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Under the Rose

By FREDERIC S. ISHAM,
Author of the "Strollers."

CHAPTER XVII (Continued).

"Should I leave you, Jacqueline, would remain to bear the truth," he said reflectively. "The jester, when he awakes, will tell the story—who brought the wine, who secured the prisoner. To go but one course is open—and he glanced down upon the prostrate man—to silence him forever."

"She started and half shrank from him. 'Could you do it?'"

He shook his head. "In fair contest I would have slain him, but now—it is not he, but I who am helpless. And yet what is such a soft life worth? Nothing; everything, however, ever justifies. I must trust to other means, and—thank you."

The outstretched hand seemed not to see, but tapped the floor of the cell yet more impatiently with her foot, as was her fashion when angered. Here was the prison door open and the captive, enamored of confinement, at the culminating point of his reason why he should not flee. To have gone thus far, to have eliminated the jester and then to draw back, with the keys in his hand—truly no scene in a comedy could be more extravagant. The girl laughed nervously.

"What egotists men are!" she said. "Good Sir Jester, in offering you liberty I am serving myself—myself, you understand!" she repeated. "Let us hasten on, lest in defeating your own purpose you defeat mine."

"What will you answer when he"—indicating the drugged turnkey—"accuses you?"

"Was ever such perversity!" was all she deigned to reply, biting her lip.

"You are somewhat willful yourself, Jacqueline," he returned, with that smile which so exasperated her.

"Listen," she said at length, slowly, impressively. "You need have no fear of me when you go. I tell you that more danger remains to me by your staying than in your going; that your obstinacy leaves me unprotected; that your company would be a boon to me. By the memory of my mother, by the truth of this holy book—drawing a little volume passionately from her bosom—I swear to what I have told you. Eagerly her eyes met his searching gaze, and he read in their depths only truth and candor. "I have a quest for you. It concerns my life, my happiness. All I have done for you has been for this end."

Her eyes fell, but she raised them again quickly. "Will you accept a mission from one who is not a prisoner?"

"Name her not!" exclaimed the jester sharply, and then recovering himself, added less brusquely: "What is it you want, mistress?"

"This is no time nor place to tell it," she went on rapidly, seeing by his face that his dogged humor had melted before her appeal, "but soon, where we part, I shall know all—what it is I wish to intrust to your hands."

A moment she waited. "Your argument is unavailing, Jacqueline," he said finally. "I am not a prisoner, but I believe you, so—have your way."

"This cloak, then," handing him a garment she had brought with her, "drape over you. I shall follow you, and I will meet any one if it serves as a disguise, and here is a sword," bringing forth a weapon that she had carried concealed beneath a flowing mantle. "Can you use it?"

"I can but try, Jacqueline," he replied, fastening the girdle about his waist and half drawing and then thrusting the blade back into the scabbard. "It seems a price less weapon," he added, his eyes lingering on the richly tinted hilt, "and his doubtless been wielded by a gallant hand."

"Speak not of that," she retorted sharply, a strange flash in her eyes. "He who handled it was the bravest, noblest; he broke off abruptly, and she left the cell, he locking the door behind him."

Down the dimly lighted passage she walked rapidly, while the jester, tractably and silently followed. Consciously, knowing well the puzzling interior plan of the old black pile, she traversed the labyrinth that was to lead them without, finally pausing before a small door, which she tried.

"Usually it is unlocked," she said in surprise. "I never knew it fastened before."

"Is that our only way out of the cell?"

"The only safe way. Perhaps one of the keys—"

But he had already knelt before the door, and the young girl watched him with obvious anxiety. He vainly essayed to turn the keys, and so that he now strove to fit the lock. It slipped in easily and the stubborn bolt shot back.

Entering, he closed the door behind them and hastily looked around, discovering that they stood in a crypt, the central part of which was occupied by a burial vault. In the crypt chapels were a number of statues in marble and bronze, most of these rude, antique, yet not of indifferent workmanship, especially one before which the jester, in spite of the urgency of the moment, stopped as if impelled by an irresistible impulse. This monument, so real the inscription, had been erected by the renowned constable of Duhrus to his young and faithful consort Anne.

But a part of a minute the girl gazed, with a new and softened expression, upon the marble likeness of the last fair mistress of the castle and then hurriedly crossed the old mosaic pavement, reaching a narrow flight of stairs, which she swiftly ascended. A door that yielded to the foot's shoulder led into a deserted court, on one side of which were the crumbling walls of the chapel. Here several dark birds perched unaccountably on the dead branch of a massive oak that stood in the center of the courtyard. In its desolation the oak might have been typical of the proud family, once rulers of the castle, whose corporeal strength had long since mingled with the elements.

This open space the two fugitives quickly traversed, passing through a high arched entrance to an olden bridge that spanned a moat. Long ago had the feudal castle been overthrown by France, yet above the keystone appeared not the salamander, the king's heraldic emblem, but the almost lifeless device of the old constable. Beyond the great ditch outstretched a rolling country, on which the jester gazed with eager eyes, while his companion

swiftly led the way to a clump of willow and aspen on the other side of the moat. Beneath the spreading branches were tethered two horses, saddled and bridled. Wonderingly he glanced from them to her.

"From whence did you conjure them, gentle mistress?" asked the fool.

"Somehow I knew placed them there."

"But why two horses, good Jacqueline?"

"Because I am minded to show you the path through the wood," she replied.

"You might as well be served. Give me your hand, sir. I am not to have my own way." And as he reluctantly extended his palm she placed her foot upon it, springing the chase she kept her seat, her little figure swaying to the movements of the steed. Soon the brighter green of her gown flattered amid the sombre tinted pines that became wilder and more forbidding as they swung to the movements of the steed. Here reigned an austere silence, a stillness that now became the more startlingly broken.

"You ride farther, Jacqueline?" said the fool.

"A little farther."

"I will be far to return," he protested.

"I have no fear," she answered tranquilly.

Again he let her have her way as one would yield to a willful child. On and on they sped, past the place where the deer now crossed the broader path, through an ever varying forest, now on one side a rocky basin overrun with trees and shrubs, and on the other hand, a great gorge in whose depths flowed a whispering stream. Yonder appeared the grey walls of an ancient monastery, one part only of which was habitable; a turn in the road allowed it up as though abruptly to come from the demolition time was slowly to bring about. On and on, until the way became wilder and the wood more overgrown with bushes and tangled shrubbery, when she suddenly stopped her horse.

He understood. At last they were to meet. And, remembering what he owed to her, the jester suddenly found himself regretting that here their paths separated forever. Swiftly his mind flew back to their first meeting, when she had flouted him in Fools' hall. A perverse, capricious maid—how she had over crossed him, and yet nursed him!

Attentively he regarded her. The customary pallor of her face had given way to a faint tinge; her eyes were humid, dewy bright; beneath the little cap the curls seemed to have been the delectable of those later day reformers, the curings of Calvinists and Lutherans.

"A will of the wisp," he thought. "A man might follow and never grasp her."

Did she read what he felt, that mingled gratitude and perplexity? Her clear eyes seemed to have a peculiar manner over the thoughts of others. Now they expressed only mockery.

"The greater danger is over," she said quietly. "From now on there is less fear of your being taken."

"Thank to you!" he answered, searching her with his glance.

Here he doubted not she would make known the quest of which she had spoken. Whatever it might be, he would faithfully require her, even to making his own purpose subservient to it.

"It is now time," she said demurely, "to acquaint you with the mission. Of course you will accept it?"

"Can you ask?" he answered earnestly. "To serve with my life."

"To serve with my life," she continued. "Then we had better go on," she continued.

"But, mademoiselle, I thought—"

"That we were ready to leave you. Not at all. I am not yet ready to leave you. In fact, good Master Jester, I am going with you. I am the quest; I am the mission. Are you sorry you promised?"

CHAPTER XVIII.

She quest, the mission! With growing amazement he stared at her, but she returned his look as though enjoying his surprise.

"You do not seem overpleased with the prospect of my company," she observed. "Or perhaps you fear I may incur your wrath with mock irony. Confess, the service is more onerous than you expected?"

Beneath her flushed yet smiling face lay a nervous earnestness he could divine, but not fathom.

"Different, certainly," he answered brusquely.

Her eyes flashed. "How complimentary you are!"

"For your own sake!"

"My sake!" she exclaimed passionately. Her little hand closed fiercely; proudly her eyes burned into his. "Think you I have taken this step idly? That it is but the caprice of a moment? Oh, no, no, it was necessary to flee from the court. But to whom could a woman turn? Not to the court—tools of the king. One person only was there; he whose life was as good as forfeited. Do you understand?"

"That my life belongs to you? Yes. But that you should leave the court—where you have influence, friends?"

"Influence! Friends!"

"Tell me, Jacqueline—why do you wish to go?" he said wonderingly.

"Because I wish to," she returned briefly and stroked the shining neck of her horse.

Indeed, how could he appraise him of events which were now the talk of the court—how France, evincing a sudden interest as strong as it was unexpected, had exchanged Triboulet for herself, and the princess, at the king's request, had taken the bufoon with her and left the girl behind; the jester's welcome to the household of the queen of Navarre, a subsequent bewildering shower of gifts, the complacent, although respectful, attentions of the king; how she had endured these ad-

vances until no course remained save the one she had taken! No, she could not tell the duke's fool all this.

Between folle and fugitive fell a mutual reserve. Did he divine some portion of the truth? Are there moments when the mind, tuned to a tension, may almost feel what another experiences? Way had the girl not gone with her mistress? He remembered she had evaded this question when he had asked it. Looking at her, for the first time it crossed his mind and would be held beautiful, an odd, strange beauty, imperious, yet girlish, and the conviction crept over him there might be more than a shadow of excuse for her mad flight.

Beneath his scrutiny her face grew cold, disdainful. "Like all men," she said sharply, "as though to stay the trend of his thoughts, you are prodigal in promises, but chary in fulfillment."

"Where is it your pleasure to go?" he asked quickly.

"That we shall speak of hereafter," she answered haughtily.

"Forward, then."

"I can ride on alone," she demurred, "if—"

"Nay; 'tis I who crave the quest," he returned gravely.

Her face broke into smiles. "What a devoted cavalier!" she exclaimed. "Come, then. Let us ride into the world. At least it is bright and shining today. Do you fear to follow me, sir, or do you believe with the handbook that I am an enchantress and cast over whom I will the spell of diablerie?"

"You may be an enchantress, mistress, but the spell you cast is not diablerie," he answered in the same tone.

"Fine words!" she said mockingly. "What it remains to be seen into what a world I am going, and how I shall come out."

Now the road so narrowed he fell behind. The character of the country had changed. Some time ago they had passed out of the wild forest and had begun to traverse a great level plain, broken with stubble. As far as the eye could reach no other human figures were visible; the land outstretched apparently without end, and the sole signs of life, wheeving birds of prey, languidly floated in the air. At length she glanced around. Was it to reward herself the jester rode near, that she had not, unattended, entered that forbidding territory? Then she paused abruptly and the fool approached.

"By this time the turnkey should be relieved," she said.

"But not released," he answered, holding up the keys which he yet wore at his girdle. "They will have to come a long distance to find them," he continued, and threw the keys far away upon the sward. "They may not think of following on this road at all," she said. "It is the old castle thoroughfare, long since disused."

"And leads where?"

"Straight to the main road."

"How came you to know it?" he asked quickly.

"How? Because I lived in the castle before the king built the palace and the new thoroughfare," she answered slowly. "You lived in the castle, then, when it was the residence of the proud constable of Duhrus? You must have been but a child," he asked reflectively.

"Yes, but children may have long memories."

"In your case, certainly. How well you knew all the passages and corridors of the castle!"

She responded carelessly and changed the conversation. "The thoroughfare, as they pressed forward side by side, but a single human figure during all those hours they encountered, and that when the afternoon had fairly worn away. For some time they had pursued their journey silently, when at a turn in the road the horse of the jester shied and started back. At the same time an unpleasant looking man in Franciscan attire rose suddenly out of the stubble by the wayside. In his hand he held a heavy staff, newly cut from the forest; a stock which in his brawny arms seemed better adapted for a weapon than as a prop for his sturdy frame. From the rope girdle about his waist depended a rosary whose great beads would have served the fingers of Cyclops and a most diminutive, leathern bound prayer book. At the appearance of the fool and his companion he opened an enormous mouth and in a voice proportionately large began to voice right vigorously:

"Good people, good people, for the mother church! Charity in the name of the Holy Mother! In the name of the saints, the apostles and the evangelists, St. John, St. Peter, St. Paul, the brotherly, suddenly, staring stupidly at the jester.

"The duke's fool!" he exclaimed. "What are you doing here? A plague upon it! You have as many lives as a monk."

"Call yourself a monk, rascal!" asked the jester contemptuously.

"At times, Charity, good fool!" the canting rogue again began to whine, edging nearer. "Charity, mistress, for the sake of the prophets and the disciples, the seven sacraments, the Feast of the Pentecost and the Passover! In the name of the holy fathers, St. Sebastian, St. Michael, St.—"

But the fugitives had already sped on, and the unregenerate knave turned his pigmy presence into an unwholesome channel of oaths, waving his staff menacingly after them.

"I fear me," said the jester when they had put a goodly distance between themselves and the solitary figure, "yonder brother craves almsiving with his voice and enforces the bounty with his staff. Woe betide the pilgrim who fails within reach of his pilgrim's prop."

"You knew him?" he asked.

"I had the doubtful pleasure," he answered. "He was ready to kill me."

"Why?" in surprise.

"Because the duke wanted me out of the way."

She asked no further questions, although he could see by her brow she was thinking deeply. Was the duke, then, no better than a common assassin? She frowned, then gave an impatient exclamation. "It is inexplicable," she said, and rode the faster.

The jester, too, was silent, but his mind dwelt upon the future and its hazards. He liked their meeting with the false monk. Why was the Franciscan traveling in their direction? In the fading light and jesteress drew rein and, moved by the same purpose, looked about them. On the one hand was the deserted, desolate plain, over which lay a sullen, gathering mist; on the other, the sombre obscurity of the wood. Everywhere an ominous silence and overhead the crescent growing in luster.

"Do you see any sign of house or inn?" said the girl, peering afar down the road, which soon lost itself in the general monotony of the landscape.

"None, mistress."

"Then, as the darkness grows, we seem alike barren of farmhouse and tavern."

"What shall we do? I am full weary," she confessed.

"The forest offers the best protection," the jester suggested. Little as he favored delay, he realized the wisdom of sparing their horses. Moreover, her appeal was irresistible.

She gazed at him dubiously into that woody depth. "Why not rest by the wayside—in the moonlight?"

"I like not the open road," he answered. "But if you fear the darkness—"

For answer she guided her horse to the verge of the forest and lightly sprang to the ground. Upon a grassy knoll, but a little way within he spread his cloak.

"There, Jacqueline, is your couch," he said.

"But you?" she asked. "To rob you thus of your cloak seems ill comradeship."

"The cloak is yours," he returned. "As it is, you will find it but a hard bed."

"It will seem soft as down," she replied and seated herself on the hillock. In the gloom he could just distinguish the outline of her figure, with her elbow on her knee and her hair blacker than the shadows themselves. A long drawn, moaning sound, coming without warning behind her, caused the girl to turn.

"What is that?" she said quickly.

"The wind, Jacqueline. It is rising."

As truce spoke, like a monster it entered the forest. About them branches waved and tossed. A friendly star seen through the boughs lost itself behind a cloud. Yet the moon shone. Then another voice, deeper and despite the mists which clung to the ground. A crash of thunder or a flash of lightning would have relieved that sighing dolor which filled the little patch of timber with its melancholy sounds.

Suddenly above the plaint and murmur of wind and forest the low, clear voice of the girl arose. The melody was no ballad, aria or pastoral, such as he had before heard from her lips, but a simple hymn, the setting by Calvin. The jester started. How came to know that forbidden music? Not only to know, but to sing it as he had never heard it sung before. Sweetly it vibrated, her waywardness sunk in its swelling rhythm, its melody freighted with the treasure of her trust. As he listened he felt she was betraying to him the hidden well of her faith, the secret of her religion—that she, his companion, was proclaiming herself a heretic and therefore doubly an outcast.

A stanza and the melody died away on the wings of the tempest. His heart was beating violently. He looked expectantly toward her. Even more gently, like a lullaby to the turbulent night, the full measured cadence of the majestic psalm was again heard. Then another voice, deeper, fiercer, blended with that of the first singer. Unwavering she continued the song, as though it had been the most natural matter he should join his voice with hers. Fainter fell the harmony, then ceased altogether—a hymn destined to become interwoven with terrible memories, the tragic massacre of the Huguenots on the ill fated night of St. Bartholomew. Again prevailed the tristful dirge of the pines.

"You sing well, mistress," said the jester softly. "Is it true you are one of a hated sect?"

"As true as that you did not deny the heretic volume found in your room," she replied.

A silence ensued between them. "It was Marot placed the hymn there for us," she said at length. "He, too, is a heretic and would have saved us."

Thereafter the silence remained unbroken for some moments, and then "God keep you," he said, answered, softly.

"Good keep you," she answered, softly. Soon her deep breathing told him she was sleeping, and as he listened in fancy

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Mr. John Kinnes, Durham, Ont., gave the following account of his case: "For three or four years I suffered from good hard backache whenever I over-exercised myself. I got a bottle of Dr. Pitcher's Backache-Kidney Tablets and they took hold immediately, and by the time the bottle was finished I was cured."

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Mrs. Richard Meyers, Preston, Ont., says: "I had a severe pain in my back that gave me no relief. The day I took Dr. Pitcher's Backache-Kidney Tablets, however, I was cured. I am now free from the pain, and I no longer have that depressing weakness in the mornings as formerly."

If you suffer from backache or any kidney, bladder or urinary trouble, send for Dr. Pitcher's Backache-Kidney Tablets to be cured quickly and permanently. See that you get Dr. Pitcher's Backache-Kidney Tablets.

Go to Chocated Coated Tablets or, at druggists or by mail. The Dr. Zina Pitcher Co., Toronto.

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