain torrents, unbridled by the melting snows, would in all likelihood soon find a way to cross the freshet. His mind misgave him that he had loosened the bridge at all. Would it not have been better to force the conflict there, when he had the advantage of position? But, right or wrong, he had made his choice and must abide by it.

To add to his discomfiture, his horse, which at first had lagged, now began to limp, and as they proceeded this lameness became more apparent. With a twinge of heart he plied the spur more strongly, and the willing but broken creature responded as best it could. Again it hastened its pace, seeming in a measure to recover strength and endurance, then, without warning, lurched, fell to its knees and quickly rolled over on its side. Jacqueline glanced back; the animal lay motionless; the rider was vainly endeavoring to rise. Pale with apprehension, she returned and, dismount-

Bridge, horse and rider were swept away.

ing, stood at the head of the prostrate animal. Determinedly the jester struggled, the perspiration standing on his brow in beads. At length, breathing hard, he rested his head on his elbow.

"Here am I caught to stay, Jacqueline," he said. "The horse is dead. But you—you must still go on."

With clasped hands she stood looking down at him. She scarcely knew what he was saying; her mind seemed in a stupor; with apathetic eyes she gazed down the road. But the accident had happened in a little hollow, so that the outlook in either direction along the highway was restricted.

"My emperor is both chivalrous and noble," continued the plaisant quickly. "Go to him. You must not wait here longer. I did not tell you, but I think the free baron will have no difficulty in crossing. You have no time to lose. Go, and—goodby!"

"But—he had a long way to ride—even if he could cross," she said, and she dropped on her knees and took his head in her arms.

The sound of horses' hoofs beat upon the air.

"Jacqueline, go! There is yet time!"

Abruptly she arose. He held out his hand for a last quick pressure, a godspeed to this stanch maid comrade of the motley.

"God keep you, mistress!"

Standing in the road gazing up the hollow, she neither saw his hand nor caught his words of farewell. An expression of bewilderment had overspread her features. Quickly she glanced in the opposite direction.

"See, see!" she exclaimed excitedly.

But he was past response. Overcome by pain in a last desperate attempt to regain his feet, he had lost consciousness. As he fell back, above the hill in the direction she was looking appeared the black plumes of a band of horsemen.

"No; they are not"—

Her glance rested on the jester lying there motionless, and, hastening to his side, she lifted his head and placed it in her lap. So the troopers of the Emperor Charles—a small squad of outriders—found her sitting in the road, her hair disordered about her, her face the whiter against that black shroud.

CHAPTER XXV.

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 magnificent and more dreaded coat of arms of the emperor, the royal rival and one time jailer of the proud French monarch.

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 aigret, 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 fetes 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 pretender, 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 unfaltering. 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 cannot 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 re-entered his pavilion.

A shadow fell across the tapestry, and 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 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. "The constable was a proud, haughty man; yes, overproud, 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 clinched. 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."

Silently 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, 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

"He is no mere fool!"

clown, rather than leave him to his fate?" continued Charles inexorably, recalling the words of the outsiders.

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."

"God alone knows the hearts of monarchs!" he said somberly.

Moved by his unexpected leniency and the aspect of his cheerlessness, she immediately repented of her response.

"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."

CHAPTER XXVI.

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 into 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—jestress"

"No."

For all the information he would volunteer the man might have been Dr. 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 yearning 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 jestress, 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 misgivings, 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 cortege of Louis of Rochfels 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 Louis 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 were 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 ascendency 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 joculatrix, 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