

THE TURBULENT DUCHESS

CHAPTER I

THE JESTER IS DEAD: LONG LIVE THE JESTER

A SUNLIT, prosperous land enjoying a noon-tide hour of siesta. From the vantage ground of the high road was a wide prospect of smiling fields promising a plentiful harvest presently. Workers, busy since the dawn, rested over their midday meal in the shade of a tree or under a hedgerow. To right and left ran the road, here lost for a while in a dip in the landscape, there gleaming white upon the hillside; a deserted road save for two figures looking small in the far distance, wayfarers on the tramp, or perchance pilgrims journeying to some distant shrine.

Immediately behind the road lay a wood, the sunlight piercing it and dappling its uneven, flower-spread floor with delicate tracery; a sleeping, silent wood, in whose depths Nature might plan and fashion as she listed, undisturbed.

So it seemed for a while as the two figures upon the road drew slowly nearer, and then the silence was suddenly and rudely broken. There was quick movement, noisy laughter, strident voices uttering meaningless oaths, a habit with men who talk much and to little purpose.