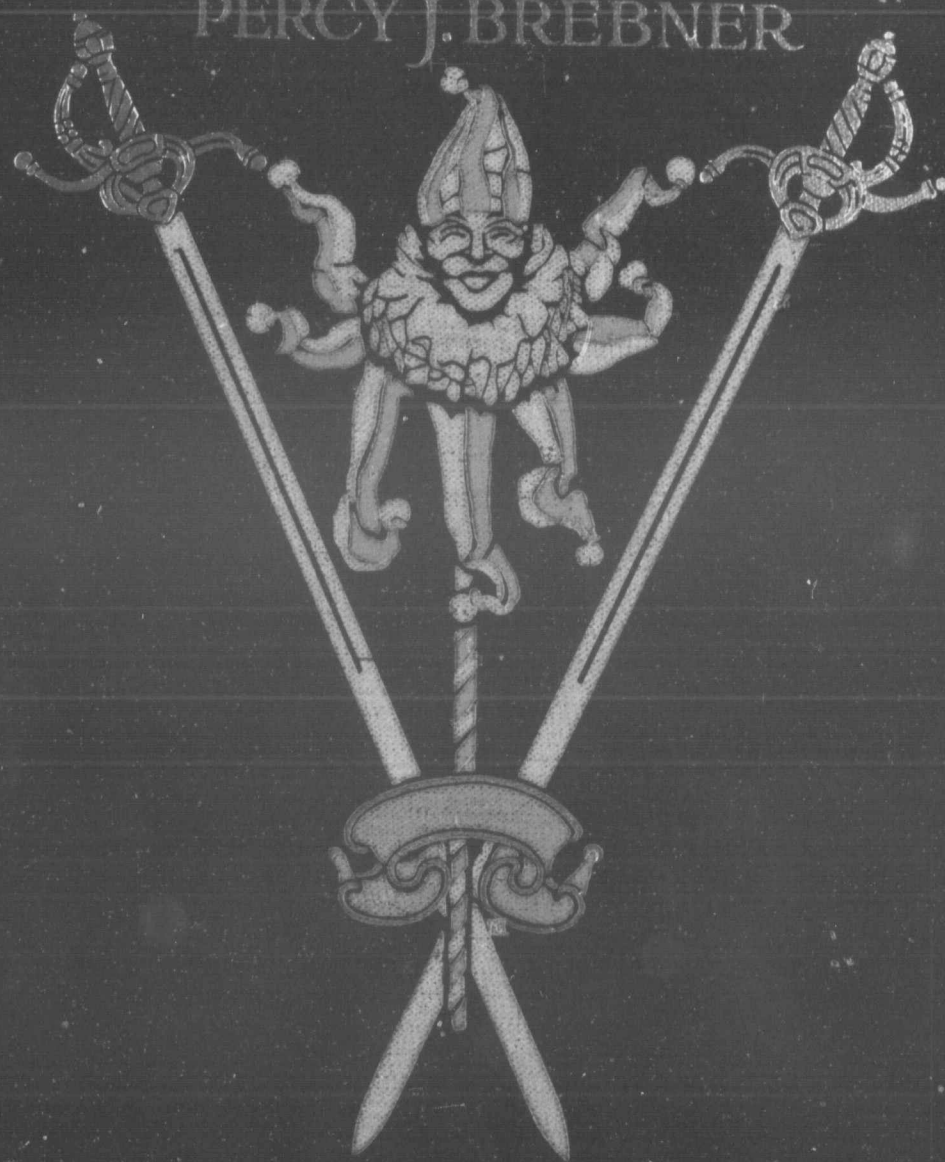


The
TURBULENT
DUCHESS

PERCY J. BREBNER

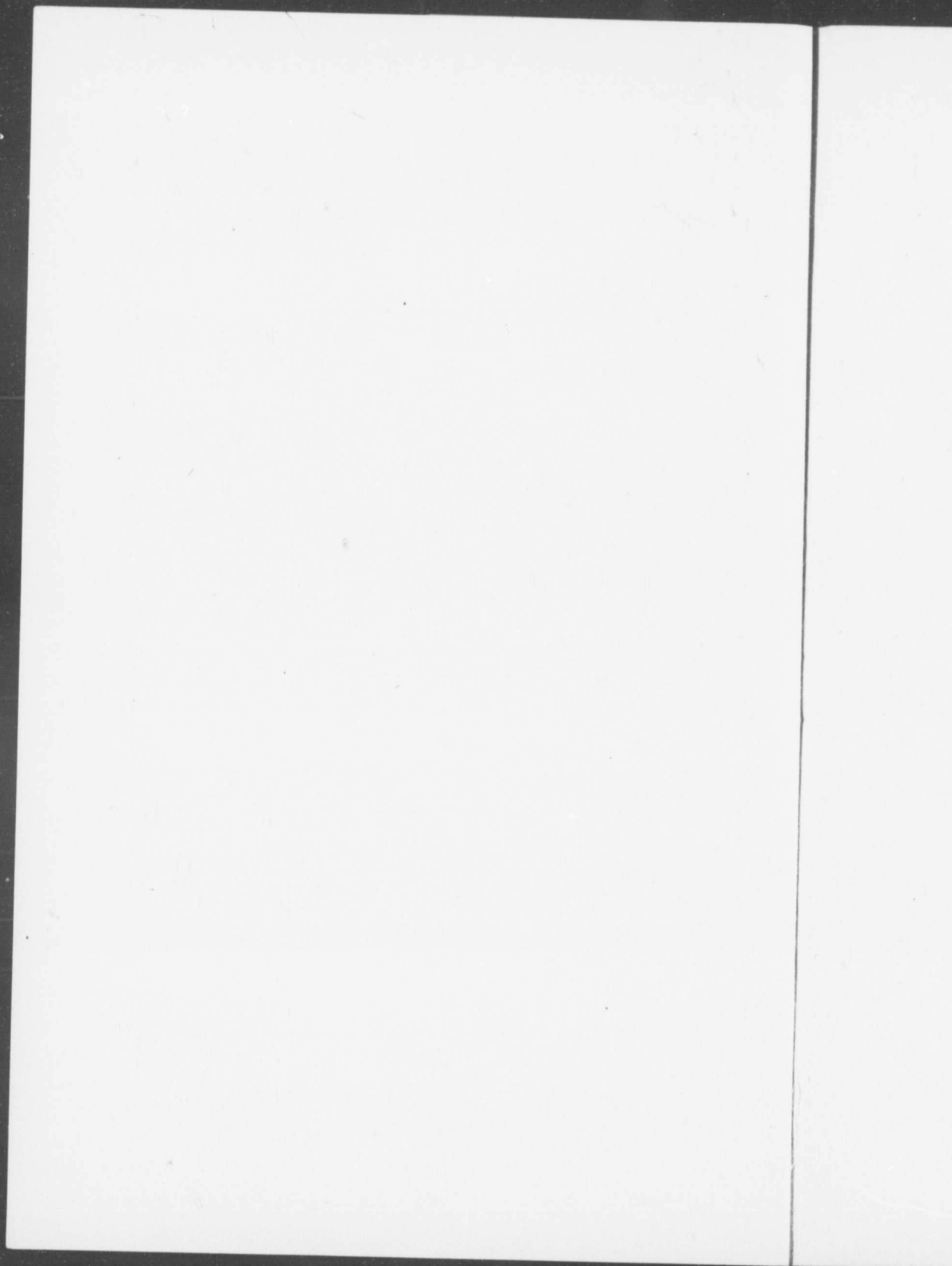


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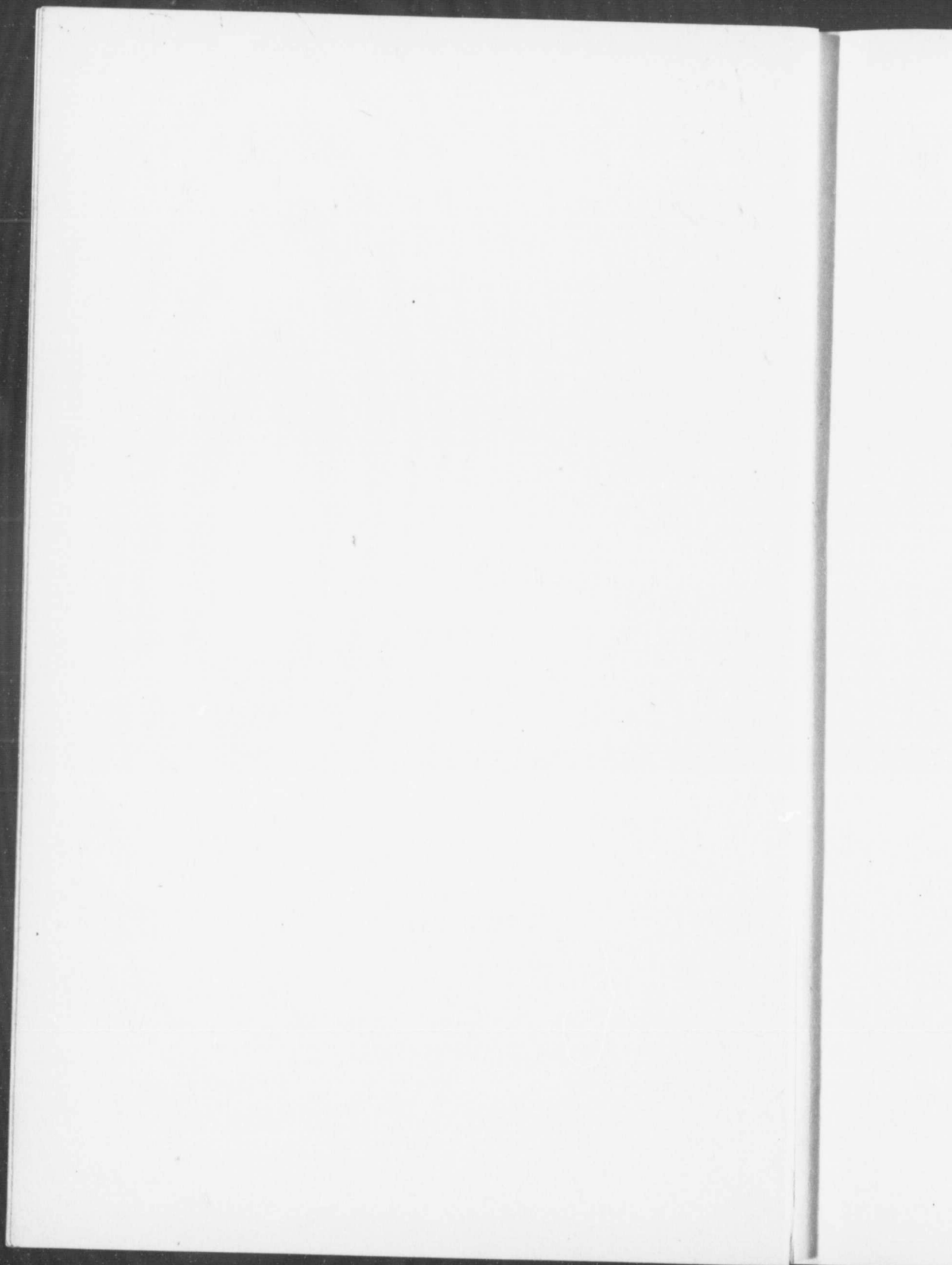
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THE TURBULENT DUCHESS







“He who would pass this door must needs give me a lesson in swordsmanship first.”

FRONTISPIECE. See Page 331.

THE TURBULENT DUCHESS

BY

PERCY BREBNER

AUTHOR OF "PRINCESS MARITZA," "THE LITTLE
GRAY SHOE," ETC.

WITH FRONTISPICE BY

F. VAUX WILSON

TORONTO
WILLIAM BRIGGS

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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.

"It's better here in the open, comrades. When the sun's out he's a fool who would stay in the house."

There was the clatter of accoutrements and the metallic ring of flagons.

"A toast to grace the liquor," said one.

"And a song. Why not a song?" shouted another in a raucous voice. "Gustav shall sing to us. It will serve to blow the dust from his throat."

There was some protest from Gustav, drowned by heavy fists pounding a wooden table, then a moment's silence followed by a man's voice, singing:

"Which best shall serve as a theme for a toast,
Liquor or maiden, which like you the most?
Love is a phantom which leads us to pain,
Wine gives its pleasures again and again.
So drink, deeply drink
If your toast be as mine;
Who cares for love
While there's wine—good wine?"

There was a noisy chorus, tankards were drained, and the table was pounded again, bringing a fat and short-winded landlord bustling from the house with more liquor.

"Wake up those sleepy old bones of yours," said a great bearded trooper in a voice which matched his ample proportions. "It's a brimming cup we'll have for each stanza. Sing on, Gustav, my son. Pray heaven no unlucky blade ever slits your weasand, for it's a sweet pipe you have which I swear might be envied by many a paid singer."

"Maids will deceive, 'tis their fashion we know,
We're not the men to believe them I trow:
Maid's kiss for fool, but for man who is wise
That kiss is best which in the wine cup lies:
Then drink, deeply drink
If your heart be as mine;

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Maids may go hang,
Give me wine — good wine!"

Louder than before came the chorus, starting echoes in the depths of the wood; the workers, resting in the fields, turned their heads to listen; it reached even to the wayfarers drawing nearer upon the road.

Set back in this square enclosure, cut out of the wood long since, was the tavern of the Three Shields, emblematic of this good land of Podina, the smallest and most prosperous of those States which had watched with anxiety the Duchy of Brandenburg growing into the Kingdom of Prussia. But for the painted board set on a pole by the roadside — the work of some wandering Florentine whose art had come to the rescue of his pocket when payment was demanded for board and lodging — a stranger would have passed without knowing of the tavern's existence. Truth to tell, it did a sleepy trade year in and year out, and the fat landlord, somnolent like his house, was at his wits' end to-day with so much serving.

"There's truth in the song," said the bearded trooper. "More wine, landlord. It seems to me these flagons of yours hold short measure."

"I'm none so sure the song is true, Hans," said one.

"Ah, you're young and of that company of fools Gustav sings about. You'll grow older, that's certain, and maybe wiser — which is doubtful."

"I warrant there are maids in Metzburg capable of making fools of us all," was the sharp retort. "Maybe it's a pity, but God made them so, and there's the devil of it."

"Maids go hang," laughed Hans, "but I know of better wine than this in a Metzburg cellar, and I would I were there. There's dust inside me an inch thick with

this search from end to end of the country for a fool."

"A fool, sir!" exclaimed the landlord.

"Aye, you may well fancy we've come to the end of our journey, but you're too fat for the part. And it takes a clever man to be the kind of fool we're looking for, though for that matter the last fool was a pretty dull fellow to my way of thinking. It was heavy work laughing at his humour."

"It must be true that I am a fool as some have said, for I do not understand what you mean," said the landlord.

"What! Did you never hear tell of Bergolet?"

"Never, sir."

"Lord, what it is to live out of the world! Bergolet was a fool, paid for being a fool at the court of the Duchess, and Bergolet is dead."

"And you would fill his place?"

"No, Master Landlord, I would not, but Her Grace would. All women have strange fancies, and the Duchess has more than her fair share of them. It pleases her to cling to custom like limpet to rock. A fool there has always been at Court so a fool she will have. Mark you, there are plenty of unpaid ones there already, but they will not suffice. Bergolet came originally out of France, they say, but rumour has it that the late Duke found him in your village yonder."

"I never heard of him."

"For all that he existed, and is dead. Her Grace is in the village hoping to find one of his family to take the vacant place. Presently she will be here, and then for Metzburg please heaven and that cellar I know of in the market place."

"Coming here! The Duchess!"

"And if no fool has been found she'll be in a tem-

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pestuous humour," said Hans. "It's a comfort to know that the worst storm must have an ending. Besides, she may like the cut of your figure and the lack of grace in those square legs of yours. They do not please me, but you can never tell what will please a woman."

The landlord looked at the big trooper, vaguely wondering whether he had treated him with sufficient respect. Truly he must be a person of distinction to speak of Her Grace in this familiar manner. The landlord had never seen the Duchess, but strange stories concerning her had found their way even to the seclusion of the Three Shields. The devil's own temper was in her, said one report, so that it was no easy matter to be in her company; yet other gossip declared her beauty to be so great that a score of princes in Christendom were ready to be at one another's throats because of her. Until this moment the tales had not interested the landlord, but now there was an unpleasant trembling in his knees.

"I'll tell them in the house," he said in an awed tone. "I'll do my best. Perhaps, sir, you'll explain it is my best, bad as it may seem. Heaven grant she's found some sort of a fool to put her in a good humour."

Laughter followed the landlord as he ambled nervously into the house, and then Gustav held up his hand.

"Horses on the road," said Hans, and he began looking to his dress, pulling it this way and that and stiffening his figure to fill it adequately.

The cavalcade was rapidly approaching, and a trooper, riding in advance, dismounted hastily at the entrance to the enclosure.

"Is he found?" Gustav asked.

"No," was the answer.

"Then it's no time for asking favours," said Hans, and the landlord, who had come to the doorway, marvelled to see this loud-voiced gentleman move quickly to the most retired spot he could discover.

With a sudden confusion of pawing hoofs, gruff voices, and jingling harness, the cavalcade came to a halt upon the road, and a moment later a woman swept into the enclosure, followed by two or three gentlemen who looked neither happy nor comfortable. She glanced at the troopers who had retired to one side of the open space, then at the house with the fat landlord standing in the doorway; and when she reached the table she hammered sharply upon it with her riding whip. The landlord did not move, he could not; his feet seemed to be fastened to the heavy stone doorstep. All his preconceived ideas of the Duchess were scattered like loose leaves before a gale in autumn; he could do nothing but stare at the woman before him.

"Wine there if you have any that is fit to drink," and she gave another vigorous rap on the table.

The landlord jumped as if he had been struck, and disappeared into the house in a fashion ludicrous enough to have provoked a roar of laughter had there been even the ghost of a smile on the Duchess's face.

Rumour had made free with the character and appearance of Her Grace of Podina. She had the devil's own temper it was said, and her attitude as she seated herself on a stool by the table, and flicked the dust from her skirt with her riding whip, seemed to confirm the statement. A man by mischance made in woman's shape, someone had once called her, and the gibe had made her furious. She had no desire to be like a man. She believed in women, resented the superiority which

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men habitually assumed, and was determined to show the fallacy in such an attitude. For all his strength and skill in arms, man, sooner or later, bowed to the will of some woman. Where was his diplomacy that a woman could not match, his intrigues for good or ill which she could not better — or ruin if it pleased her? What power of thought had a man which a woman could not equal? or what skill in argument that she could not turn to ridicule if it suited her purpose? Conscious of her power and personality, the Duchess meant to rule. She was no figure-head for others to turn this way or that. Her will must be paramount, and since none of the gentlemen with her seemed inclined to disturb her present isolation, it appeared that she had succeeded in enforcing obedience.

Yet, when gossip had said she was beautiful and desirable as a woman, it had not lied; indeed, it had barely said enough. She was a creature of moods, varied and transient, so that a description of her to-day would to-morrow seem no portraiture at all. She gave the impression of being taller than she was, perhaps because every movement was full of self-confidence. She never seemed to forget for an instant the high position to which she had been born, and was always ready to combat opposition. Not even her chosen ministers could boast of enjoying her full confidence. It was for her to command, for others to obey, no matter how unexpected those commands might be. Her grey eyes often flashed with anger, yet there were depths in them where Love might be hidden, awaiting that moment when he should come gloriously into his kingdom. The line of her mouth was often set hardly, but the moment a smile touched her lips she changed as completely as an April day is transformed by a burst of sunlight. Wind

and the sun had kissed her cheeks to a warm colour, her hair was of that brown which glints with gold at a turn of the head, and the little hands were strong and capable. She was a personality, a force, answerable only to herself for anything she might do or say. In a score of ways she had succeeded in impressing this personality upon all who came within its influence. She had won respect or fear, love or hatred, according to the natures upon which this personality played. At every turn she asserted herself. Her judgments were often unexpected, sometimes dangerous. She strove to keep her court distinct from any other court in Europe; even in matters of dress she would not be ruled by fashion. Her enemies spoke of her as a woman of whims and postures, yet the fact remained that there was more prosperity in Podina than in any of the neighbouring States. If her judgments, in their severity or leniency, seemed dangerous, they had constantly proved wise in their result. If she outraged fashion at times, it was only that the woman in her might clothe Her Grace of Podina in a manner which should show her to the best advantage.

To-day she was angry, unreasonable, even petulant. She had set her heart upon a whim only to meet with failure, and it was aggravating to know that those about her were not ill-pleased at her want of success.

"Karl," she said suddenly, and one of the gentlemen standing a little behind her moved quickly to her side: "Karl, is it not strange that in all this land of mine I cannot discover a man capable of being a fool?"

Prince Karl was her cousin and presumptive heir. It was said she would presently marry him.

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"Is it so strange?" he asked.

"Do you always answer a question by asking another?"

He paused, weighing his words before uttering them. He was always careful not to offend the Duchess.

"I think you forget, Cousin, that the times have changed," he said slowly.

"How should that affect me?" she asked, clasping her knee and tilting herself back upon the stool to look up into his face.

"Once there was some honour in being a court jester, but now —"

"Well, and now?"

"In our days the world gallops, leaving many old customs behind as ridiculous and childish. I do not say I agree with this galloping world, but whether we like it or not we are carried along with it. If you ask my advice, I think it would be wise to let Bergolet be remembered as the last of the jesters."

"I do not remember asking your advice," she returned. "I have decided there shall be a fool; all that is necessary is to find one."

As Kar stepped back, knowing that it was useless to argue with her in this mood, the landlord ambled nervously from the house and set wine upon the table. Bowing as low as his fat body would permit, he would have made for the security of the house again had not the Duchess touched him with her whip.

"Stay. Did you ever hear of Bergolet?"

"Yes, Your Grace," gasped Boniface. "He was a fool who came from the village yonder, and he's dead and buried."

"You're not as sleepy as you look. Tell me —"

"At least I suppose he's buried," the landlord added

hurriedly, fearing that he might have said too much;
"I know he's dead."

"Tell me, are there any of his family in the village now?"

"Please Your Grace, I've never heard of them."

"When did you last see Bergolet?"

"I never saw him."

"Hear of him then?"

"To-day for the first time. That gentleman told me all about him," and he pointed towards the trooper across the enclosure, though Hans had succeeded in effacing himself behind his comrades.

"Truly, this should be a good neighbourhood to search in," said the Duchess.

"It is a fine neighbourhood," said the landlord believing that he was expected to answer. He started as the Duchess again touched him with her whip.

"Master Landlord, I am looking for a fool, show me one, and however long your purse may be I will fill it."

"Indeed, Your Grace, you may look at me. They say I am a fool and a dull one."

With a musical ripple of laughter the Duchess stood up, and the aspect of the enclosure was changed in a moment. The gentlemen came forward laughing, as if they had never known a moment's fear of this gracious lady. The troopers fell into an easier attitude, and Hans was no longer afraid to show himself.

"Pay for the wine, Karl, and give the fellow something over for his wit, unconscious though it be. Rather than return to Metzburg empty handed I have a mind to rob the Three Shields of its landlord."

As Karl threw the money on the table, feeling some

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gratitude to mine host for relieving the strain, there were sounds of struggle and hurrying feet, the snapping of twigs and the scattering of dried leaves, and the next moment half a dozen troopers burst into the enclosure from the direction of the road, dragging in with them two prisoners. One was a man of middle age with a grizzled head set on powerful square shoulders, a big man with deep set eyes and iron jaw, and great muscular hands twitching to get their grip on something to crush. The other was of slimmer and more graceful build, had barely lost touch with youth, and by the upward curl of his mobile mouth seemed to find something humorous in the situation.

"Spies, Your Grace," said a trooper. "We caught them in the wood watching all that passed in this enclosure."

The Duchess made a movement with her whip, and the prisoners stood free, but closely watched. The elder man shook himself roughly and folded his arms as if to prevent himself doing someone damage; his companion laughed as he flicked some dust from his coat. The Duchess looked from one to the other. Her eyes travelled slowly from head to foot of the big man with some satisfaction. He was a fine specimen from an animal point of view, and so appealed to her, but he was inclined to exhibit nerves under her close scrutiny. The younger man had assumed an attitude, graceful and a little whimsical; the Duchess's close scrutiny did not trouble him at all, he appeared to think it only natural, and seemed satisfied that he was found interesting.

"Have you nothing to say?" she asked.

"Madam, I — we —"

"You see he has a great deal to say," said the young

man interrupting his companion, "but his tongue works with difficulty. He is only a man of action while I have words and wit at command."

"Few words will serve you best," the Duchess returned. "Long speeches always make me angry."

"Mine will not, I warrant, unless you lack wisdom, which I cannot believe. I have known the sun travel down to the West, while I have been speaking, daylight turn to dusk, and firelight flicker in corners where sunshine had been, yet never a closed eye in my audience, never a yawn, so fascinating was my tale."

"Plain speech, sir, and quickly," and the Duchess flicked her whip impatiently. "It is a five minute business to decide whether you are spies to be punished or vagabonds of no account."

"There's many an honest man has a rough exterior, and villainy can easily wear a mask. Your five minute judgments must lead you into great error."

"I am likely to judge your case in less time."

"Call us vagabonds, madam," said the youth; "vagabonds, but do not say we are of no account. We are kinsmen, this big fellow and I. It is a cousinship beyond my powers to calculate. He has been to the wars, and it would please you to see how good a blow he can strike and what scars he bears; now his only occupation is to look after me, a poor youth who exists by his wit. There must be someone to see that I am not robbed of my reward. We travel afoot, all the world our field. We crave hospitality from castle or camp which may lie in our way, and in payment I tell some brave tale of warrior and maid, or I sing a song, wild as the winter blasts of the North land which gave it birth or sweet with the love that is whispered in Provence. To-day, we were afoot upon the road yon-

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der when I heard the faint echo of a song. It was no great song, nor was the singer of any worth, but music of any sort always quickens my feet. We hurried forward, plunged into this wood and saw soldiers drinking. Since they had spent their money in liquor, they would have none to pay me for a tale, and we were moving towards the road again when there came the sound of horses. The world was suddenly changed. You were here."

The Duchess frowned, but with an irresponsible laugh the youth went on:

"This big fellow would have run like a frightened rabbit, he is afraid of women. I could not move for I was ever a slave to beauty."

"You are an impudent rascal," said the Duchess, but her frown vanished.

"For that the dear God is responsible. To-day He gives breath to a poor fool, to-morrow He fashions a beautiful woman. Is it not good to know that He has some use for both of us?"

"A fool?" she said slowly.

"Yes — Your Grace."

"You know me then?"

"Travel east or west, or where you will, you cannot escape the fame of the Duchess of Podina. Long ago I made a song of it."

"Pay for the song, Karl. We will hear it."

"Never," cried the youth. "It is gone, forgotten, dead as the flowers of yesteryear. I had not seen you then, now — now I shall make another song, so beautiful that lovers shall sing it beneath the stars to win their mistress. Is it not strange how things come to pass? I hide in this wood, a poor fellow not knowing where to find a supper, you come, the great Duchess of

whom I have heard so often, and I find that you have been looking for me."

"Is not this insufferable insolence, Cousin?" said Prince Karl. "Shall I set him running with your whip?"

"Have I a rival?" said the youth in a plaintive tone. "I noted it was a foolish face, but I have heard him say nothing worthy of his calling. Come, brother, shall we battle in words for Her Grace's favour, or shall the singing of a stanza help her to choose between us?"

Karl's face was lit with sudden rage, and the big man moved close to his companion as though prepared to shield him from attack.

"So you would be my fool?" said the Duchess, ignoring her cousin's advice and temper.

"Out of heaven there is no place I covet more."

"Have you wit enough, think you?"

"Is not this gentleman smarting under it?" he asked, pointing at Karl, "and the fat landlord yonder did not much impress me. I am better than such a makeshift as he, and shall take up much less room."

"Are you of Podina?"

"From this hour, although I had the misfortune to be born elsewhere — while my mother travelled in France I have been told."

"And your name?"

"Some call me this, others that, and to none of the names have I any right. A hard thing for most men, but of no matter to me."

"You shall come to Metzberg, but a name you must have. Now, Sir Fool, what shall I call you?"

With a quick movement the youth was kneeling at her feet, and he raised the hem of her dress to his lips.

"What you will, mistress. Why not Bergolet?"

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CHAPTER II

THE NEW BERGOLET

LEANING at an open window high up in the castle of Metzburg was the fool — the new Bergolet.

Against the dim blue of the horizon the southward stretching hills were almost hidden in a golden haze. Nearer, running north and south, was the dark line of forest famous for its hunting, and a lurking place for robbers. Nearer still was undulating country glowing warmly under the westering sun, here the river gleaming like a band of gold laid upon a soft green carpet, there a village nestling in a dip of sloping pasture land, yonder a belt of wood whispering of mystery, a dim retreat where a dryad might have her home.

Metzburg stood high, a far landmark to the traveller. Narrow, tortuous streets climbed steeply upwards to the outer walls of the castle which for centuries had crowned this heaped-up mass of high-pitched roofs, tapering spires and pointed gables. They built well when the city was founded, stout walls to defeat time and cheat the ambition of an enemy. No point where determined assault might win success was without its protecting bastion, and the city gates once closed, a siege might be withstood for months. To-day the great hinges of the gates were in working order, discipline reigned in the guardrooms, and watchful sen-

tries paced the castle terraces, for these were troublous times and ill news might come at any hour of the day or night.

Louis of France, seizing a golden moment for conquest, and bent on punishing the Dutch, had succeeded in breaking down the terms of the Treaty of Aix-la-Chapelle. Afraid of his greed, even neutral States were combining against him, Catholic and Calvinist at one against the common enemy. Bonn had fallen, the French road to Holland by the Rhine was barred; one army of the allies opposed to Condé was threatening Hainault, another had gathered in Germany to attack Alsace. Against this latter force Louis had sent that master of strategy Turenne who, having reduced Franche-Comté, crossed the Rhine and was devastating the Palatinate. Who could tell how far the sparks from his war fires might fly? It was wise to keep watch in Metzburg and no one was more alive to the fact than the Duchess.

Now news had come to the city that the Elector of Brandenburg had broken his neutrality and would throw the weight of his twenty thousand fighting men on to the Imperial side, and when the Elector moved it was time to beware. He would claim his reward in full. Had he not for many years, either by diplomacy or arms, been strengthening his State into a Kingdom at the expense of his weaker neighbours? Cleves and the County of Mark had been restored to him, he had acquired Halberstadt and Minden, he held himself cheated out of Pomerania, and had a tale of some treaty by which he should have received Podina on the death of the late Duke. Sandra Henrietta Louisa, the Duke's only child, had seemed an insignificant person to the Elector, merely an attractive girl who would make an

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excellent wife for one of his puppets, a pawn in his diplomatic game to be moved as he listed.

He discovered his mistake as soon as she became Duchess. At once she was a stumbling block in his path, an important piece upon the board, only to be moved by her own will. She laughed at the idea of Podina being absorbed by Brandenburg, and she had pointed out to the neighbouring States, and to the Emperor, how dangerous the growing aggrandisement of Brandenburg might become. Podina was not to be acquired by any one or by any treaty, she declared, and suggested that it was not likely to be taken by force of arms either. She boldly threw down the gauntlet, confident there was too much jealousy abroad for any one to dare to pick it up. She was right. The Elector spoke no more of his secret treaty, and the neighbouring States were persuaded that the separate existence of Podina was necessary to the general safety.

To thwart the Elector in one way was to set him scheming in another, for no man looked further ahead, nor planned more deliberately for the future. It was inevitable that Sandra of Podina must marry; her minister Kevenfelt was constantly urging her to make her choice, and the Elector, secretly and deftly, began to pull diplomatic strings for the purpose of bringing about a marriage which in the future should play into his hands or into the hands of his successor. The Duchess remained unmoved, told her minister that her marriage was her own affair, and that when she had come to a decision she would inform him. There were rumours of first one alliance, then another, until romance as well as politics crept into the situation. A spirit of rivalry was engendered by the stories concerning the Duchess's beauty which found their way into

castle and camp, and many princes were ready to come a-wooing. Diplomacy might attempt to arrange matters, but love might put to route the astutest ministers. In Podina it was generally supposed she would marry her cousin Prince Karl, a match which would not please the Elector of Brandenburg, scheming in Berlin against this turbulent Duchess. So he called her, and the name clung to her. She became known by it throughout all Germany.

Now that the Elector was to take the field again, his schemes against Podina must remain in abeyance for a while, but he would not forget them. They would be very clearly in his mind whenever the division of the spoils of war should be in question.

Much of these political intrigues, and something of the Duchess's character, the jester had learnt during these few days in Metzburg. He was thinking of the Duchess as he stood by the window. His dress, quaintly fashioned into many points, was parti-coloured, of brilliant scarlet and a pale green, loose enough to give freedom for antic action, yet so cut as not to conceal altogether the lines of his athletic figure. The Duchess had interested herself in his attire, declaring that she would not have the beauty of her pretty fool hidden. He had thrown his cap, furnished with jingling silver bells, on to a stool behind him, but the silver mounted bauble lay across his arms, and he glanced at it from time to time as at a sympathetic and understanding companion.

He had worn the dress little more than a fortnight, yet had already proved himself an excellent jester, winning more friends, and enemies too, in these few days than the old Bergolet had made in as many years. His quips had set laughter rocking at the board when

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the wine ran freely; a jest had brought an angry scowl to a courtier's face when his advice was ridiculed from behind the Duchess's chair. He had started heads nodding to a martial rhythm, and had moved ladies to sighs with a song of love. He had brought laughter to Her Grace, even when she was inclined to be angry, and had jested her into forgiveness when she meant to punish. He had justified himself, this new Bergolet; many were afraid of his sharp tongue, while others saw profit in keeping on friendly terms with him.

"You and I are lazy," he said, apostrophizing his bauble as he presently turned from the window. "We ought to be thinking out new follies to amuse our mistress, and I am spending my time in musing like a mere statesman. It is a strange place, this Metzburg. By recognising that I am a fool, I believe I am the wisest man in it."

A faint ring of steel in the courtyard below sent him to the window again. The sentries were being relieved, and his big kinsman, who had been given a place in the guard, glanced up as he passed. The jester laughed, pointed at the bauble and made it bow, but the action brought no smile to the imperturbable face of the soldier.

"Little friend, he does not like you. He hasn't grace enough to see the wisdom of folly."

A moment later he had turned quickly from the window to listen. Only his big kinsman ever troubled to climb to this room high in the tower, but now there were slow steps upon the twisting narrow stairs, deliberate steps which suggested a weighty message. A pause was followed by a knocking at the door.

"Enter. Folly is at home."

The jester had assumed a whimsical attitude, leaning

against the wall, and he did not move when he saw who his visitor was. He looked at him in surprise, then very solemnly made the bauble bow.

The visitor was an old man with a shock of white hair, and a face which seemed chiefly composed of tiny wrinkles. Age had bent him a little, but he was constantly pulling himself together and endeavouring to assume the upright and commanding pose of his youth. General von Kevenfelt had enjoyed the favour and confidence of the late Duke, he was the Duchess's chief minister, but whereas the father had usually been guided by his advice, the daughter seemed to use it as an indication of the way she should not go. The General was fully convinced that only his restraining hand had saved Podina from ruin, and attributed the State's prosperity to his own foresight. He was a diplomatist with much to his credit in the past, and had fallen into the habit of considering himself wiser than he was.

"You live near the stars, Master Jester."

"By the will of others, not of my own presumption; yet who shall say I am not well placed? On occasion folly gets nearer the truth than wisdom."

"Sometimes at least wisdom gets tired in pursuit of folly."

"That is an excellent saying. I shall use it as my own."

"It is true," said Kevenfelt, glancing round the room. Then he lifted the jester's cap from the stool and sat down with a sigh.

"Are you come to take my office?" exclaimed the jester.

Kevenfelt smiled, looked at the cap and handed it to the jester, who put it on his head. The bells jingled musically as he did so.

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"Brother fool, you are welcome to my lodging. Had I been a General, I should have saved myself a journey and sent for folly to come to me."

"I need the services of a wise fool, Bergolet, and I climbed your stairs to be away from listening ears."

"Bow, little friend; we are to be employed in statesmanship."

"Rather where statesmanship has failed," said Kev-enfelt. "You have been in Metzburg long enough to know something of the affairs of the State. Dissatisfaction simmers like the contents of a pot over a slow fire, and some there are who watch the pot anxiously for the moment when it will boil over."

"You would have me amongst the watchers?"

"I would have you prevent the catastrophe, and the time for it is near. Some of Podina's best fighting men have already joined the army operating in Alsace; others will march to join the Elector of Brandenburg's troops, so Her Grace has decided."

"Against your advice?" queried the jester.

"I have no great love for the Elector."

"And I am the Duchess's servant always," returned Bergolet.

"I have noted that. With all her faults, and they are many, the Duchess has the power of inspiring love. Even my tired old heart, which in its youth never beat out of time for any woman, is sometimes inclined to drop a beat on her account. How goes the heart of the jester?"

"You have come near to stopping it altogether," laughed Bergolet. "The jester in love! It would be a pretty idyll to play one night in the Duchess's garden, one night when the moon was at the full. It would have to be at full moon, that is madman's time."

"It is a wise fool I want to talk to," said Kevenfelt severely.

"Baron, a wise fool forgets he has a heart or his folly would make him miserable."

"You would serve your mistress, Bergolet?"

"I am paid for it."

"Would you run the risk of losing her favour?"

"What matter that so long as she is served?"

"We talk of love, Bergolet, but it is of marriage we should speak."

"I see, we leave romance and come to reality."

"The Duchess must marry," and Kevenfelt spoke slowly and impressively. "She knows it, the Court knows it, every peasant in the fields yonder knows it. It is an affair of State. Happily, as it chances, love has no part in the matter. I warrant no man has received even a passing thought of love from her."

"Yet she must marry," said the jester mournfully; "hear that, little friend, and weep. No love, only marriage; no springtime of life with its incense of worship and stolen kisses, only — only marriage, a cold contract scrawled on parchment by some clerk who himself perchance knows love."

"You realize what such a marriage means?" said Kevenfelt.

"Aye, that I do most fully, trouble, misery and —"

"For peasants, Bergolet, it may be so for peasants. Let's leave sentiment to the common folk; for the Duchess we want an heir."

"Peasants have children," said the jester confidentially to his bauble, "heirs to their misery, or whatever it is they live on."

"An heir to the throne of Podina," Kevenfelt went on; "therefore the Duchess must have a husband."

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"Little friend, we are at school to-day and are learning the grammar of things."

"Since love does not hamper us we want to secure a husband who will not disturb the political condition of Podina. Do you understand, Bergolet?"

"General, you frighten me. Are you really suggesting she should wed her jester?"

"I would have the jester use his persuasion as to whom she shall marry," and Kevenfelt dropped his voice.

"There is Prince Karl," said Bergolet.

"You touch the difficult point. Because he seems harmless, with small will of his own, the Duchess is inclined to marry him, believing he will not thwart her in any way. But he is a tool in the hands of a strong party in the State. He would be ruled and forced into action. Give a weak man power and he is always dangerous. For the Duchess to marry him would be to make the pot I spoke of boil over for a certainty."

"There is the Marquis de Vannes, who has come from Paris. Is he a candidate, or does he merely bring the name of one from his master in France?"

"He is a little mysterious," said the Baron, "but not dangerous, I think."

"Who is the man in your mind, General?"

"Prince Maurice of Savaria."

"A wastrel I have heard."

"An excellent man for our purpose. When the time comes for him to reign in Savaria, his State will be in confusion. It may be absorbed by Podina. It is my business to look into the future. Podina and Savaria as one State, or even in strong alliance, will be better able to stand against Brandenburg. The Elector is

alive to the danger. He would have the Duchess marry some puppet of his own."

"Who?"

"I would give much to know," said Kevenfelt; "but of this I am sure, though the Elector marches towards Alsace, he will not forget his schemes against Podina; that is why I would not denude the State of all its best fighting men."

"Nor will you forget to scheme in your turn against the Elector."

"Bergolet, were it not for your dress I should not recognise you for a fool."

"Still I am fool enough to think that a wastrel is no mate for the Duchess."

"Prince Maurice is a man she will be able to rule," said Kevenfelt, "and he will not busy himself at all in her affairs. To him she will not be the Duchess, merely a beautiful woman. He will be her slave, and he will not lack a measure of popularity. That is the way with your wastrels. In council he is of no account, but he knows the forest depths and can hunt with the best; he has no constancy of purpose, but his bitterest enemy cannot deny him courage. Of camp or court he will tire in the waning of a moon, growing restless for some new adventure; and tell him of a pretty woman, he will travel the length of Europe to pay her a compliment."

"It is no wonder that the Duchess hates him as I have heard her declare," said the jester.

"She is a woman, Bergolet, as well as a Duchess. Play on the romance that is in her and she will be aching to set eyes on him. You may imagine any tale you will to rouse her curiosity, it cannot be more marvellous than some that are told of him. Throw a little glow

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of the hero over this tavern knight and she will shut her eyes to the wastrel in him. Play your part, Bergolet, set her longing to see him, and I will contrive that he comes to Metzburg."

"I marvel he has not found his way here already if the tale of a beautiful woman moves him so easily."

"The Duchess stopped that. No sooner was this alliance urged upon her than it became the one alliance she would not make. We are near the stars, out of the world's earshot, so may speak the truth, and I tell you she is as self-willed as the devil. She declared that Prince Maurice would be arrested if he set foot in Podina."

"Is she less self-willed to-day than yesterday?"

"No, Bergolet, no, but if you can rouse her interest I'll find her an excuse for changing her mind. In Podina we keep holiday at the festival of St. Winifried. Who St. Winifried was, or what she did, I have forgotten, even if I ever knew, but for days we run a riot of idleness and carnival. The Duchess knows that the people expect her to make known her choice during the festival, and I have almost persuaded her to make much of the feast this year and to invite to Metzburg such princes of the neighbouring States as are not at the wars. From this carnival Savaria cannot be omitted. Trust me at least to have Prince Maurice here."

"You know him well it seems, General; he may end by making a wastrel of you."

"I do not know him, but I know how anxious his father is for the match. I will even play the wastrel for a night or two during the carnival if it will help forward this match. Are you prepared to play your part in the scheme, Bergolet?"

"I would serve the Duchess."

"And you will serve Podina, too."

"I am not paid for that. But tell me, General, tell me and my little friend here, why do you trust the jester?"

"I like your face. There's honesty in it."

"It's a poor reason. Tell me further why you have so great a faith in my persuasion."

"You're a clever fool, Bergolet. Where you get your understanding from I cannot tell, but you have found a way to influence the Duchess. She has been less angry since you came. She has laughed, even against her will. Did she not, on your persuasion, put that big kinsman of yours — Saxe do you call him — into her guard? You have turned her displeasure into forgiveness, and once or twice you have given her most excellent counsel. It is certain no one dare speak to her as you do —"

"That is the fool's privilege."

"The other Bergolet had no such privilege," said Kevenfelt. "He was a fool, there was an end of it, while you — Did you ever see the old Bergolet's dress?"

"Never, General."

"It was poor stuff beside that you wear. His little friend had a common head of brass, yours has one well fashioned in silver. His bells, too, were of brass while yours are silver. You are greatly honoured, Master Jester; that is why I climbed your stairs to-day."

"I will serve the Duchess and Podina," said Bergolet.

"Even a fool finds trouble sometimes; you may come to me if you want a friend," said Kevenfelt, rising. "One word more: you must begin your persuasion at once. It is more than likely that on his way to Alsace, the Elector will visit Metzburg. It is an opportunity

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to see his young and very dear neighbour which he would not miss, and when Friedrich Wilhelm troubles to give so definite a statement you may know that his real reason hides behind it. I may discover who is the puppet he has in his mind as a husband for Her Grace. I know the Elector. Brandenburg is over fond of enlarging its borders and Podina has long been a coveted jewel."

"We'll have no puppet of his choosing in Metzberg, General. I couldn't abide another fool to keep me company. Think of it; he might be given bells of gold. I'll talk to the Duchess before she sleeps."

The jester laughed, and he did not move until the sound of the General's steps had died away down the winding stairs. Then he went to the window again.

"Little friend, we've got to persuade our mistress to marry a wastrel. It's statecraft, but an evil occupation. We know these wastrels; brimming tankards, loose company and — what did the General say? A journey across Europe to see a pretty woman. By my cap and bells such a wastrel interests me. He might journey on a worse errand. Is the General honest, little friend? Eh, you think so? No subtle scheme behind that wrinkled skin of his? Not a man who has grown white-headed in villainy? Just an ordinary old man who loves his country and his Duchess, in spite of the fact that she is as self-willed as the devil. How goes the heart of the jester? Did you hear him, little friend? The heart of the jester?"

Bergolet leaned over the sill, looked down into the court below, and was thoughtful for a while.

"Time we sought our mistress's company again," he said presently. "She will walk in the garden to-night, and if we talk of this wastrel — ah, little friend, we

shall see her angry and perchance shall hardly escape a whipping."

He went quickly down the stairs, a laughing, shallow, mercurial fool, and as he went he sang the stave of a doggerel rhyme.

"Three came a-courting a maiden fair
All in the month of roses:
The first had fame for his deeds in war,
Learn'd was the second in scholar's lore,
The third was a sinner and little more;
'Twas the sinner that love was waiting for,
So, hey for his time of roses."

He was chanting the stave a second time as he crossed a small courtyard on his way to the garden, when a woman suddenly came from an angle of the wall and stood in front of him. The bells jingled as he stopped abruptly.

"You have a light heart, jester."

"'Tis easier carried than a heavy one."

"Jester, would you have your fortune told?"

"I know it."

"Not as I could tell it," she answered quickly.

Bergolet looked at her curiously. The shawl which was wound round her head and shoulders was so held as to hide her face, but her voice was young, her figure neat and attractive. She was no ordinary gipsy.

"I'll see if I possess a silver coin," he said slowly.

"Or pluck me a bell from your cap, Master Fool. Are they so precious because a woman gave you them?"

Bergolet caught her wrist.

"Ah, that brings out the man in you, does it?" she laughed. "Let me be. Why should a fool quarrel with a fortune-teller? There's a heart in you which may be touched even by a Duchess; and since you make so brave a show it would seem certain you have touched

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hers. That's the kind of success to win enemies, and before now men have died violently in a Metzburg street and no one been brought to account for it. Will you hear your fortune?"

"I am searching for the coin," and he thrust his hand into his pocket.

"Keep your coin and your bells; we are two of a trade and will not rob each other. And this is no place to tell a fortune. You know the end of the market-place, by the great door of St. Anne's."

"An elderly Eve gave me an apple from a stall there two days ago."

"And while you munched it did you note a house hard by the church, a house that leans forward as if it were tired of standing so long? A sign hangs from its wall, a rearing horse swinging from a hook. On the street level it is a saddler's."

"And above, a witch's sanctuary. I call the saddler, ask for the witch and —"

"Better say: 'Is the lady waiting?' It is likely to frighten him less. To-night at ten. You must come alone."

"And bring no coin?"

"Nor let your bells jangle," she answered.

"I'll leave folly at home and come as a man."

"To-night then," and she slipped by him, passed through an archway and was gone.

Bergolet stood for a moment looking at the archway.

"Maybe she loves me, little friend, or maybe — ah, that would be awkward. I must talk to kinsman Saxe about it. A General and a fortune-teller in one day. We're making strange friends and may get employed on queer business. Little friend, evidently there is a place in the world for the fools — and for sinners.

"The third was a sinner and little more;
'Twas the sinner that love was waiting for
So, Hey for his time of roses."

And he went on towards the garden, singing.

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CHAPTER III

THE DUCHESS'S GARDEN

HIGH, enclosing walls shut in the Duchess's garden from the turmoil and noise of the world. No one walked therein but by her special leave and invitation, and he was indeed fortunate who was allowed to present his petition to her there; it had the greatest chance of being granted.

It was a garden of winding paths between hedges of box and sweetbrier, fragrant with a thousand subtle perfumes; a garden of secluded lawns, close shorn and primly bordered. Here a fountain dropped tinkling music into its marble basin where gold and silver fish flashed in the sunlight; there a rounded seat of stone, deep-set in a corner of shade, invited to idleness and the telling of secrets; and lest the sundial hard by should mark time wasted with too envious precision, a climbing plant of purple blossoms had so embraced it as almost to obliterate all knowledge of the passing hours.

There were some paths irregularly flagged, others upon which moss had grown and across which creepers had stretched long tendrils; paths which lent a formal beauty to carefully tended flower beds; paths which led through wild luxuriance, by long grass with daisies like fallen stars nestling in it, and golden blossoms glowing like flakes of molten fire fallen from a sunset; paths which lost themselves in a grove of trees where birds

nested undisturbed and sang their matins and their evensong.

It was a garden for every mood; a morning paradise when the dew scattered diamonds in the grass; at twilight a place of prayer filled with incense and sweet odours. There was joy in it for those who would laugh and make merry; sadness, touched with a holy calm, if one would wander alone with memories of the past and the departed happiness of yesterday. It was a garden changing from hour to hour and from day to day. Clad in its green mist of spring it breathed of youth renewed and resurrection; in summer, blazing in a wanton riot of colour, it laughed at care and the thought of tears; sedate as a matron crowned was it when autumn fashioned its robes of brown and scarlet; and in winter, to veil its naked loveliness, soft grey clouds were caught for fleecy raiment and sometimes the snow lent it chaplets of pearls.

To-night it was a garden of dreams. A thin crescent moon hung amongst the bright pendant stars, a perfume-laden breeze murmured in the trees, the silence was full of mystery and anticipation. Nymphs might walk the alleys undisturbed, a goddess might pause for a while beside a fountain, and on the edge of a flower petal an elf might swing or hide some mischief under a wide sheltering leaf. It was a night for confidences, for love, for the whispering of passion and the half-reluctant yielding of a maid.

A little while ago the silence had been broken by a faint echo from a terrace without when the guard was relieved, and from the direction of the lights glimmering through the foliage had come the sound of a lute and the falling cadences of a song; since then only a murmur in the trees and the tinkle of a fountain. The

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Duchess was at supper, Prince Karl, Von Kevenfelt, and a Frenchman, the Marquis de Vannes, recently arrived at the Court of Podina, being of the party. Behind her chair stood Bergolet, wondering what fortune ten of the clock would bring him. He had missed few openings for a jest to-night, he had sung a lovesong which had nearly touched his listeners to tears, but his thoughts were constantly returning to the fortune-teller.

"Since we go hunting to-morrow we should seek bed early to-night," said the Duchess as she rose from the table.

"I will find me a horse before I sleep," said Bergolet.

"A horse, dear fool! Has your mule died since you rode with me yesterday?"

"I am fool enough not to like a mule, mistress; besides, the churchmen, I hear, think me presumptuous. They are wont to honour the mule. Bid me ride a horse to-morrow, and you shall see how fine a fellow a fool may look upon occasion."

"You might fall and spoil this pretty livery of mine," said the Duchess. "Besides, I do not take you hunting with me to-morrow. You shall ride your mule to the gates with us and then have leisure to improve your wit against my return."

"You want it, Master Jester," said Prince Karl. "It has not been easy to laugh at you to-night. And, Cousin, you might mark the difference between fool and churchman by ordering your fool to ride with his face towards the mule's tail in future. It used to be the custom."

"Once upon a time there was —"

"No, Bergolet, we are not in the mood for a story," said the Duchess, moving towards the garden.

"It is a pity, mistress, for my tale has nothing to do with either end of a mule, but tells of a prince who was almost as witty as your cousin here."

The Duchess passed into the garden, followed by her ladies, and Kevenfelt would have walked beside her, but she called to Karl.

"Forgive me, General, but you would only seize the opportunity to weary me with affairs of State; it is not a night for such matters," and she spread out her arms for a moment in ecstasy. "There's many a maid in Metzburg thinks of love at this hour, I warrant. Come, Karl, you at least will not weary me with business."

"Nor in any way I trust, Cousin," he answered as he walked beside her.

"Unless it be with his love," whispered Bergolet in Kevenfelt's ear.

The suggestion increased the frown upon the General's face. The Duchess's behaviour was ominous.

"Remember the feast of St. Winifried," he said in a low tone to the jester, then turning to find the Marquis beside him, he walked away with him.

Perhaps the Duchess was conscious of the encouragement she was giving to the man beside her. She had grown exceedingly weary of Kevenfelt's talk concerning her marriage, but she had realized that marriage was a necessity. She had almost promised her minister that she would make a special occasion of the approaching festival of St. Winifried; it would please the people, and the humour of inviting to her Court the princes who aspired to reign with her in Podina appealed to her; but she was not inclined to leave her choice until then. The coming visit of the Elector of Brandenburg puzzled her. That he should trouble

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to visit her at such a time must mean that he had some great scheme in his mind, not to be laid aside even when a campaign against the victorious Turenne was before him, and jealous rivals might in his absence seek to cross the frontiers of his beloved Brandenburg. Now that the Elector was hurrying to the support of the Imperial forces it seemed impossible that the French could hold their position. If they were driven back the Elector would quickly demand some return for his services from the Emperor, and he was certain to think of the future of Podina when he made these demands. Much might depend upon the Duchess's choice, and marriage with the man beside her could dangerously offend no one.

She led the way across a trim lawn to a marble seat in a corner by a fountain. It was a favourite place of hers, and Karl knew that her seclusion here was seldom disturbed. She glanced at her cousin as she motioned him to sit beside her, wondering how it was he had the reputation of being a gallant gentleman, and so great a favourite with women. Certainly he was handsomer than most men, but he seemed to lack many things which the Duchess looked for in a man.

"You spoke truly," he said slowly; "it is a night when any maid in Metzburg might dream of love, and not the maids only."

"In such dreams, Karl, there must needs be a man," she laughed.

"I could tell you of such a man, Cousin."

"Would the story interest me, do you think?" she asked.

"On such a night as this it might."

"I will listen to it," she said, her head resting against the high back of the marble seat. Very beautiful she

looked in the pale light, a little mysterious too, as desirable as any woman had ever seemed to him. For a little while he was silent, remembering perchance other fair women who had stirred him, remembering many things. He was a schemer, less a tool than Kevenfelt thought him perhaps, and he was fully conscious of what this marriage would mean to him; but to-night his soul was in his eyes as he looked at her, the best that was in him came to the surface.

"I think you know the tale already," he said, his voice soft, his attitude humble.

"Tell me, Karl; I am in the mood to listen. If the mood comes from without, because of the beauty of the night rather than from any longing within me, still it is there."

"Sandra, I might find words to woo a woman, but it is difficult when that woman is a Duchess — when she is you. Before a woman, even had she all your beauty, love would make me bold, masterful even, would give me burning words; before you I am almost dumb. Once, not long ago, I dared to say I loved you, and you laughed at me. I wonder if you realized how you laughed. It silenced me, it cut deep into my very soul as a whip lash may tear into flesh, but it did not kill that love. Again I dare to say, I love you. It is the confession of a man to a maid. I love you; do with me as you will."

She did not answer, but underneath drooping lashes she looked at him. There was no harmonizing note in her, no thrill in her being at the offered homage, but she was conscious that he was at his best. She was trying to value the man at his true worth, dispassionately appraising him. Could she marry him and endure what marriage entailed? The woman in her rose in

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revolt, only love could make marriage possible; the Duchess remained silent.

"All my days shall prove my love worthy, Sandra," he went on after a pause. "You will turn a loyal subject into a loyal husband and my whole life shall be spent in meriting the honour."

Still she did not speak. Her thoughts had flown to those maids in Metzburg who dreamed of love to-night. How might she dream if she were only a woman? A little ripple of laughter sounded through the garden, one of her ladies laughing at the jester. They were merry yonder, while she —

"I hate to urge any other reason but love why you should marry me, Sandra," Karl said earnestly, "but there are many reasons. A score of lovers, worthy men amongst them no doubt, are ready to kneel at your feet, but any one of them would bring you difficulties. You know this as well, perhaps better than I do. With me there is no such danger. I am not hated in Podina; our marriage would be quite a natural thing, and I believe most of your subjects would rejoice at it. Love makes me hate such an argument, but —"

"Karl."

He leaned a little towards her, eager and ready to take whatever privilege she gave.

"I would be honest, Karl, and be as gentle as I can. It is the argument you hate to use which moves me most. I must marry; but for that duty to my people, to my race, I would remain as I am until — until love came to me. To a woman in my position it does not come easily, and when it does come marriage is often out of the question."

"Yours is rather a dangerous philosophy, Cousin."

"Not to a woman of my temperament," she said

proudly. "I can sympathize with the woman who is tempted by love, even though I hold womanhood too precious a thing to yield to such temptation myself."

"To the strong comes strong temptation," he returned.

"I could hardly expect you to understand my attitude," she said, looking at him gravely. "You have little perception — oh, you need not be angry, you share the lack with most men whose judgment of women is usually a parody. But at least you can understand that it would not be easy for love to come to me."

"Why not?"

"Can you name a man who might succeed in setting my heart aflame?"

"I had hoped —"

"You!" And she laid her hand gently on his arm to take the sting out of her laugh. "Forgive me, Karl, but you offer me reality for my dream, and they are so far asunder. It is not your fault. You are as other men, neither better nor worse, and the man of my dreams is a hero, a fighter, a doer of deeds which others dare not even attempt. His face I do not see, whether it is good to look upon or not I cannot tell, nor does it matter. It is the personality which counts. He is gentle, yet masterful; there is romance in him, yet he is no visionary; he is a man of the sword, yet tender as any woman."

"You dream of an angel, Cousin."

"Am I an angel that I should wish to mate with one? I said I would be honest, and I want to show you why your love cannot move me even on such a night as this."

"There must be opportunity if a man would be a hero," said Karl.

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"The hero makes the opportunity," she answered. "Would St. George have met the dragon, think you, had he not been riding out upon adventure?"

"Cousin, I believe I might achieve much for your sake."

"Were you my husband it would be strange indeed if there should be no improvement. I would see to that, Karl."

An angry flush came into his face, but he controlled himself.

"I seem only to offend when I am most anxious to please."

"I am not offended."

"And I would have you remember, Cousin, that I wished to join the Imperial forces against Turenne, but by your wish remained in Metzburg to protect your State, to be Captain of your Guard, and of the City."

"I know that, Karl."

"You may have robbed me of an opportunity of becoming a hero, Cousin; is it fair to despise me?"

"I am trying to be gentle."

"Is it strange that I should believe you had need of me near you?" he went on; "that in some measure at least I was necessary to you? As a lover, was it not natural that your attitude should bring me hope, should lend me wings? To-night I should not have spoken had I not thought you invited my confidence."

"You are partly in the right, Karl. I would talk of marriage, though I cannot speak of love. Have you ever considered what it would mean to marry me?"

"The fulfilment of my desire."

"Nonsense, Karl."

"I swear that you —"

"Spare me," she said; "I do not want to be told

how desirable I am, nor to listen to praise of my beauty. I am not in love, Karl; I am only speaking of marriage, of your position if you marry me. To-day you are your own master, a man of some importance, free to come or go, free to choose a wife amongst the many women who doubtless are willing to give you love; marry me and you become the Duchess's husband, nothing more. You would be subject to my will since I am and shall remain ruler in Podina; you would be a slave to my caprices, not to the whims of a wife with whom you could quarrel as other husbands do, but to those of a Duchess whom you must obey. It is not an enviable position for a man."

"If there be any sacrifice I am willing to make it."

"That is brave of you since you know my temper so well. Truly, you sacrifice something. On my side there must be sacrifice, too, Karl, and I confess to cowardice."

"If I am so distasteful to you —"

"Sit down, Karl," she said quietly, as he rose angrily to his feet. "Sit down. I have not said that I will not marry you, but I cannot say yea or nay in such a hurry. For reasons of State I am inclined to marry you, possibly time may make the marriage seem less irksome than I imagine, but I will make no hasty decision."

"You have had much time to think of it already. Is it possible that I am too nervous a lover?"

He bent eagerly towards her; it wanted but a look in her eyes to make him masterful.

"I am sure it is not that," she said.

"Would you still be advised by Kevenfelt? You must know he hates me."

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"I have often wondered why," she said. "The General has wearied me with his advice already."

"Perhaps you would talk of me to the Elector of Brandenburg when he comes?"

In a moment anger flamed in her face, but her answer came coldly and deliberately.

"No; it is myself I must question, whether I can do this thing, whether even for the sake of Podina I can consent to marry you."

Bitterness, contempt, anger, were in her tone. He writhed under the lash, and rose to leave her.

"If you will, you may go and forget all you have said to-night," and she made no movement to restrain him.

He was tempted to do so, but he had much to lose. He remembered that many women had smiled upon him, and after all Sandra was a woman. As her husband he might win her love, and if not, he would see to it that her husband was no slave to obey and be handled as she chose. Power seemed within his grasp, he could not afford to let slip the opportunity.

"I have said I love you," he said after a pause. "That you will speak only of marriage does not affect my love."

"Oh, you have something to gain," she returned lightly, and it almost seemed she had read the thoughts rapidly passing through his mind. "Some power my husband must possess in Podina, more power than my cousin has. Indeed, I think it is worth your while waiting for my decision."

Just then laughter came again from an alley beyond the hedge, a woman's laughter, and there was a little crash of silver bells.

"They are happier than we are, Karl."

"I do not pretend to love your jester, Cousin."

"The fact does not appear to distress him."

"You honour him too much," said Karl.

"He has often given me excellent advice when my ministers have feared to venture an opinion."

"Cousin, he puzzles me, this jester of yours. His impudence is often more apparent than his humour, and it is whispered in Metzburg that he is a spy."

"Who whispers it?"

"Gossip in the market-place, and it is discussed in tavern and workshop. Can you wonder? His coming was strange; he has no name, and owns to no country. Could any man be better fitted for a spy?"

"I find him an excellent fool," said the Duchess.

"And give him every opportunity to learn your secrets. I wonder if you realize how great a license you give him. If he is a spy I shall know it presently. He would be surprised to learn how close a watch I keep on him."

"You watch him? You dare to—"

"Duchess, am I not Captain of your Guard, responsible for your safety and the security of the city?"

She was angry, but she could not deny his wisdom to take precaution.

"For whom should he be a spy?" she asked.

"Perhaps for Brandenburg, perhaps for Louis of France. They are both capable of using duplicity as well as arms, and while one covets your fair State, the other may speedily have need of your friendship. Turenne has yet to be driven back, and your friendship might give him a high road through Podina to further conquest. It is not only German Princes who are ready to wed you, and King Louis has not forgotten to scheme, I warrant."

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"Quite true, Karl. The Marquis de Vannes is in Metzburg to tell me of a cousin of King Louis who is most desirous to marry me. I have heard of this same cousin, and would not willingly have my bitterest enemy wedded to him."

"It is something to know that De Vannes is only the messenger. I thought he bore himself as if he were an aspirant for your hand."

"I have heard of him, too," laughed the Duchess, "and doubt if he could name his grandfather with any degree of certainty. But I talk gossip, and gossip is the business of the market-place and taverns; you will have enough to do if you go there listening for danger. I wonder what they say in the taverns concerning a certain Prince Karl; and do they not give me greater beauty and a more devilish temper than I really possess? They talk of my marriage there, no doubt. I wonder what the jester will have to say to it."

"Something insolent, for which you should punish him."

"We will see"; and then she called: "Bergolet! Bergolet!"

"You would ask his advice?"

"Why not? I assure you he has often given me good counsel."

"This is too outrageous!" Karl exclaimed, springing to his feet. "Your laughter is bad enough, but I do not stay to be ridiculed by a Merry Andrew."

"Are you afraid of the wit you despise?"

"I shall not stay."

"It is my wish that you stay. I do not command, but if you go it is very certain you shall never have the honour of being my husband, and I may doubt your loyalty sufficiently to find another keeper of the city."

Again he remembered how much he had to lose by disobeying her, and he had reseated himself beside the Duchess when the jester came across the lawn towards them. He came soberly, still thinking of the fortune-teller and ten of the clock.

"You called, Mistress."

"Bergolet, my ministers say it is expedient that I should marry: whom would you advise me to take for a husband?"

"Why, that is an easy riddle," he laughed, leaning against the basin of the fountain. "Marry the best man you can find."

"It is not so easy, fool. I might find the man, but for reasons of State dare not marry him."

"He must be a man of no importance," said the jester reflectively, "and he is hard to find, especially if you be guided by his own opinion. Well, mistress, you pay me for my services, and even as a husband I might still amuse you."

"I had not thought of that," laughed the Duchess.

"It is true I have never been a husband," said the jester, "but to-night — to-night it seems to me I might do worse."

"Is that insolence, Karl?"

"Indeed I think so."

"It is refreshing to hear the truth. Possibly you might do worse, Bergolet — I believe less attractive women than I am do exist — but for reasons of State the Duchess may not wed her fool. Find me some other husband. If rumour be true, there are a score of candidates anxiously waiting."

"So I am too dangerous. Why not marry Prince Karl then?"

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"It seems to me you owe Bergolet some thanks, Karl."

"I will earn your thanks, Prince. I will urge you upon Her Grace until I weary her."

"You are not in my service, Master Fool, which is fortunate for you," Karl answered, scowling.

"I have already promised to think of such a marriage," said the Duchess.

"And yet he wears a glum countenance!" the jester exclaimed. "Give me such a promise, mistress, and happiness would make me beautiful. Is it too late? Offer me the post of husband, and most willingly shall the Prince have my cap and bells."

"Must a man be either a husband or a fool, then, Bergolet?"

"Surely, when so beautiful a woman offers to marry him."

"Sometimes you are more courtier than fool," she said with a little sigh as she stood up. "Come, Karl, it grows a little chilly I think, and those maids in Metz-burg who thought of love are probably going to sleep now. Besides, we start early to-morrow. Remember, Bergolet, you ride your mule with us to the gate. Forgive my whims, Karl; you are likely to spend your life putting up with them. No, it is not a promise, but —"

"I long to do you some service which shall prove how much I love you," said the Prince, and before she was aware of his purpose, he had bent and kissed her hand.

The jester stood by the fountain until they had gone, then by another path he hurried through the garden towards his lodging high in the tower. Only one purpose was clear in his mind; he must have his fortune told to-night. Much might depend upon it.

CHAPTER IV

THE FORTUNE-TELLER

WITH an ample cloak about him, his bauble and cap of bells discarded, Bergolet hurried from the castle. He was a privileged person and passed the sentries easily. A glance at his green and scarlet dress was passport enough. Once in the streets, however, he drew the cloak closer to conceal his dress. He had made enemies in Metz-burg; and had not the fortune-teller warned him that men sometimes died a violent death in the streets and no one was called to account.

The market-place was in shadows. Here and there a dim light shone from an upper window, but no one was abroad, unless they were hiding in an angle of a wall. The irregular houses cut a fantastic outline against the night sky, the crocketed spire of St. Anne's was like a warning finger. From the depths of a narrow wynd, which looked mysterious and full of danger, came the faint echo of singing, men drinking in some tavern or wine cellar; otherwise the market square, the centre of the town's bustle in the daytime, was silent and lifeless, its cobbled pavements empty, its booths packed up until to-morrow.

By St. Anne's was the saddler's shop, an elaborate sign of a rearing horse swinging over the doorway. No glimmer of light came from any window, and the door was shut. Never did visitor seem less expected or

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welcome. Bergolet looked about him sharply, trying to pierce the shadows. Was this a trick, some trap set for him? Perchance his knock upon the door would be the signal for attack, and he glanced back over the market-place to see what line of retreat would be the best. He had not been long enough in Metz-burg to know every turn of the streets, nor what corners might be used with advantage.

He knocked gently at the door, and stood back a little, but there came no rush of attack from within, nor hurrying feet over the cobbles behind him. He was about to knock again when the door opened slowly, and just sufficiently to show the figure of an old man. It was darker within the house than without.

"Is the lady waiting?" Bergolet whispered, remembering his instructions.

The man made no reply as he drew back to let him enter. Then he closed the door and quickly shot a bolt home. From a corner, where it had been set to hide its light until he was sure of his visitor, he took a lantern and held it above his head. They were in the saddler's shop, which the flickering lantern peopled with distorted shapes as the man led the way through it. At the end he opened a door into a passage which smelt damp, as if it were little used; and in this passage he opened what looked like a cupboard door, but which disclosed a flight of stairs going upwards.

"There is a passage at the top, and a room at the end of it," said the man, holding up the lantern to light the way and standing aside to let Bergolet pass.

Was it a trap? Bergolet regretted there had been no opportunity to let Saxe know where he was going to-night. As soon as he was upon the stairs his guide lowered the lantern, closed the door, and left him to feel

his way up in the dark. In the passage at the top there was a feeble light coming from a window which looked into a narrow lane. Bergolet paused by the window which was so shut in by the blank walls opposite that even in daytime the passage could not be very bright. He was turning away when he heard running feet in the lane without. They came, passed quickly, then gradually died away. Whether they went in the direction of the market-place or away from it he could not determine; indeed, he was not quite sure in which direction the market-place lay. He was in the mood for speculation, but there was nothing very strange in a man's running. A thief, perhaps, well away before his theft was discovered since there came no sound of pursuit; or perchance some rascalion hastening home after a too long tarrying at the tavern.

He left the window and continued his way along the passage. Now he saw at the end of it a dim, upright line of light, a door unlatched. Outside of it he paused to listen, but no sound reached him.

"There's a love of mystery about this woman, whatever else there may be. For good or ill, here's to learn my fortune," and he pushed open the door and went in.

It was not a large room but its emptiness gave it space. The panelling was dark and heavy, the ceiling had grown black with age, it was evidently a room that was seldom used. In one corner of it two candles were burning upon a small oval table, and the worn leather screen which stood behind the table had the effect of giving seclusion to this corner. By the table was a stool, and in a carved but dilapidated chair, which in its heyday might have served for the throne of a bishop, sat the fortune-teller. The cloak which she had worn that afternoon now lay on the floor beside her, but she

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had wrapped her head and shoulders in a dark veil which effectually concealed her face. She was leaning forward apparently intent upon the crystal which was on the table before her.

"You may turn the key in the door," she said, without looking up.

Bergolet had entered so quietly that he had wondered whether she was aware of his presence. He looked slowly round the room, then locked the door.

"You can come and sit down," she said, without altering her position; "and bring the key with you. It may be safer."

Bergolet crossed the room, glancing at the windows which were shut. He put the key upon the table, but before sitting down he looked behind the screen.

"You seem afraid of me."

"I have known strange fortunes hidden behind a screen," he answered.

"Your fortune lies here in the crystal."

"It may be that I am a fool to come seeking it, but so long as I hide myself in this cloak you may take me for just a man. I have left my cap and bauble at home."

"It is a man's fortune I see in the crystal," she said in a monotonous tone, as if she were half dreaming. "The mist clears. I see a city, and a man passing through the streets. To all appearance he is a man of affairs, some definite purpose in his mind, but from an open doorway a woman beckons him and his purpose is gone. Now I see a stretch of country, some fair is going forward at a village, and the man, the same man upon his journey, pauses to look on. Again a woman, this time a wench of the country, smiles upon him, and he goes no further that day."

She was silent, still gazing into the crystal.

"It is difficult to judge whether he is a mere man or a fool," said the Bergolet gravely.

"The mist came again but it clears, and I see many people gathered in a great hall. Soldiers are there for I see the flash of steel, wealth is there for I catch the sparkle of jewels. I think this is the palace of a king, for men are habited as a king's ministers might be. A man comes cautiously through the crowd, the same man, a whisper here, a short parley there, and then he passes through an archway into an anteroom deep in conversation with a minister, or it may be with the King himself. By the looks that follow them the man is a personage — to be feared, I think."

Bergolet did not speak when she paused. He had come to listen to the fortune-teller, not to exercise his wit or to give her information.

"I see little now, parts of a picture, the beginning or the end of some action. There is a glimpse of a camp, and the man is hiding; there are two statesmen talking and from behind hanging tapestry the man listens. Now through the night a man gallops furiously; now he kneels to receive some honour — I cannot tell what it is for the picture fades almost as quickly as it is formed. Wait! Here is something more definite. A woman, gorgeous in dress, gems in her hair, and alone; the man comes and in his eyes there is — which is it, love or hate? The man is not clear to me, but the woman is. I think she is a princess."

Bergolet was leaning forward, his eyes fixed upon the fortune-teller.

"Another picture," she said quickly; "this time distinct, so clear that I can see the leaves moving in the breeze. In the distance a city lying in the plain, and

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travellers journeying towards it. A portly merchant not too used to his saddle, a slim youth, perhaps his secretary, riding beside him. Behind him ride a girl and a man. He urges her not to ride too fast, and he is talking of love, or should be by his looks. They enter the city; and now there is a room, a hanging lamp in it, a brass lamp of most unique workmanship. The girl enters quickly, then the man, and in spite of her he kisses her. He seems to think he has made an easy conquest and may gather the fruit of it when he will; but I think the girl is amused, and laughs at him. She is not complacent like those others, the woman who beckoned from the doorway and the smiling wench at the village fair. Now the mist comes again," and she pushed the crystal from her and sat back in her chair.

"I am the man?" Bergolet asked.

"Unless you have a twin brother."

"The fortune is hardly worth a silver coin or a bell from my cap."

"The past and future seem strangely mixed, I own," she answered. "You know best how to fit them into place."

"I think you can tell me more about the man if you will, and have little need to gaze into the crystal," said Bergolet.

"That tells me how near the truth I have seen in the crystal."

"At least you must tell me more."

"Must!"

Bergolet put his hand on the key which lay on the table.

"Force, Master Fool, is that what you mean?" and she laughed. "I have but to call and a dozen men would rush to my deliverance, and some among them

would not be ill-pleased to silence you. Bergolet has many enemies; it would be rather foolish of him not to consider me a friend."

"For a fool my judgment is somewhat ripe," he answered.

"Shall I tell you what I think of you?" she asked, leaning forward in her chair.

"It would interest me."

"When Her Grace found a new Bergolet, I think she brought a spy into Metzburg."

The jester did not move, his hand still covered the key. This fortune-teller had laid a trap for him.

"A spy," he said slowly; "that would be strange work for a fool."

"Easy work," she answered; "but my thoughts go further. Would you care to know how far they have travelled?"

"I am wondering how deeply into an error you have fallen."

"Your very gravity accuses you," she laughed. "When Bergolet forgets to jest, he is serious indeed. Well, Master Jester, I think the spy was not quite so honest as the man. The spy came to trick a Duchess at the bidding of his master; but the man saw only a woman and—did not the crystal show a man easily influenced by women? You may look at yourself in the glass and see an easy lover."

"I am so interested in myself, you must tell me more."

"Or you will try force," she laughed. "I will save you that trouble. Fortune-teller and jester, we are two of a trade, hiding our secrets as best we may. Do you remember me? It is a face some men have told me is worth remembering."

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With a quick movement she untwisted her veil and let it fall over the arm of the chair, revealing a face full of witchery. There was laughter in her blue eyes, a challenge in the upward tilt of her chin, humour in the curve of her lip; she was the last woman in the world a man would try force with, amongst the first he would seek to propitiate.

"Once you told me so," she laughed. "It is not so long ago that you should forget. We met as chance travellers on the road to Toul in Lorraine. My father was pleased with your company, and when he rode forward with his secretary you would have me linger behind, and tried to make me pleased with your company too. Afterwards in a room with a hanging brass lamp you kissed me."

"I remember."

"You were not a fool then, Master Bergolet."

"Indeed I am not so sure since you are a fortune-teller. It is true I lacked the fool's uniform."

"I am not resentful," she said. "Not every kiss a maid gives is serious. I know enough to be your enemy, but I think we may be friends."

"Why are you in Metzburg?" Bergolet asked.

"Lorraine, overrun by the French, did not please me."

"And besides?" queried Bergolet.

"The Burgomaster of Metzburg is my uncle."

"And further?" Bergolet queried again.

"I have become one of Her Grace's ladies. No, you have not chanced to see me, but henceforth I shall be more in evidence."

"You are a spy then?"

"Did I not say we are two of a trade?" she laughed.

"We should be foolish to quarrel. I have noticed you

although you have not seen me, and I am convinced you will do nothing to harm Her Grace, whatever might have been your original intention. You may have the same confidence in me. We may help each other; indeed, that is why you are here to-night. I am going to put it in your power to serve the Duchess. She will thank you; and if at the same time you do me a service — well, it is the price you may pay for a kiss."

"I am not to be cajoled into acting blindly," said the jester.

"No, we bargain," she answered. "You shall learn a secret to-night, but I must have your word that no one shall know how or from whom you learnt it. You shall keep my secret as I will keep yours, and the best of the bargain is with you. Were I to speak of you to the Duchess, I doubt if Master Bergolet would escape a dungeon; were you to speak of me, I could easily prove that I was not an enemy to Podina, but a friend to the country and to the Duchess. I have a personal end to serve, while you —"

"You may speak plainly," said Bergolet.

"I have other kisses which it may be worth my while to sell," she answered. "Oh, they are worth buying, although at this moment you may not think so. I will be very plain with you. When a fool falls in love with a Duchess, it is poor sport for the fool. By my help you shall serve your mistress, but she will not reward you with love."

"You know so much you should know that she is to wed Prince Karl."

"In itself such a marriage might not prevent her love being elsewhere," she laughed. "There are many princes in Germany, and I hear that some of them may

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She had just asked the question when in the street without there was the sound of quick, regular feet — men marching. She crossed the room to a window, and listened. Bergolet followed her. He judged that this window looked out upon the same narrow alley as the one in the passage. The woman held up her hand, bidding him listen. There was a halt, then from the distance the sharp hammering upon a door.

"The saddler will not open to them readily," she whispered.

"And I have no weapon to defend you."

"My gallant fool, I thank you, but I need no defence."

"Have you tricked me?" he said quickly, seizing her wrist a little roughly.

The knocking came again, and louder; then a voice: "Open! In the name of the Duchess, open!"

"Does that demand sound like a private enterprise?" she asked. "It is as unexpected to me as it is to you."

Bergolet let her go, and she went to the table, took up the key, and put on her cloak and veil.

"It is well the door is locked and the key out of it, but someone knows of our meeting to-night. Circumstances force us to a bargain. Are we enemies or friends?"

"Friends."

"Good. Now blow out the lights."

The imperative demand to open in the Duchess's name came again, with an added threat that the door would be burst open if the demand was not immediately complied with. The old saddler came reluctantly through the shop carrying a lantern, his dress suggest-

ing that he had risen hastily from his bed. The knocking was so loud that every one in the house must have heard it, and some sleepers in other houses in the market-place must surely have been awakened. He would have ignored the knocking, and the door was almost strong enough to stand a siege, but at the Duchess's bidding it should be opened.

He was a long time unbarring it, and they were impatient and ill-tempered men who rushed in as the door swung back upon its hinges.

"What's to do at this hour?" said the saddler.

"Trouble for you unless you bring us to your visitor at once," said the Captain of the company.

"Visitor? I have no visitor. There's the old woman in the attic who cooks for me, and there are two apprentices who are either dead asleep or afraid to move. What should the Duchess want with them or me?"

"Liar!"

A thin face was thrust between the forms of two troopers, and the saddler turned to look at it.

"Liar! I saw him enter. Ten of the clock it was by the church."

"Drinking Peter, is it? Liquor helps you to see things which no one else can see."

"His cloak fell apart as he knocked. I saw it. It was the jester — Master Bergolet, the jester."

"Some other drunken loon will say he has been listening to my laughter ever since," sneered the saddler.

"You're welcome to look for the jester."

"You'll take us to him, and quickly, or you'll find this sword point an inch or two in your body."

"Will that be in the name of the Duchess?"

The old saddler had drawn back as the light of the lamp showed him the naked blade, but his quick retort

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proved him not deficient in courage. The Captain's silence seemed to acquiesce in the trooper's action, and the man had seized the saddler roughly by the shoulder preparatory to being as good as his word and administering a prick which should compel obedience, when his sword was struck aside.

"We're here to find the jester, not to maltreat an old man."

It was Saxe who had interfered, and his companions had reasons to know that he was not a man to quarrel with. The trooper uttered an oath as the saddler slipped from his grasp.

"I only save you from an error of judgment, comrade," said Saxe. "The old fellow may be a villain, and not too old for the gallows for all I know, but Her Grace would not thank us if perchance we spitted a loyal citizen."

"The big man speaks the truth," said the saddler. "In all Metzburg there is none more loyal than I."

"Saxe is right," said the Captain. "Search the house."

"That's reasonable," said the saddler, "I'll get another lantern or two. Her Grace knows me for an honest workman. The first saddle she got into was made by these hands, and it's my work she uses now every time she mounts a horse. Search the house, Captain. You'll find the old woman in the garret, the apprentices behind that door yonder; and you'll discover that drunken Peter there has looked at the bottom of a tankard so often since noon that he cannot tell what he sees."

The search began in the shop, a man keeping guard at the door lest any one should slip out unobserved in the confusion. Saxe was as diligent as any of his com-

panions, but was ready to turn his sword upon them in a moment if the jester were found. The tale had evidently been carried to some one in authority who believed in a plot, or the order to seize the jester in the Duchess's name would not have been given. Surely Peter was too practised a toper to run the risk of bearing a false message. Probably Bergolet was here, Saxe concluded, safely hidden by this time; and he had interfered on the saddler's behalf to prevent his being tortured into revealing that hiding place.

The search was thorough, it was not the first time these men had been engaged on such work, and if the saddler expected them to miss any doorway, he was doomed to disappointment.

"This is a strange house of yours," said the Captain as a small door which suggested a cupboard revealed a flight of narrow stairs.

"It's very old," the saddler answered. "I haven't mounted these stairs for years, and heaven knows what lumber is at the top of them. My grandfather—"

The Captain led the way, uninterested in the saddler's ancestors, and coming to the narrow window in the passage above, looked out to the right and left. Then he called two troopers, pointed into the narrow street, and despatched them to keep watch in it.

"Here's a door, Captain, and locked," said a trooper from the end of the passage.

"Where's the key?" the Captain demanded of the saddler.

The old man shook his head.

"I have no key. Perhaps the door is not locked, only caught with long disuse."

"Break it in," said the Captain. "Do you think a man might drop from that window, Saxe?"

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"I would not venture it," Saxe answered, thrusting out his head to look into the alley.

"Watch him," whispered the Captain to a trooper. "He loves the jester and may give trouble if Bergolet is in that room."

The door at the end of the passage was stout, but the attack upon it was resolute, and the lock was old. With a splitting sound it burst open suddenly, and Saxe was amongst the first to rush in, ready for any emergency. The room was in darkness until a trooper raised a lamp above his head and a dim gleam touched the far corners.

"A table! Candles!" exclaimed the Captain. "Light them."

As the tiny flames grew steady he glanced round the room, then threw down the screen which stood by the table. No one was behind it. The room was empty. Then he looked at the saddler.

"Are you astonished?"

Saxe watched the old man cross the room slowly.

"What's that?" the saddler asked, pointing to a glass ball on the table.

"Sorcery; the devil's work," answered the Captain.

"Indeed, sir. Can it be that my grandfather was —"

"Curse him. How do you explain these candles in a lumber place you have not entered for years?"

Open-mouthed the old man stared about him, and Saxe could not determine whether his astonishment was feigned or not.

"Candles! That's proof there can be no rats in the house."

"And here's proof there's an impudent dog in it," said the Captain, striking the old man across the mouth

with his open hand. "Finish the search, but I fear our bird has flown from the open window in the passage yonder."

Saxe said no word in defence of the saddler, who staggered back under the weight of the blow, and was only just kept from falling by the wall; he was thinking of the jester hurrying through the streets and wondering where he would find a place of safety.

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CHAPTER V

WHEREIN THE FOOL LEARNS VILLAINY

AS Bergolet blew out the candles the woman touched his arm.

"This is no trap of my setting, Master Jester," she whispered. "That knocking at the door is unexpected, but it alters nothing; it only serves to hurry us a little. This room has a secret. I came upon it by chance, and in any case I should have had the lights out to prevent your learning it. Give me your hand."

She piloted him across the dark room, somewhere behind the screen he thought, for he lost the faint glimmer which came from the window.

"I shall help you to serve the Duchess," she said, stopping suddenly, "but in return I must have a promise from you."

"The fool is to pay without knowing what he buys."

"The fool should be thankful that he has found a woman to trust him," she returned.

"What must I promise?"

"You shall not betray any one you may chance to see to-night, nor tell the true story of how you came to hear the plot. You will swear to this?"

"That is easy."

"How deep your honour goes I cannot tell, but every man holds something sacred, even if it be only his own self. You shall swear to me by what you hold most sacred."

"You have me in a cleft stick. I take the oath, for I think the soldiers are already in the house."

"And for all the harm they can do they might as well be snoring in their beds," was the answer.

There was a sound in the darkness as though for a moment a rat gnawed behind the skirting.

"There is woodwork a foot high to step over," she whispered. "Do not stumble. Now wait. Now step once more, a foot high again. So we escape the enemy."

Four times there was the momentary gnawing sound, the opening and shutting of two panels, and then she guided him across another dark space.

"Tell me, Bergolet, was it a woman you swore by?"

"Was it part of the bargain that I should confess?"

She laughed softly, and warning him to be silent, she quietly opened a door.

They came out upon a gallery at the head of a staircase. Above them was a painted ceiling dark with age, and suspended from it by a chain a great lamp hung low, lighting the hall beneath them. In gallery and hall stood carved chairs and presses; the walls were painted, here a battle scene, there some civic ceremony; over the balustrade hung a richly woven piece of tapestry, and rugs fashioned in the East lent warmth to the stone floor of the hall.

"The Burgomaster's!" whispered Bergolet.

"My uncle, and I would not betray him. That is why you have taken an oath."

A door opened sharply, there was a murmur of voices for a moment, then the door closed again, and heavy steps were in the hall below.

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living. "Are you all asleep, or is my service so easy that you grow lazy?"

Quick feet hurried to do his bidding. One man brought his hat, another his cloak, as he stood breathing audibly beneath the hanging lamp, a fat man as full of his own importance as a tun is of wine; his legs were widely bowed under the weight, and his head was so insignificant a part of him that one marvelled there was brain enough to ensure sufficient ability to nurture so large a carcass.

"My stick! Dolts, where's my stick? Would you have me walk the street without it? It is true that, thanks to me, Metzburg is a paradise to what it was, but even now the streets are none too safe at night."

"It was a fortunate day for the city when you became Burgomaster," said the sycophant who handed him his stick, but his tongue was in his cheek the moment his master's back was turned.

"There are visitors yonder," said the Burgomaster, pausing at the open door and nodding in the direction of the room he had left. "Others may come. They will wait for me, for my advice upon an important matter. Remember whose servants you are and attend them fittingly."

With a flourish of his stick the Burgomaster departed, and Bergolet smiled as he remembered how this same fat mass of importance grovelled whenever duty brought him into the presence of the Duchess.

"I congratulate you, Fräulein, that I can discover no likeness between you and your uncle," he whispered to the woman beside him.

"The years may mend that, and if you mean a compliment this is no time for it. Come quickly and tread lightly. Chance may yet do us an ill turn."

She led him along the gallery, down one narrow flight of steps and up another, and by narrow passages which had an echo of emptiness in them, then through a room to an inner closet.

"Kneel here," she said, pulling him down by the wall. "There is a little shutter—I will open it directly. You will see nothing, but you will hear. Just below us is an inner room of a tavern in the Holtstrasse—the tavern of the Rising Sun. It has known the hatching of many a plot in Metzburg, I am told; how often there have been listeners here I cannot say."

The drawing back of the shutter revealed a glimmer of light, but nothing more. Sight was blocked by some projecting cornice in the room beyond, but sound was distinct. For a time there was only the clatter of flagons and the rough jesting of men met to drink away an evening, but presently a man spoke and the other voices were hushed.

"To-night we touch the money, comrades, and this is an affair we agree to keep to ourselves."

"It is, Captain."

"We have friends yonder and hold with them in most matters, to the death if need be, but this is an especial affair, naught to do with law-breaking. For once we are in the employ of the State."

A laugh and an oath or two answered this statement.

"One or two of you will have it that we're too few for the business. Long Joachim there thinks so."

"Caution, Captain, just that."

"There's no risk. We attack men who are there to be beaten, paid to be beaten just as we are paid to win. When I bargained to do the business for a certain sum, I thought of choosing only six to help me—the

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"Supposing we are the tricked?" queried Joachim. "There's plenty will lie when they've got the law on their side."

"There would be big men in Metzburg to pay for any trickery," answered the Captain, "very big men, comrades. We're upon their business, and by paying us they put themselves in our hands."

"Maybe, but we're dealing with a woman," Joachim returned, "and one who's not like other women. The devil's in her by all I've heard, and that's the kind men get fools over. A man may be all for her destruction until the moment comes, then she smiles on him, or gives him a honeyed word, and he'll shed his last drop of blood in her defence. That's what we've got to allow for."

"Show me the money and Venus might smile till she was sick without my seeing her," said the Captain.

"Not long since there was a woman stopped in the forest yonder," Joachim went on. "Some of you will have heard of it and know the two who stopped her. They are not the most gentle to deal with, and their luck had been of the devil's planning for days past; they hadn't a coin between them, and their stomachs were as empty as this flagon. What happened? Because she was beautiful and smiled upon them they let her pass with all her gear, and stood thanking her, caps in hand, when she threw them a crown."

"A good tale enough whether it's true or not," said the Captain, "but there's no robbing in our business. Here's the pith of it. Her Grace goes hunting. We care not who rules in Metzburg, nor who he may be who shall call the Duchess wife, but there are powerful men here who see great importance in such matters. They

plan to bring the Duchess to reason. It is a simple matter."

"To bring a woman to reason?" asked one.

"In this way, yes. She is captured in the forest and held prisoner. There she must come to terms with the men who are powerful in Metzburg. She will have to rule as they wish, marry as they dictate, or some one else will be found to rule over Podina."

"I thought Prince Karl was to hunt with her," said one man.

"He does. We capture him too."

"Rumour has it that he is to marry the Duchess," said Joachim.

"That's no affair of ours," the Captain returned. "He is to be captured; the rest of the company will run after a show of fighting."

"I've no liking for Karl," said Joachim, "but there is no denying he handles a good sword."

"In this business there is not likely to be much heart behind it," was the reply.

"For all that he may give us trouble when it comes to defending the Duchess," Joachim persisted. "And who are these great men? I like to know my paymasters."

There was a murmur of assent.

"Why, what ails you, Long Joachim?" cried the leader angrily. "Is your courage suffering from a touch of fever? When there's good money to be had for the picking up, would you have us cackling of fears like a parcel of scared women?"

An angry oath and the shuffle of impatient feet seemed to presage a quarrel, when there fell a sudden silence. A door opened and closed, and a fat voice gave a greeting.

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"Your uncle," whispered Bergolet.

"Your oath," the woman returned.

"A chair for the Burgomaster," said the Captain. "Here's one of the big men I spoke of, Long Joachim."

"And a flagon of wine for the Burgomaster, though it be but tavern stuff," said another.

It was apparent that a chair received the weight of the newcomer.

"Aye, I'm more likely to trust a man after I've drunk with him," said Joachim.

"I've known worse wine than this," said the Burgomaster, "but I have better guarantee for your trust than any tavern cellar can give. Listen to the music in this bag — good money, which you may come by far easier than most men earn it. Here is half the sum agreed upon, the other half I hold until the work is finished. That was the bargain, I think?"

"It was. A fair bargain," came the answer in chorus.

"Tell me the plan then, so that I may be assured you understand before I hand over the money."

"I take it that the men who will be of the hunt tomorrow will only make a pretence of fighting," said the Captain.

"They have been carefully chosen and well paid," the Burgomaster answered.

"And the hunt will be towards Festenhausen?"

"That is so," said the Burgomaster. "Prince Karl has his house at Festenhausen, and it is arranged that the Duchess shall spend the night there."

"The rest is easy, and the Duchess will spend the night elsewhere," said the Captain. "Towards Festenhausen there is a ravine, deep and well-wooded, which

has a good name with huntsmen. A blank day may finish there with excellent sport. A green track dips into the ravine at a spot which the woodmen call 'Gallows Oak'—maybe the law hanged one of us there, Burgomaster, at some time. A man is ill fruit for any tree, but the name has stuck. Along that dip there's hiding room for an army, and that's where we shall be to-morrow, a dozen of us, but with shouting enough for three score."

"It seems a good plan."

"It cannot fail," was the answer. "There'll be a pretty struggle, then our enemies flee, leaving the Duchess and Prince Karl in our hands. We shall find a safe place for them and bring you word."

"And receive the other half of the reward," said the Burgomaster.

"I shall not forget it," laughed the Captain.

"Would a thrust in earnest matter in Prince Karl's case?" asked Joachim.

"Matter!" cried the Burgomaster. "Have I not made it clear that this is a ruse to get the Duchess and the Prince into our hands? It is an affair of State. There must be no thrusts in earnest, a scratch or so amongst yourselves to give a look of truth to the fight if you will, but nothing more."

"And afterwards, Burgomaster?"

"Another bag of gold like this," was the answer, "and your work will be ended. The afterwards is for wiser heads than yours, for mine and for those with me in this matter. If we think a woman's whims dangerous to the State, if we choose to dictate how she should rule, and whom she shall marry, that is not for you to know. There is a bargain between us, a beginning and an end to it."

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"What is it to us what happens afterwards?" said one man.

"Much, if it should presently be thought wise to silence us lest we should talk," Joachim returned.

"You have my word that with the completion of the bargain it will be forgotten."

"And those who are with you, Burgomaster? We know nothing of them."

"This is a strange fellow to have brought into the enterprise, Captain," said the Burgomaster.

"It's Long Joachim's way to ask questions," was the answer. "When his time comes he'll argue with death."

"I speak for all who are with me in this business," said the Burgomaster. "Nothing shall be remembered against any one of you."

"That's a seal to the bargain," said one contentedly.

"I'll give it a further seal. If chance should bring one of you to trouble presently, I'll so read the law as to find some circumstance which shall let him go free."

A rattle of flagons and noisy approval greeted this promise.

"It grows late," said the Burgomaster, "and the hunting party starts early. You have passes which shall see you through the gates to-night. There is the money. I have another bag of the same weight ready when you have earned it. Good night, and good fortune."

Still Bergolet listened, but there was nothing but the noise of departure and the paying of the score. The woman closed the shutter.

"Come. It is time you were out of the house," she said.

"Your uncle tells little."

"Enough surely. The hunt must not reach that

ravine, Bergolet. You must see to that, and there are not many hours before the dawn."

"The Burgomaster has visitors and expects others. Shall we see who these visitors may be?"

"For what purpose? Your oath covers all those you may see in this house to-night."

"It is a pity. Your uncle is a great villain, but no doubt he will come to a bad end without any assistance. It puzzles me how you come to be connected with such a person."

"This is the time to act, Master Jester, not to wonder," she said as she led him back along the passages, but not by the way they had come. "I care not what story you tell. The result must be sure, though you may not betray me or my uncle. I have an end to serve which does not concern you, and you are the only man in Metzburg who can help the Duchess to-night. We work together, each for our own end. Here is a door into a side street. Good night. Would you kiss the fortune-teller as once you kissed her when she was a merchant's daughter in Lorraine?"

He hesitated, then drew back.

"It was light then and I could see into your eyes. I never loved a kiss in the dark."

"You may claim it some high noon if you will, Master Fool," and opening the door she gently pushed him out.

Once in the street, with the door locked behind him, Bergolet's first thought was to marvel that he had not accepted the proffered kiss. Never had he seemed so much a stranger to himself. A kiss was pleasant and meant little; a score of pretty lips had met his willingly enough, if with a show of resistance for form's sake, but to-night — to-night there was more in a kiss than

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he had imagined. He was at enmity with the man whom the fortune-teller had seen in the crystal, a mean and contemptible fellow whose idea of women was an outrage. They were all alike to him, city-bred or wench of the country, merchant's daughter or — no, there had come a break. Clouds had gathered in the crystal, but dimly seen there had been a Princess. What was she to the man who kissed so lightly and so easily went his way?

"Enough to make him refuse a kiss offered by a pretty woman," Bergolet murmured, "a kiss in the dark too, when nobody could be a whit the wiser."

He had not moved from the door, now he looked to right and left, wondering which way to take. A breeze ruffled the quiet of the night, and stars hung low in a sky which had a texture like velvet. He went to the right, still thinking of the man in the crystal.

"There are a thousand ways of sinning," he said to himself, "and I'm no worthy judge. The Burgomaster is not the only villain in the city. The moon would cast the shadow of one at my feet, only it is a crescent moon with little light in it, and moreover has set."

Metzburg was asleep. Tread as lightly as he would, his steps seemed to break the silence almost roughly. He went slowly, feeling his way, for in this narrow street it was dark. Besides, he had not determined how to act. He could not go to the Duchess to-night, to-morrow it might be too late. She might laugh at him for a fool. Perhaps already he had done something to make her angry, and it was in search of him that the soldiers had come to the saddler's. He stood for a moment to listen, fully alive now to his danger. He was not sure of his direction. The street was full of shadows and dark corners, villainy might be as wake-

ful here as in the Burgomaster's house, or in that inner room of the Rising Sun. With a sudden decision he quickened his pace. He could not see the Duchess to-night, he would tell the plot to Prince Karl. Even if Her Grace would not abandon the hunt, and laughed at danger as was her custom, the Prince would see to it that the men in the hunting party were changed for others who could be relied on. The ravine towards Festenhausen would be avoided, or the robbers lying in wait there would meet with a reception they did not bargain for. If the Duchess had ordered his arrest and he were put under lock and key, it would not matter so long as she was warned in time.

Bergolet had reached the end of the street and seen against the night sky a familiar spire which showed him in which direction he must go, when an unsteady figure reeled towards him from a dark doorway. He was a soldier, but fortunately was hopelessly drunk.

"A woman, and alone," he gurgled as he lurched forwards. "I'm in luck."

Content that the ample cloak should deceive the man, Bergolet had stepped aside as a preliminary to seeking safety in flight, when the drunkard fell forward and caught his arm in a firm grip to steady himself.

"If you will come abroad in the night, my pretty, there's toll to be paid."

The jester drew back his arm to strike, but it was caught behind him. The drunkard laughed and his grip tightened as Bergolet fiercely struggled to free himself.

"A toll to pay, my pretty fool."

There was a snigger of laughter with the words. For an instant Bergolet wrenched himself free, then all sound, sight and feeling ceased, and he was suddenly

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pitched forward into space and utter blackness. There was a sense of falling, then came oblivion.

For a few moments the street echoed with the sound of footsteps, a door closed heavily, then there was silence again.

CHAPTER VI

THE MARQUIS DE VANNES

AS Captain of the Guard Prince Karl had quarters in the castle. On leaving the Duchess's garden that night, his mind more occupied with the jester who had mocked at him than with the woman whose hand he had kissed, the sound of quickly following footsteps made him stop. An intriguer himself, none too particular in his methods, he put no great faith in his fellows, no matter how great their professions of friendship, and he heard something stealthy in the footfalls behind him.

"Monsieur le Marquis!" he exclaimed as the Frenchman joined him.

"What remains of me," was the answer. "For my sins I have been forced to spend a great part of the evening in Baron Kevenfelt's company. It is not a lively way of passing the time. I pray you have compassion on me and let me enjoy your society for a little while."

"I regret, but my day's work is not yet over, I—"

"Your Highness, I will be frank with you. I have something to say which concerns you rather closely. Indeed, it is too private a matter to whisper until I am certain of security."

For a moment Karl hesitated, but such a statement was not to be ignored. In the maze wherein he walked he could not afford to turn away from any man who had a secret to impart.

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"It must perforce be a short interview, Marquis, but believe me I sympathize with you. I always find the Baron most wearying company."

"And after Paris and Versailles!" exclaimed De Vannes. "Your Duchess is charming, but — will you think me lacking in all gallantry if I say I am an exile and long for home?"

"Will your mission take so long to accomplish that your exile need trouble you?" asked the Prince.

"I cannot tell. I shall know better after we have talked a little; but not here, Prince. I do assure you it is not safe."

The Marquis did not appear to feel himself secure until they were within four walls and the door closed.

"You spoke of my mission, Prince. You have guessed my reason for being in Metzburg."

"I guessed, but it was beside the mark. I thought, Monsieur, you aspired to the hand of my cousin."

"Indeed, Prince, your thought did me too much honour. I came on business from my master King Louis."

"I heard the truth only to-night from the Duchess," Karl said with a smile.

"So naturally think my exile need be of no long duration. The Duchess was diplomatic. She can evade a direct answer and conceal her designs as cleverly as King Louis himself. She is a woman after his own heart, and I hope they may meet somewhere to enjoy each other's wit. I have been brought up in the midst of subtle diplomacy, Your Highness, and I am sure that whoever the Duchess may honour with her hand, he is not likely to be a Frenchman, and certainly not one of my master's choosing."

"I congratulate you on your clear-sightedness, Marquis."

"As a fact, Your Highness, my mission was rather to you than to the Duchess."

"To me?"

"Under certain conditions, if I found that such conditions existed," De Vannes answered. "You permit me to be precise?"

Karl gave the permission with an inclination of his head.

"I should be blind, Your Highness, did I not see that the Duchess's choice has already been made, did I not understand that you are to be her husband. You have intimated that I may be quite definite. There will be many who will not be pleased with the Duchess's choice. Dreary companion as he is, Baron Kevenfelt has moments when he is extremely lucid, and in this matter he is your enemy. Doubtless he has a strong following in the State, and therefore Your Highness is almost compelled to look for support to many persons personally distasteful to you, but necessary to you under the circumstances. It is an everyday situation in diplomacy."

"At present, Marquis, you have given me no new information."

"Further, there is your cousin herself," De Vannes went on. "Love will hardly make her forget that she is ruler in Podina. A weak man would inevitably be of small importance as her consort, and even for a strong man, like Your Highness, the position must have difficulties."

"I fully appreciate them," Karl answered.

"I do not suggest your inability to deal with the situation, but for a moment let me emphasise the difficulties. The Duchess, just because she is the Duchess, must often be in opposition to your wishes, and there

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will be powerful support behind her wholly bent on frustrating you. The support behind you must be largely composed of those who look to you for favours; and if you are not able to give those favours their loyalty is likely to become lukewarm."

"I appreciate all these difficulties, Marquis, and I have taken some precaution against them."

"Indeed, Your Highness, I am sure of that. I had not had the honour of your acquaintance many hours before I knew what manner of man Podina had to deal with. It is your strength and ambition which make you so many enemies. One does not trouble to hate a weak man, we give him contemptuous pity. Still, the strongest man is only secure when he has staunch friends he can depend on, or one friend powerful enough to make him independent of sycophants and time servers. Louis of France would be that friend. This is my true mission to Podina."

De Vannes leaned forward, sinking his voice as though such a secret could only be whispered even within four walls and the door fast shut.

"Is it necessary to speak in detail of the advantages of such a friendship? There would be a force behind you which nothing in Podina could or dare attempt to stand against; and I think a strong man might rule even the Duchess — his wife."

"And the price to be paid for this friendship, Monsieur le Marquis?"

De Vannes laughed.

"I love a man who comes to the point so directly. Prince, do you love the Elector of Brandenburg?"

"I hate him."

"So does Louis of France, the more perhaps because there was once friendship between them. Hatred is

always bitterest then. He is the one man in Europe at this moment who may thwart my master. He is hastening south to hurl his force against Turenne in Alsace. On his way he visits Podina. Without the Elector in its midst his army will hardly take the field. He might be delayed in Metzburg. He might be prevailed upon to go on further. Some accident might happen which would compel him to return to Berlin. With your hatred to help you, and the fact that he must have many enemies in this city, it should not be difficult to contrive some accident."

"That is King Louis's price," said Karl.

"Can such a bagatelle be considered a price?" the Marquis returned. "On his side, my master will promise that the State of Podina shall ever remain separate and free no matter what other territory it may please my master to bring under the French crown."

"You tempt me, Monsieur le Marquis. I see now why your exile from Paris and Versailles cannot be of such a short duration as I imagined. I would in my turn be frank with you. My precautions for the future are more far reaching than you suspect, and the position of the Duchess is not so strong perhaps as you imagine. Still, I hate the Elector and an accident would please me greatly. We must talk again. For the moment I will say no more than this; by some means I shall endeavour to win the friendship of Louis of France."

The Prince rose to end the conversation, and as the Marquis took leave of him at the door a trooper came to a halt and waited. It was evident that he had come in haste, but Karl did not speak to him until De Vannes was out of hearing.

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"Your Highness, Captain Weber has sent me for your instructions. A fellow who haunts the market — drunken Peter they call him — has come with a tale that the jester Bergolet has gone in secret to a saddler's shop in the market to-night. Peter says he had your orders to report anything of this kind."

"And Captain Weber did not believe him," laughed Karl. "For once drunken Peter must be on the edge of sobriety for he has told the truth. Get back quickly and bid Captain Weber go to the saddler's and arrest Bergolet in the Duchess's name. Take him, without violence if possible, but take him. Do you understand?"

The man saluted and disappeared as hastily as he had come. *

Prince Karl was in no hurry to go about the duty which he had pleaded to the Marquis. For a long while he remained in deep thought which now wrinkled his brow into a frown and now made the corners of his mouth quiver with a smile. He believed himself a strong man, not of that sort which foolishly stakes all on a single throw, but of that strength which is tempered with prudence, and leaves a loophole of escape. The schemes which he had set in motion, using others to carry them forward, were not entirely to his satisfaction. The element of danger in them was too marked, and of necessity there were too many in his confidence. If failure came he believed he had secured sufficient lack of evidence to save himself, but with success, certain debts must accrue which he had never seen clearly how to avoid paying. To-night the Marquis had shown him a high road out of this difficulty — the friendship of Louis of France. There might be a crooked way out which he would prefer to take, but at

least he had a second way open to him, and the knowledge made him smile. Sandra would be forced to listen to his counsel, and the demands of his creditors would have to be reasonable. He was a gambler who could not lose.

"They have waited to-night and will complain," he said, taking his cloak. "They have a foretaste of my independence which will do them good."

Calling for a servant to attend him, he went out. He never went unaccompanied in the streets of Metz-burg if he could help it. He had enemies, and he was not too trustful of his friends.

Certainly he was waited for to-night. The Burgomaster had returned from the tavern of the Rising Sun, and so sure was he that the number of his guests would be complete by this time that he did not question the servant in the hall.

"Not here yet!" he exclaimed as he entered the room which he had left not long ago.

"No," answered one of the three men with an oath. "It is not the first time we have had to dance attendance in this fashion."

"It will be the last," said the Burgomaster. "We are nearing the end. I have arranged everything. After to-morrow I shall speak plainly. We shall not dance attendance any more; we shall call the tune."

There was an air of finality in the statement as he seated himself. Heinrich von Lehmann had no doubt whatever concerning his own importance. Clothed in his robes and seated in the great carved chair of office in the Rathhaus, there was undeniably something imposing about the Burgomaster. There the ermined gown lent an air of wit to his commonplace utterances, and his pompous speech often passed for wisdom; in

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his own house, although he endeavoured to preserve his public dignity and must needs occupy an ample chair, he was only a fat man who breathed heavily and was inclined to bluster.

Yet in his head, so disproportionate in size to his body, there was a brain of sufficiently high an order to appreciate how best to ensure the worldly prosperity of the Burgomaster, and since he possessed no conscience to speak of, the methods to be used towards this end troubled him not at all. Ready to consider any scheme or any kind of underhand dealing which might help to fill his private coffers, he was an easy friend to any man or woman who might be useful to him. His first thought was always for himself, and at any moment he would have sacrificed his best friend if he stood either in the way of his ambition or in the path of his escape. At heart he was a coward, but he could speak fearlessly enough on occasion to those he deemed sufficiently in his power; and since the friendship of a crooked man is always a dangerous thing, there were men of mark in Metzburg who could not safely offend the Burgomaster.

In some degree at any rate this was the case with the men who were with him to-night. Straubel, who had already complained of waiting, held office at Court and was ever alert to throw obstacles in the way of the policy of Baron Kevenfelt whom he hated; Kurd was one of the richest men in the city, as avaricious and as unscrupulous as the Burgomaster himself; Rahmer was a schemer against the existing order of things, a man ever on the side of change, gallant in manner, glib in speech, and popular with all those who were discontented.

They had waited and grumbled for an hour or more

when Prince Karl entered the room. He offered no apology. He seated himself without any explanation, and looked at the Burgomaster.

"Well, Von Lehmann, have you carried out your instructions?"

"Instructions!"

The look on the Burgomaster's face caused a smile on his companions' faces, and the Prince burst into a laugh.

"The lateness of the hour forbids too nice a choice of words."

"The lateness is not our fault," the Burgomaster answered. "We have been waiting long enough to try our tempers, I do assure you."

"We are in like case then and may cry quits. I have been cursing myself for not arranging that you should come to me at the castle. I find the walk to the market-place trying sometimes. Well, what have you done? Does that form of question please you better?"

"Your Highness, I think we all find it more appropriate under the circumstances," and then the Burgomaster slowly and ponderously reported his visit to the Rising Sun.

"Excellent," said the Prince. "We approach the end of this affair, gentlemen. I shall hunt to-morrow with a light heart, and afterwards—we need hardly discuss the afterwards to-night."

"There is just one point of danger," said Straubel, "the jester—Bergolet. Her Grace has elected not to take him with her to Festenhausen, but even at the last moment she might change her mind."

"The jester! What can he do even if he should be of the company?" gurgled the Burgomaster. "There will be short work with the pestilent fellow I

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warrant. A patch of darker crimson in his dress than he usually carries, a supper for beast and bird, and an end to him. You will see no sign of mourning with me."

"If excuse for my late arrival were necessary, Bergolet would furnish it," said Karl. "Your minds may be at ease concerning him. He has been arrested to-night while prowling about the streets. I hear he made some sort of resistance and consequently had the senses knocked out of him. By the time he is ready to jest again our hunting will be over."

"That is good news," said Straubel.

"Was it the Duchess had him arrested?" asked Rahmer.

"It was done in her name," Karl answered. "If there has been a mistake it can be explained later."

"I could almost regret that the forest will lack its carrion," said the Burgomaster as the Prince rose.

The opening of the door was the signal for conversation of a more conventional character, such as friends may use on parting; it acted as a warning too, and the woman who had descended half a dozen stairs hastily retreated to the gallery again where she had watched ever since she had let the jester out of a side door. She had not been there when the Burgomaster returned, but she had seen Prince Karl enter and she wanted to know who all the visitors were to-night. Only a few moments ago a chain which she wore had fallen on to a rug in the hall below. As she fingered it with restless hands the clasp had become unfastened and it had slipped from her neck. She was going down to get it when the room door opened. Safe in the shadows of the gallery again she watched the men crossing the hall,

hoping that her chain would remain unnoticed. It was Kurd who saw it and picked it up.

"You scatter your wealth in strange places, Burgomaster," he said, holding out the chain.

"Dropped by one of the servants, probably," said the Burgomaster, but as he took it the Prince saw it.

"May I look?" and then after examining it for a moment he said, "A servant, surely a servant never wore this?"

The woman in the gallery drew further back into the shadows afraid of an upward glance that might pierce her hiding place.

"Why not?" said Von Lehmann, "it is only a cheap trinket."

"Look again, Burgomaster," and Karl held out the chain so that the light from the hanging lamp might fall upon it. "If that be a sample of your judgment of merchandise, I can picture you a ruined man. Only once before have I held in my hands such a chain as this, and though I am no merchant I knew that I held a gift worthy to clasp the throat of a princess. Surely it is of finest gold, Burgomaster, and look at the workmanship. I warrant it came from Florence and that the goldsmiths of that city never accomplished better work."

"You are right, Prince," the Burgomaster answered after a pause. "My sight in this light is indifferent. How she became possessed of it I do not know, but it may belong to my niece."

"Your niece!" Karl exclaimed.

"I did not know you possessed a niece," said Rahmer. "Has she delicacy and beauty which can match the chain?"

"Like other men I have relations," the Burgomaster

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answered somewhat irritably, "and my niece has sufficient beauty, I believe."

"Tell her that Prince Karl would make her acquaintance and would learn how she became possessed of such pretty jewelry."

"She is somewhat masterful, Your Highness, and may refuse the information."

"I think not," laughed Karl as he passed out.

For a few moments after his guests had gone the Burgomaster stood looking at the chain in the palm of his great fat hand. Very gradually his frown changed into a smile, a leering smile which had malice in it, and cold, calculating wickedness. They must be devilish thoughts which ran through his mind to make him smile so; and the woman watching him from the gallery seemed to read them, for a sudden shudder shook her. It was not fear she felt, but abhorrence, the presence of something unclean and unholy. At that moment Bergolet might have broken his oath to her and not have made her angry.

The Burgomaster dropped the chain into his pocket as he left the hall, and the woman hurried to her room and fast locked the door.

CHAPTER VII

SHOWS HOW AN ASS REMAINED RIDERLESS

THE day was young, invigorating as a draught of wine; there was the keenness of new life in it. The sun of early morning threw long shadows of turreted wall and pointed roof across the castle courtyard where horses pawed the rough stones impatiently, and men appeared anxious to be in the saddle and away. There was an air of excitement, men asked each other eager questions in an undertone, questions difficult to answer apparently; and only an ass, richly caparisoned in scarlet and green, and motionless save for an occasional flap of the ears, seemed perfectly contented with things as they were.

Prince Karl, breezily good-humoured, had just entered the inner hall, but one glance at his cousin, as he bent over her hand, was enough to show him that she was in a capricious mood. He was astonished to see Kevenfelt there at such an hour.

"You are an early riser, Baron, yet you do not go hunting, I think."

"No, Prince, it was a more important matter which called me from bed."

"It is a pity you were not here ten minutes earlier, Karl," said the Duchess. "We might have started before the Baron had time to worry me."

"Your Highness, this is a serious matter," Kevenfelt returned. "It is not mere caprice, but the stern reality of war which causes this alteration in plans, and the

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Elector is too powerful a man to offend gratuitously."

"Baron, I am not inclined to be at the beck and call of any Elector," the Duchess answered.

"Madam, I think he means his message to be of great civility. Even at the Emperor's urgent call, Brandenburg does not choose to ignore Podina."

"What is the Elector's message?" asked Karl.

"Post haste in the night a rider came to Metzburg with news that the Elector must visit us at once," said the Duchess. "He puts his visit forward a week, and expects me to alter all my plans to give him welcome."

"Because he must hurry to the help of the Imperial forces," Kevenfelt added. "Your Grace hardly does him justice unless you give his reason."

"You seem more careful for the Elector, Baron, than you are for me," said the Duchess, tapping her skirt irritably with her riding whip.

"Madam, I would be fair to my worst enemy."

"The Elector no doubt has some definite end in view or he would not trouble you with this visit," said Karl.

"Indeed, why must he visit Podina at all?"

"It would take too long a time to explain the diplomacy which for years has served this State so well," Kevenfelt answered.

"Your experience laughs at my youth, eh, Baron?" said Karl; "but, forgive the suggestion, the policy of the fathers may not always be the best for the sons to follow. When has our visitor decided to arrive, Cousin?"

"To-morrow at the latest, but it may be earlier," said the Duchess. "The Baron demands that the hunt should be cancelled."

"Postponed, Your Grace," Kevenfelt corrected.

"Is not one day as good as another for hunting? I would not risk offending a powerful neighbour."

"I know the people of Festenhausen have made great preparation to receive you, Cousin," said Karl. "There is a risk of offending them. Perhaps the Baron forgets that."

The Duchess looked at Kevenfelt. Devoted to her, and to her service, as the Baron was, he failed to appreciate her moods, and had never succeeded in separating the woman from the ruler. He constantly appealed to the one when his appeal should have been to the other. It was so now. In spite of her annoyance she was ready to be persuaded. A careful answer to her look and to Prince Karl's suggestion, would have moved her; but Kevenfelt lost his opportunity by using sarcasm.

"Since Your Grace must hunt, it remains for me to appease the Elector as best I may," he said with a shrug of his shoulders.

"You forget my people at Festenhausen," she returned quickly. "Prince Karl is right. I would sooner offend a neighbour than my own people. We shall endeavour to return in time to relieve you of an arduous task, Baron, but we hunt to-day. Where is Bergolet?"

"Bergolet! Bergolet!"

The name was called in the castle and across the courtyard, but there was no answer. The ass awaited him, ready to carry him as far as the city gate, but no one had seen the jester this morning.

"He does not leave his bed as easily as the Baron," Karl laughed.

"Go, fetch him, someone," said the Duchess angrily. "The fellow presumes and must be taught manners."

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Bring him at once, as he is in his night gear if you have to drag him from his bed. At least it will amuse those who are early in the streets. What gear does a fool sleep in, do you suppose, Karl?"

"I cannot imagine."

"I can," said Kevenfelt, "for a fool asleep is much like other men; even awake he has more wisdom than some."

If the Prince found the remark offensive the Baron was satisfied, but it was the Duchess who answered him.

"Bergolet has evidently been teaching you some of his folly. A wise man should remember that punishment is not only for fools."

The jester was not in bed, had not been in his bed all night. Those who had gone to look for him returned to say that he was nowhere to be found. The big soldier Saxe was troubled about him, and was even now abroad in the city looking for him.

For a moment it seemed that the absence of the jester would achieve what the news of the Elector's coming had failed to accomplish, that the hunt would not take place. The Duchess hesitated a little, then with an angry flick of her whip, she led the way from the hall.

In the courtyard there was a hurrying of grooms, quick mounting to saddles, the musical jingle of the bit and bridle, and a noisy clatter of hoofs. The gateway was flung wide open and the little company rode out. Standing on the wide steps, Kevenfelt watched them go; and for a moment the motionless ass was alone in the courtyard, then a groom came and led the animal away.

"There is no use for you to-day, my friend, nor for me either it seems," and with hands clasped behind his back the Baron slowly reentered the castle.

For a little way the Duchess rode in silence, her face

showing no pleasure at the expedition. Even now it seemed possible that she might turn back before reaching the city gate.

"What can have come to this fool?" she said, turning to Karl.

"In some ways, as the Baron says, I expect he differs little from other men, Cousin. A night at the tavern may have its attraction, and the liquor be potent enough to make him lose himself on his way home to bed."

"It might be the explanation," she said.

"Or he may be a spy and have spent the night in the service of his employer."

"That also might explain his absence, though I think he would be more careful not to arouse suspicion. He had my command to ride to the city gate with us, the ass was waiting. Last night, I remember, he pleaded to be allowed a horse and to ride with us to the hunt. He may come upon us so mounted before we leave the city. He might think it a good jest."

"You would not pardon such effrontery and let him come?"

"I should pardon the fellow, but I should send him back, with a few coins to spend perhaps during my absence. He might go to a tavern and yet get safely home."

"He might, but I wouldn't wager on it," said Karl. "Maybe there is some woman in Metzberg—"

"A woman?" queried the Duchess sharply.

"That he is your fool, Cousin, gives him some importance, and there are women who will smile upon some marvellously strange fellows."

"A woman!" she repeated. "I had not thought of a woman."

"Why, a woman is the most likely explanation,"

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laughed Karl. "A man's a man though you deck him in motley, and even the wisest man may play the fool at the bidding of some woman. Why should your jester be different from the rest of mankind? The city gate is before us, Cousin, but I see no parti-coloured rider on a horse. Take my word for it, either he is sleeping off the effects of the tavern, or behind some walls in Metzburg a woman has succeeded in making him forget your commands."

"We shall find out," she said, flicking her horse unnecessarily. "I will be obeyed though all the prettiest women in the world should be gathered together in Metzburg."

At the gate she stopped, and called an officer to her.

"Have you seen Bergolet?"

"No, Your Grace."

"He is somewhere in the city, drunk in a tavern perhaps, or making love to some woman, or — I know not where he is or what he is doing. Have Metzburg searched. Find him. Put him under lock and key. Sober him or cool his ardour with bread and water for diet until I return. My jester shall be taught manners. If men are beasts by nature, he shall be unnatural and not as other men."

Again she flicked her horse, which would have thrown a less capable rider in protest, and so passed through the gate without another word. In silence and with a smile upon his lips, Karl followed her, waiting for her petulant mood to change.

Within four walls, enclosing a comfortless chamber, lay the jester, but he was not sleeping off the effects of a tavern orgy, nor was there any woman beside him to put a cool hand on his throbbing head. He lay in the corner of the room on a heap of straw, none too clean,

but for some hours neither the room nor his bed had troubled him. He was dealing with shadows, some altogether fantastic, some with dim likeness to realities that had been in the past. He moved in a twilight world, was caught from place to place, from one unfinished episode to another, with lightning rapidity and without rest. At first he could make no protest by word or action, fate whirling him whither it would; but presently he was conscious of opposition on his part, of a struggle to sleep. And in time the riot of shadows grew less, and he moved in a clearer light. He was able to look about him, to observe his surroundings with some understanding, and so found his fantastic world quite a narrow place. The light became a window, the vast spaces dwindled to four walls, the vault above him became a patched and broken ceiling, and the only form near him was a man, sitting on a box turned endways, who was whittling a piece of wood for no purpose apparently but to keep his hands employed.

Beyond this Bergolet's consciousness did not go for a time. He saw, but without any special interest; and then, quite suddenly, he remembered the drunken soldier who had mistaken him for a woman. He had gripped his arm very firmly for a drunken man. He had been pretending, surely. It was all part of a plot to capture him. It had been successful. He was a prisoner, and on the upturned box sat his gaoler.

After this, full memory came quickly; the fortune-teller, the Burgomaster, the listening by an open shutter, all that had gone before his capture; and he remembered that he had to stop the Duchess's hunting party from reaching that ravine which lay towards Festenhausen. What hour was it? How long had he been here? It was daylight coming in at the window,

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full daylight. His head throbbed painfully, but his brain was clear enough to recognise the need for subtlety and precaution. Without moving, he looked round the room, judged it to be an upper room, and then fixed his eyes upon his companion. He was a big man, a trooper he had often seen, a man full of boasting if he remembered rightly.

"Hallo," said Bergolet, raising himself on his elbow. No limbs were broken; indeed, he was not so stiff as he expected.

The soldier threw down the wood and put away his knife.

"You're not dead then?"

"Not yet, it takes a lot to kill some folk."

"That's no argument in your case. We only had orders to knock the senses out of you. A bag with some sand in it does that easily."

"So easily that I'm trying to remember what happened," said Bergolet. "I seem to remember you."

"Everybody knows me. I'm Hans, Big Hans. I was at the inn of the Three Shields when the Duchess took you for her fool."

"The Duchess!" said Bergolet. "What Duchess?"

The soldier leaned forward and regarded him in astonishment for a few moments.

"What Duchess! Do you mean to say you don't remember who you are?"

"I cannot think; nor why I am dressed in these queer clothes."

"Lord! and it wasn't much of a blow you had either," said Hans. "It was Gustav did it, and I've seen women with as good muscles as his. There wasn't much sense in you to knock out, that's a certain thing."

"As certain as that my head has nothing but pain

in it now. Tell me who I am, sir, and what I have done."

"Who you are? That's easy enough," said Hans, and in a few words he told him how he had come to Metzburg, and how the Duchess had seemed to think a great deal of her new fool. "As for what you've done, that's not so easy. Word came last night from the Duchess that you were to be arrested, and it being known that you had gone to a saddler's shop, we went there to find you. You had dropped from a window, though how you managed it beats me — the devil must have looked after his own to bring you safe to ground. Two or three of us were sent into the streets to look for you, and we'd given up hopes of you when you came."

"Am I in Metzburg now?"

"I could almost pitch my hat into the market-place from that window."

"You haven't told me what I have done."

"I can't. I don't know. The Duchess ordered your arrest, and one doesn't ask questions when the Duchess orders."

"She puzzles me, this Duchess," said Bergolet; "and Metzburg, and the saddler's shop, everything puzzles me. I want to go back home; they'll look after me there, they always did. I wasn't like the others. They called me poor — poor — I forget what they called me, but it was something with poor before it."

"Idiot, was it?" asked Hans.

"I'm not sure. It was a name like that."

"He's done for, poor devil," said the trooper with some pity in his voice.

"No, it wasn't poor devil. I'm sure of that. The other name you said was more like it."

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Hans got up, walked to the door and back, then came and stood by the straw bed.

"Don't you remember Saxe?"

"Saxe!"

"Aye, a great fellow, nigh as big as me, says little but can hit as hard as a stallion kicks when he's in a temper."

"Saxe! Saxe! I think—Is it the name of my home?"

"He's a man, idiot."

"You're kind speaking to me like that," Bergolet said with a smile. "It is like being amongst my own people. Saxe is a man, is he, and kicks? Why not take me to him? If I saw him I might remember him. I remembered you, you know."

"I don't know where he is," said Hans.

"There's something better to be done," laughed Bergolet, after a pause. "I've just thought of it. Take me to this Duchess, then we shall be told why I was arrested. Clever of me to think of that, isn't it?"

"Very; but I can't take you to the Duchess either. She left Metzburg early this morning."

"Left it!"

"Gone hunting. And there's a puzzle about that too. Gustav was here a while since and said the Duchess ordered the officer at the gate to arrest you because you weren't there when she wanted you."

"How could I be when I was here?"

"That's what puzzles me," said Hans.

"It's all very confusing," said Bergolet, "I expect I shall wake up presently and find you're only a dream. Yet I seem to be awake now. That's daylight at the window, and it seems time to get up. Eh, but they're dead limbs I have."

He crawled from the straw and slowly stretched himself.

"It's a fine morning and this is a poor place," he said, going to the door. "Let's go out."

The door was locked and Hans laughed.

"We're prisoners?" queried Bergolet. "Birds in a cage? I hate birds in a cage, yet I have heard them sing."

"I've heard you sing too," Hans returned.

"But not in a cage," was the quick answer. "Put me where there are trees, or where a stream tumbles over a stony bed, and I will sing. At home, when I talked, they did not listen to me, but they did when I sang. What's this for?"

Bergolet picked up the piece of wood which he had seen the soldier whittling. It was rather heavy, the pointed end of a stout stake.

"Just a bit of wood," said Hans.

"You were making something?" asked Bergolet, pointing to the litter on the floor.

"Just cutting to pass the time."

Bergolet went to the window. He did not attempt to open it, but he looked up and down. Suddenly he slit a hole in his cloak with the point of the stake, and began tearing the bottom part of it into strips, his guard watching him.

"That's a fool's trick, spoiling a good cloak," said the soldier.

"Wait. I am a very clever fellow," and to the end of one strip Bergolet tied the piece of wood securely, knotting it with quick fingers. "It is not far to the street. We make a rope, the wood for a weight to keep it steady, and then we climb down. I care not which of us goes first. Then for a tavern and break-

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fast, and afterwards — perhaps afterwards I shall sing. Is it not a clever thought of mine? ”

“Are you hungry? I can call for food.”

“Eat here!” Bergolet exclaimed. “It would choke me. I must have sunlight and the open air.”

“Don’t you understand that you’re a prisoner, that I am to keep you here until I have word what to do with you? ”

There was a blank expression in Bergolet’s face. He held the strips of his cloak in one hand, pointing to the window with the other, a forlorn and pathetic figure of imbecility. As a rule the rough soldier would have laughed and found him a good jest, but now a deeper note was struck, and with a little sigh of pity he turned away from his prisoner.

And in that moment Bergolet became alive. He hated treachery, but at any cost he must escape. With a quick movement he swung round the block of wood which he had knotted to a strip of the cloth. It proved no mean weapon. It struck Hans full on the side of the head, felling him like an ox, and the big man lay senseless across the bed of straw. With the strips he had torn ready for this event, Bergolet bound him hand and foot, and tied a pad of cloth over his mouth to prevent his uttering a sound. The man was only stunned, there was no telling how long his unconsciousness would last, and every moment was precious.

Bergolet took the key from the trooper’s pocket, and still armed with his improvised weapon, opened the door. On the outside he locked it again, and stood at the head of the stairs listening. There were others in the house or Hans would not have said he could call for breakfast. Soldiers might be there, perhaps only a woman, but he was prepared for any emergency as he

went quietly down the stairs. Luck was with him. Over the stair rail on the lower floor, a coat, such as workers in the market wore, had been flung. It was old, but it covered the dress of scarlet and green completely. It was a far better disguise than his mutilated cloak, which he hung over the rail in its stead.

The house door stood open. From the rear of the building came the clatter of a saucepan, the smell of cooking, and a drone of voices, but no one barred his way. He passed into the street and assumed a slithering gait to match the coat he wore. There was a huge inside pocket into which he thrust the weapon which had served him so well. He might need it again.

He avoided the busier streets, and he noted with satisfaction that the few people he met took no interest in him. Evidently the disguise served. Until now all his wit had been concentrated on how to escape, but this so far accomplished, his brain was busy deciding what next he must do. Hans had said that last night the Duchess had ordered his arrest, yet was puzzled that she should order it again as she passed out of the city this morning to hunt. If she had ordered his arrest last night, surely she would know that it had been carried out, Bergolet argued. He would have been taken to some proper prison, not locked in an upper room of an ordinary house. Hans may have spoken the truth as far as he knew it, but it seemed clear to Bergolet that the Duchess had given no such order last night. He had been attacked for some other reason, and important men were in the secret or the soldiers would not have been employed. Bergolet did not believe the fortune-teller had played him false, but doubtless the attack made upon him had some connection with the plot hatched in that inner room of the Rising Sun tavern.

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Already the hunting party was far on its way towards that ravine near Festenhausen; how was he to prevent the Duchess reaching it? The sun was near noon. Men were searching the city for him. A swift horse he must have to make rescue possible. How was he to get it? To attempt theft from the castle stables must mean capture. Even if he came by a horse, how was he to pass out of the city gate?

He slithered along side-streets, his direction towards the gate by which the Duchess had gone that morning. So far good fortune had been with him. He might slip through the gate unnoticed, and rob some farm of a horse. He had found a coat, why not a horse? This hope seemed gone when he came in sight of the gate. There were more soldiers there than usual. Some troopers had just flung themselves from their saddles and were in eager conversation with the Captain at the gate. A crowd of idlers was gathered about them, and with no definite plan in his mind, Bergolet joined the crowd.

"There's not a tavern on this side of the city we have not visited," a trooper was saying. "No sign of him, not a word of him. Nobody has seen him."

"What's he done?" asked another. "If we knew that we might guess in which direction to look for him."

"The Duchess is angry, that's all I know," was the answer, "and there'll be the devil to satisfy if he's not under lock and key on her return."

"Maybe he left the city last night," another suggested.

"I have enquired. It seems certain he did not do so. Can that fellow the saddler be made to say nothing?"

"He, too, strangely enough, is not to be found," was the answer. "He disappeared in the night. We met

the Burgomaster. He had no advice to give. He seemed to see only humour in the affair, and was inclined to laugh at the Duchess."

"He'd do no laughing if Her Grace had laid commands on him which he could not fulfil," grumbled the Captain. "You must search again, and don't trouble to be too gentle with anyone you think might give you information, not even if it's a woman. There's no room for sentiment in this business."

Bergolet had elbowed his way through the crowd of idlers until he stood near the horses. It was impossible to slip through the gate without being seen. He looked first at one horse, then at another, finally stroking one. The animal started a little at his touch, and at a second touch moved impatiently.

"Stand away there," cried a trooper roughly to the crowd.

There was a quick backward movement at his command, and then a yell. The horses began to plunge, causing confusion, and one of them reared high, pawed the air for a moment and then sprang forward towards the gate. On his back was a man swinging in a rapid circle a piece of wood tied to a black band. The weapon struck once or twice, bringing an oath and a cry of pain. It effectually cleared a space about the horse and its rider, and the soldiers by the gate fell back at the onslaught.

With a quick movement the rider let his coat fly apart. He had seen a musket raised to fire.

"It's the jester! It's Bergolet."

"Don't shoot!" came a frantic order.

A musket ball would have stopped him, but, as Bergolet had foreseen, they would not run the risk of killing him. It was his capture, not his death, the Duch-

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HOW AN ASS REMAINED RIDERLESS 101

ess had ordered. So as he galloped through the gateway he let his coat fly open, showing his dress of scarlet and green.

In a few moments three troopers had flung themselves into their saddles and were racing after him. It remained to be seen whether the jester had used his judgment aright and chosen the swiftest horse.

CHAPTER VIII

THE DAY PASSES

HOW the fellow rides!" exclaimed one trooper, digging spurs into his horse to better its pace.

"Aye, like a bundle of old rags in the saddle. I have looked every moment to see a fall," was the answer, and he too dug in his spurs, for the city gate had been left far behind and his beast was flagging.

"It is sheer fear that gives his horse such speed," said the third trooper after a pause.

"Maybe, and it serves his purpose; but for all that he took the best animal of the lot," said the first speaker.

"The devil's luck. He is beating us at every stride now. I've a mind to send a bullet after him."

"It would be a miracle if you hit him at this distance," was the answer, "but it would be folly even to tempt fate. For all her anger the Duchess is proud of her fool. A dead jester might easily set you swinging on a gibbet. There's rough ground in front of us. It is likely to shake him out of his saddle."

It seemed that the rough ground might bring disaster, for Bergolet rode loosely, his body bent low over the horse's outstretched neck. He looked rather like a bundle of rags which at a sudden jerk might easily fall, and it might be terror which gave the animal such pace; but the effect of the riding was to make the burden as light as possible, and the jester talked to his

horse all the time, in confidential whispers of encouragement and appreciation as though human ears were listening and speech might answer him.

"They lag behind us, my pretty. You knew they would, didn't you? No, there is no need for a longer stride. This will beat them. We'll keep this pace for a little longer, and they'll turn back. You and the fool must save the Duchess. Reward! We claim nothing, do we? But they shall talk of you in Metzburg, my beauty, and Bergolet shall — Ah, this is not such easy going, is it? Rough ground's the devil. A little slower,— that's it. They'll have to go slower too."

Bergolet patted the horse as he glanced behind him. The troopers were labouring after him, still losing distance, and the fringe of the forest was before him. If his pursuers got so far, they would lose him there. They would hardly expect him to ride towards Festenhausen, that would be to overtake the Duchess and become a prisoner again. The men behind him were doubtless honest fellows with no part in the plot which he was attempting to frustrate.

"Rough ground troubles us little, oh, beauty, but it's taking the last wind out of those behind. They stop. No — yes. They've given it up. They've done their best, we can witness to that, but they'll get hard words when they ride back through the gate. Perhaps we'll say a word for them later if — if the Duchess will listen to us. We'll get no welcome at first, that's certain. We'll have to keep our wits at full stretch to get a hearing at all, and even then — why, what's to happen then I don't know. The forest, my beauty. To the left is our direction. Heaven send that we strike the easiest way to Festenhausen and that ravine by the Gallows Oak."

Now that pursuit was over, Bergolet went slowly for a while, resting his horse. There was no telling what the animal might have to do before the day was over. Beyond the general direction of Festenhausen, Bergolet knew nothing of these deep glades and green tracks. Along the roads travellers might be met, travellers who were better avoided perchance, and it was not by any road the hunting party would go. Not until towards evening was the Gallows Oak to be reached, and a direct way would not be followed. There would be some hours of hunting, a wandering to this side and that, otherwise Bergolet could not expect to arrive in time.

"It's a pleasant way this, my beauty, but we must not linger upon it too long. There are devils in front of us and the Duchess is in the midst of them."

At a shake of the reins the horse broke into a canter, the soft turf giving little sound to the beating hoofs. Bergolet still had his weapon, the pointed stake-end fastened to a strip of cloth; it had served him excellently, and there might be further use for it yet. There were other thieves in the forest besides those waiting near the Gallows Oak, and Bergolet had keen eyes as he went, and noted his direction carefully.

Time slipped away as he went deeper and deeper into the forest. Twice he crossed a road, running to right and left of him, but not a traveller was to be seen upon it; and once he turned back for the third of a league or more, finding that the track he had chosen bent too far from the general line he was following. There was no sign of the hunting party, not a sound of it to be heard, and nothing had been dropped by the way to tell of its passing, though he kept a sharp lookout as he rode. Time was pressing now, and he was

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growing anxious, when at the crossing of two tracks he came upon a woodman. For a moment the man stared at him, then turned to dive into the undergrowth by the wayside.

"Stop!" cried Bergolet.

"Lord! What are you?" said the man in an awed tone.

"A hunter."

"I know. I have heard of you, but since I came to be a man I have not believed. They reared me in Master Calvin's way, it was no choice of mine. Mother Mary, I am a poor sinner, repentant," and awkwardly he made the sign of the cross.

A woodman might be in league with robbers, but the man was evidently afraid, superstition made him so; it would be wise to play upon his fears rather than seek information by direct questioning.

"What evil thing do you think I am?" Bergolet asked sternly.

"I know you for one of those who haunt the forest depths, those spirits who bewitch the unwary traveller. I have heard of them, but never seen until now."

The man was a simple fellow, his fear evidently genuine.

"Look well, woodman," said Bergolet, throwing the old coat he wore wide open. "Can you not tell it is a royal vesture that clothes me, green like the new raiment spring gives the world, and scarlet as a sunset sky seen in winter through a vista of bare trees? Bow to a king, fellow, and tell me if you think only evil can be hidden in the woods."

"I thought so."

"So you sign the cross to expel me from your path. I still remain, you see. Listen, woodman, and be care-

ful you say nothing but the truth. There are robbers in the forest."

"Many. Many."

"When last did you help them to stop a traveler?"

"I swear, never. I am honest."

"We shall see," laughed Bergolet. "At what hour was it to-day you saw robbers?"

"It was after noon."

"Where?"

"Yonder," said the man, pointing behind him. "There's a great stone by a narrow track which crosses the road; do you know it?"

"Know it!" Bergolet cried as if such a question made him angry.

"Of course—I forgot. They were taking that narrow track, and I kept well hidden amongst the trees. There are times when they would rob even a woodman. But indeed, sir, I know not if there were robbers. There was a woman with them."

"Beautiful as morning?"

"I only saw that she was a woman."

"They were robbers, woodman, though of a sort you may not often encounter. I think you are honest, and it is the only thing I can find of interest in you. I'll try you further. That way lies Festenhausen, does it not?" And Bergolet pointed behind him.

"Nay, sir, that way," said the man, pointing in the opposite direction, the direction in which Bergolet had been travelling. "Behind you, far behind you, lies Metzburg."

"Metzburg. The people of the forest know nothing of cities."

"No, sir, nor woodmen either. I have never been

there, but it stands high on a great rock, and from the edge of the forest I have seen it on a clear day."

"And longed to travel there? Will you ride to the city with me?"

"Nay, sir, pity me. I know what that would mean. Who rides with you dies in your arms before the journey's end."

"Peace, fool. I mean not to-day. Your soul is not yet ripe for such a ride as that. I'll test you again. Know you my especial haunt which men call the Gallows Oak?"

"I have eaten my midday bread under it scores of times."

"Perchance that is how I first knew you," said Bergolet. "It lies yonder, two hours away."

"Pardon, sir, it lies straight before you, not an hour's distance for an ordinary horse, for yours — I cannot tell how long it will take yours."

"An hour, for I travel not like the wind when I take shape for men to see me. I thank you, woodman, mark that condescension, then mark also my commands. Not until the dawn of another day shall you tell any man of this meeting; nor until another dawn must you have word with any traveller, and if men come riding apace seeking for the woman you saw, have no answer for them. Best hide from them if you can, for should they catch you and treat you roughly, still you must not answer them. Only if she be alone, and asks your help, give it; and you may tell her also of me — of the king in green and scarlet. Do you understand?"

"Yes, sir."

"Keep faith then and you shall find good days," said Bergolet, and he laughed as he cantered along the track which led to the Gallows Oak. He laughed at the super-

stitious woodman, but he soon became serious. How was he to act at the end of an hour?—One man against more than a score of ruffians. How was he to make the Duchess and the Prince realize their danger without raising the suspicion of their enemies and so precipitating the attack? He was so deep in thought that he allowed his horse to drop to walking pace more than once. And some of them were strange thoughts for a jester. But for his quaint costume and the mad weapon he carried, he might have been a knight riding on some great quest as twilight began to gather in the forest.

Far behind him the woodman, hiding in the bracken, still trembled at the apparition he had seen, and started at the most familiar sound; and farther away still, in Metzburg, there was excitement, citizens in eager talk at street corners and in the market-place; and villains holding their courage by telling one another that their well planned schemes could not miscarry; and one man wandering hither and thither, anxious as a father who has lost his son and knows not in which direction to look for him.

When the search of the saddler's shop had been accomplished and no sign of the jester found there, Saxe returned to the castle with his companions. With them he grumbled at being kept out of his bed to no purpose, but unlike them he made no attempt to sleep. As soon as he could do so without attracting attention, he went to the round tower and climbed the stairs to Bergolet's lodging. He did not expect to find the jester there, but he might find something to suggest upon what kind of adventure he was engaged.

A woman. It was Saxe's first thought, and might denote a special knowledge of Bergolet, or merely in-

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dicare his fixed idea of man's besetting weakness. After a thoughtful pause, however, he shook his head. There must be some other reason or the Duchess would not have ordered his arrest. Some conspiracy must be connected with the saddler's shop, or why had his arrest been ordered as soon as it was known he had gone there?

Why had he gone? Again Saxe gravely shook his head. Bergolet would not conspire against the Duchess. The grim soldier seemed to have been born with a distrust of his fellows, and given sufficient motive, any man was capable of villainy, he argued; even Bergolet might not be proof against temptation, but he certainly would not betray the Duchess. His arrest must therefore have been ordered under a mistaken impression or for some other cause altogether. The alternative presented a wide field for speculation. With a woman like the Duchess, full of whims and free to follow them, a man's intelligence might well be baffled to pick out the truth from so many possibilities, and Saxe's wrath and contempt was silently poured out upon all women from Duchesses down to serving-wenches.

What could he do to warn Bergolet? Nothing. All night he awaited the jester's return, now listening at the window for hurrying footsteps in the courtyard below, now going to the head of the winding stairs and listening there. Definite ideas came to him slowly, but he was presently wondering why no soldiers had been placed to watch this round tower and arrest the jester on his return. It seemed as though he were not expected to come back. Surely he would return? The doubt opened up another wide field for soldier Saxe to speculate in, and moreover he came to some very definite conclusions. Once, with sudden determination, he

went half way down the winding stairs, then came slowly back again. No, there was nothing to be done to-night. Were he found prowling about the city, he might easily make matters worse for Bergolet. He must wait for the new day.

Saxe's attitude of protection towards the fool was a jest with his fellows. "The Fool's Nurse" and "Mother Saxe" were amongst the names they gave him, but not in his hearing since he had knocked a man down for the pleasantry. No one was astonished therefore when, with early morning, he went off in quest of his charge. One man, who had a liking for the grim soldier, being of a taciturn humour himself, warned him to be careful and not get into trouble over the matter.

"I was on duty last night obeying the Duchess," Saxe answered; "this morning I am off duty and looking for a friend who at times is not able to take care of himself."

So Saxe was searching the city when the Duchess's messengers came to call Bergolet and drag him from his bed if necessary, and he saw nothing of the hunting party on its way to the gate. For most of his acquaintances Saxe would have had a shrewd notion where to search. There would have been some favorite tavern where he would certainly have been heard of, or some girl whose face and figure had an especial power of attraction; but with Bergolet it was not so. When he drank wine it was in no special place, and attendance upon Her Grace seemed to have absorbed him as far as women were concerned. Saxe's wandering was therefore rather aimless, a trusting to chance. He might catch sight of the jester's face at the window of some house where he was hiding, or happen upon someone with whom Bergolet had left a message. He con-

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stantly found his way back to the market-place and to the neighbourhood of the saddler's shop. He was there when the business of the market was suspended for a few moments while mounted troopers clattered through and halted by the sign of the rearing horse. It was then that Saxe learnt that the Duchess, as she passed out of the gate that morning, had charged the officer to arrest Bergolet and keep him close until her return. He also heard that the saddler had likewise disappeared since last night and could not be found to be questioned. Lucky for him, poor devil, Saxe thought, as the troopers rode away, but the puzzle became more intricate. Why was the Duchess so eager to have her jester caught? Having ordered his arrest last night, why should she order it again at the gate this morning?

Saxe wandered out of the market-place, went as far as the gate and back again, choosing narrow streets, turning to right and left as fancy prompted him, and was presently by the church of St. Anne once more. After a few minutes' reflection, and with a glance to make sure there were no soldiers in the market-place, he crossed to the saddler's and entered. Two apprentices were working there.

"The master is not in and we do not know where he is," was the answer to his enquiry, "but if it is saddle or harness you wish for we can attend to the business."

"He was here last night," said Saxe.

"Aye. The soldiers came last night, and after they had gone he was here, for we heard him moving about. This morning there's no sign of him. Sometimes he goes out early in the morning before the shop is opened, but he's never away after it is opened."

"Maybe I'll try and find him later," said Saxe.

"Say a friend came, a friend of Bergolet's. He'll understand."

"If he comes back he shall have the message," said one of the apprentices, "but his not being here may mean he's past understanding — dead, sir, that's what I fear."

"I shouldn't trade on that," Saxe answered, "or you're likely to find him laying a thong of leather sharply across your idle shoulders."

"Idle! Why —" But Saxe had left the shop before any explanation could be given.

It was after noon that a double excitement came to his knowledge. Bergolet had been taken last night and kept in a house near the place of his capture because the senses had been knocked out of him in the struggle. Big trooper Hans had been his gaoler. Early this morning the prisoner was asleep, trooper Gustav had seen him when he went to talk to Hans. Some time before noon Gustav had gone back to talk to Hans again, and had found him bound upon the straw bed in the corner, gagged and unconscious, and the prisoner was gone. Hans was recovering but could not yet tell a plain story. Gustav had only just given the alarm when news came that Bergolet had hoodwinked the guard at the gate, stolen a horse, and had escaped from the city. Soldiers had ridden after him, but the jester had got clear away.

Saxe's face wrinkled into a grim smile when he had confirmed the news. Bergolet had cheated his enemies, but it was all very puzzling to Saxe. How was it the Duchess was ignorant of the jester's arrest last night?

Duty called Saxe back to the castle, but it was still destined to be a day of extraordinary happenings for him. He had kept his guard on one of the castle ter-

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races, his brain full of speculation the while, and on being relieved towards sundown was returning to his quarters when a woman suddenly put herself in his path.

"Trooper Saxe?" she asked.

"My name," he answered curtly.

"Wouldn't it be nearer the truth to say it is the name by which you are known here?"

"I am Trooper Saxe of the Guard, and one who is fond of his own company."

"That is a pity, for I was going to ask you to talk with me for a few moments."

"By your leave I would sooner go about my own business."

"Business!" she laughed. "I happen to know you have just come off duty. You had better humour me, and you risk nothing. Along this alley-way to the right we are not likely to meet anyone."

"Pardon me, madam, but women do not interest me."

"You are frank, yet in speaking to you there is some condescension on my part I do assure you. Perchance I may prove an exceptional woman and shall interest you."

"I think not."

"Am I not sufficiently good looking?"

"I am no judge. You are a woman and that is enough for me. I have nothing to do with women."

"One of my despised sex must have hurt you very deeply at some time."

"I am a rough soldier, and have no belief in confession," was the answer.

"Rough certainly, and to match your frankness I might add not prepossessing."

Saxe saluted and was going when she touched his arm.

"Wait. I think you have been much in the market-place to-day, interested in a saddler's shop there."

"Who told you so?"

"The saddler himself. Ah, that does interest you I see."

"You have evidently not heard that the saddler has disappeared," Saxe said.

"Indeed, I was the first to know of it," she answered. "I had my own affairs to think of, and had locked my door for safety when I remembered the old man, so fearing he might suffer at the hands of your rough comrades for his part in last night's adventure, I hid him. He has spent his idle hours in watching the market-place from an upper window. Bergolet happens to be a friend of mine. Shall we turn into this alley? It has a private and secret aspect."

He hesitated for a moment, then turned and walked by her side.

"A woman may be interesting, Trooper Saxe, if not on her own account, by reason of what she knows."

"I am interested in Bergolet," was the curt answer; "shall we talk of him?"

"He is the only bond between us, for I assure you I am not interested in Trooper Saxe," she laughed. "Last night the jester visited me. No, do not think evil of him or of me. It was by my contriving, but it was no love affair, though I do not think he is a hater of women as you are."

"More's the pity, for your contriving has got him into grievous trouble."

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Bergolet how he might serve the Duchess. He would have left by the way he came had not the soldiers interrupted us. I concealed him, and about midnight let him out by a back door. To-day I hear that he was captured last night, and this morning has escaped from the city."

"Where to? Can you tell me that?"

"I doubt not he has ridden after Her Grace into the forest. There was treachery on foot."

"What treachery?"

"Bergolet knows and may tell you if he will. How should I know whether he shares his secrets with you?"

"You must speak plainly," said Saxe in a tone of command.

"Must!"

"For Bergolet's sake."

"It is plain enough," she answered. "If he were too late to warn the Duchess, he may have fallen into the hands of her enemies."

"And then?"

"The worst that might happen is death."

"Death! Bergolet! My — Heavens, woman, you talk as if the death of a man were no more than a passing incident. I tell you —"

"You show me a side of Trooper Saxe which is not unprepossessing," she said gently. "Indeed, I think you are afraid too easily. I am inclined to trust Bergolet's wit to find the way out and to save the Duchess too."

"I shall find excuse to ride towards the forest within the hour," said Saxe.

"A natural decision but a foolish one I think. Wait a little. I look to see some of the hunting party return quickly, and we shall learn more then. Do you

suppose it was by the Duchess's orders that Bergolet was arrested last night?"

"The order came in her name. I was amongst those who searched the saddler's shop."

"The jester has many enemies."

"I shall ride from the city within the hour," said Saxe. "Could I persuade him he should never enter its gates again."

"He is not a woman hater and would cut you down I think, if you stood in his path to Metzburg. You have a strange love for this fool, Trooper Saxe."

"Strange love! He is my — my friend."

"Have a care or you will be telling me secrets," she laughed. "Do not leave the city. Bergolet's enemies are within it. They would hear of your going and you might do harm instead of good. Wait. Wait until to-morrow. Should Bergolet not return then, we will take counsel together. I may help you to trustworthy men for a search."

"You! Who are you? What knowledge lies behind that — that face of yours?"

"You hesitate — would you say pretty face, Trooper Saxe? Say it. You will not make me angry, nor will you be the first to utter so obvious a truth. Who am I? I have no need to hesitate, having nothing to hide. I am Bertha von Lehmann, a lady-in-waiting to Her Grace, one who is beginning to be somewhat in her confidence. You see there was some condescension in my speaking to Trooper Saxe."

"Von Lehmann," he repeated slowly, "the Burgo-master —"

"Has the honour of calling me niece," she said. "There is no time now to tell you all I know, but I knew Bergolet before he became a fool, and have no

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doubt his kinsman, Trooper Saxe, is masquerading too. Do you find me a little interesting? "

"You seem more intent on making me think you dangerous," he answered.

"I have the power, perhaps, but not the will. I am showing you the need for caution. What I know, others may learn presently, or perchance have guessed already."

Saxe looked at her critically for a few moments.

"I daresay pretty is the word to suit your face. I am no judge, and men are often satisfied with very little in a woman; but were it ten times prettier than it is, it would not influence me if by word or act of yours harm came to my — to Bergolet. Without a prick of conscience I would wring the life out of you."

"And if I help Bergolet, what then?" she asked, and there was coquetry and temptation in her attitude.

"There would be no change in my general opinion of women," he answered slowly. "I will wait until to-morrow."

"If there is no news then, you shall find me early in this alley," she said, and left him.

That night Saxe slept, was asleep long before the lights in Metzburg windows went out, or even the early revellers had left the tavern and the wine cellar. If to-morrow he must start upon a search for Bergolet, many wakeful nights might be in store for him; it was well to rest while he could. He slept soundly too, yet not without dreaming, dreams into which a woman came with disturbing influence.

CHAPTER IX

FROM DARK TO DAWN

TWILIGHT was gathering in the deep glades of the forest, though in the open it was still daylight. There was no wind in the coming night to set the trees complaining and murmuring together; no sound of a horseman came from a distant road, no traveller nor homeward bound woodman came into the clearing by either of the three green tracks which met here. Only the slow whirring of wings as some heavy bird rose from its feeding ground and sailed lazily upwards, broke the silence.

It was a long, narrow clearing of Nature's making, and a recent storm had cast a great limb from a giant tree into it. At one end of the clearing a sharp descent went down through a tangle of undergrowth into a deep ravine which evidently ran for some distance in that direction. At the opposite end a wider track curved gently down to a more open glen where there was water. It was chiefly from this lower ground that birds rose at intervals. The third track was at one side of the clearing, a green drive which ran straight into the heart of the forest for some little distance, and at the head of this path, standing apart like a sentinel, was a great oak. Its girth told of immense age; from the summit of its foliage gaunt, bare branches zigzagged against the sky, telling of past storms and deadly lightning; and one of its lower branches

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stretched, a huge mass of gnarled wood, far across the clearing.

At intervals a bird rose and sailed upwards, and then, with a sudden whirl which filled the air and startled the echoes, a cloud of birds called warning to one another and, rising quickly, beat a hasty flight westwards. Strained ears could not catch the sound which had frightened them for some little time, but it came presently — the jingle of bit and spur, the quick fall of horses' hoofs on the yielding turf, growing louder and louder until a hunting party straggled up the curved track into the clearing. Men and beasts looked rather jaded, and the one woman of the party seemed discontented as she glanced about her. The man beside her dismounted.

"Shall we call a halt for a few minutes, Cousin? They call that the Gallows Oak, an unsavory name but it marks a spot where game is often found. Our way lies through the ravine yonder; we may find sport as we pass, before we strike the Festenhausen road at the far end."

"It is too late for sport, Karl," the Duchess said as he helped her to dismount. Then she seated herself on the fallen limb and looked up into the oak tree. "Why the Gallows Oak?"

Karl did not know and called to a huntsman for an explanation.

"They say a man was once hanged on it, Your Grace."

"On that outstretching branch, I suppose," said Karl, "and that is why the branch died. I like my legend complete."

"We get an incomplete legend at the end of a poor day, Karl," the Duchess returned. "We seem to have

found all the places where no sport was to be had. Whether that is the fault of the game or the incompetency of the huntsman I cannot say, but I do know the journey was hardly worth while."

"It wasn't only for the sport you came, Cousin, but also to visit your good people of Festenhausen."

"You spoke of them very opportunely this morning. They served as an excellent excuse for coming, but I am rather sorry I came."

"We may yet get sport enough to satisfy you in the ravine yonder."

"I am not thinking of that."

"You are not thinking of Brandenburg surely?" said Karl.

"Yes. The eager breath of the new day was in my head this morning, but Kevenfelt was right. I ought to have remained in Metzburg to welcome the Elector."

"It would have been like obeying his commands."

"So I said this morning," she answered, "but I was wrong. I think my self-will makes me petulant at times."

"I cannot honestly deny it, Cousin, but I swear it is one of your many charms."

"I warrant Kevenfelt doesn't think so," said the Duchess. "I have a mind to return to Metzburg to-night."

"It is impossible."

"Why?"

"Think of the journey. It would mean being in the saddle all night, and reaching the city at dawn. Besides, the forest is difficult at night. Start from Festenhausen at dawn if you will. At the earliest the Elector can hardly arrive before to-morrow."

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"Very well," said the Duchess, rising. "Let us make Festenhausen as soon as possible. I shall not be content until I am again in Metzburg."

She had reached her horse, and Karl was in the act of putting her into the saddle, when there came the quick beating of hoofs. Along the level track came a galloping horse at full stretch, riderless it seemed at first, so limp was the man lying almost prone upon him. Perhaps it was only by instinct that the animal pulled up short on reaching the clearing, and the rider rolled to the ground, green and scarlet showing under his dirty and tattered coat.

"The jester!" someone exclaimed.

Only for an instant Bergolet lay where he had fallen, then he crawled to the tree trunk from which the Duchess had risen a few moments ago.

"Water! For the love of Heaven, water!"

It was the Duchess who took a flask quickly from her saddle and gave him drink.

He drank greedily, yet with every sign of exhaustion, only the eyes between his half closed lids were keen. The horse came and nosed him and demanded the Duchess's attention too. She patted his neck, noting that the animal showed little sign of distress, and she turned quickly to look at the fool.

"What is the meaning of this? Why are you here?" she asked, taking the flask.

Bergolet tried to speak, but failed.

"He found a horse after all, Cousin," said Karl. "You were right it seems, and the fellow has disobeyed your commands. The unwonted exercise seems to have knocked the life out of him, but if you will we can give this tree a reason for its name."

"The tree," said Bergolet, looking up.

"The Gallows Oak, fool. Does the name appeal to you?"

"I've suffered too much to care what happens. Oh, if I'd only been contented to stick to my ass."

"Why were you not in attendance this morning?" asked the Duchess.

"It's a long story. I—"

"How did you manage to leave the city?"

"That's a longer story still," and Bergolet laughed foolishly.

"I think he is still feeling the effects of the tavern," said Karl.

"It was difficult leaving the city; they wanted to arrest me at the gate."

"By my orders," said the Duchess.

"Oh, what a foolish jest," sighed Bergolet, playing with the thong of her riding-whip, and then giving it a little jerk to attract her attention.

"It grows late, Cousin; shall we ride for Festenhäusen?" said Karl.

"Aye, Prince, ride on and leave the Duchess and me to follow," said Bergolet, and with a show of pain and stiff limbs he struggled to a sitting position on the tree trunk. "I'm to be told why my arrest was ordered."

Karl moved away with an oath.

"More drink," Bergolet cried, and as he seized the flask he caught the Duchess's hand, forcing her to come nearer to him. "Have a care, mistress, there is treachery."

"Shall we ride, Cousin?" said Karl. "Your fool has delayed us too long."

Bergolet was drinking when the Prince turned round, and he at once began to struggle to his feet.

"That's true. It's getting dark, and I should hate

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to spend a night in the forest. It's not robbers I fear, we're too big a company for robbers to attack, it's the devils and the ghosts I'm thinking of. The only weapons against them are prayers, and I expect we're poorly armed that way. Mistress, will you order someone to put me into the saddle, or it is certain I shall never get there. My joints creak so much that I can pity a door with rusty hinges."

"A night in the forest alone might be an excellent punishment for him," said Karl as he put the Duchess in her saddle.

She did not answer. Her face was set and for a moment she seemed to consider the advice; then she motioned to a trooper with her whip to help Bergolet.

"Oh, my joints!" he cried as the man took hold of him rather roughly. "Steady. You're more used to throwing sacks on to a packhorse than helping a woman to mount, I'll swear."

He clung on to the saddle looking so much like a half empty sack that there was a titter of laughter as his horse walked quietly to the Duchess's side.

"They're old friends evidently," said the jester. "Oh, if I could only ride, what an improvement I should be to the company."

"Forward!" Karl cried, swinging himself into the saddle. "There is still a long road between us and Festenhausen."

"And I am likely to delay you," said Bergolet, "for I cannot gallop."

"We'll see you don't delay us," answered the Prince.

The first horseman went carefully down the dip into the ravine. It was steep and some of the animals required coaxing. It was necessary to descend in single

file. Two troopers were behind the Duchess, the Prince and Bergolet on either side of her, as she halted for a moment at the top of the dip. Without warning the jester's horse became suddenly restive, and putting down his head lashed out with his hind legs. The troopers behind were barely able to get out of the way. Every moment it seemed that Bergolet must tumble from the saddle. He rolled from side to side and then, in the very act of falling, shot out a hand towards the Duchess to save himself. He caught her horse's bridle, and in steadying himself brought the animal sharply round.

"You fool!" cried Karl. "A cut with the whip, Cousin, or the idiot will unseat you."

"Ride!" whispered Bergolet. "Round the oak. Ride, for there are devils behind us."

Almost unconsciously the Duchess obeyed, and then Bergolet turned in his saddle and shouted.

"Come, Prince, this is the road we have to take. Don't wait, Your Grace, he'll follow. Every man of your company is bought, and robbers are waiting in the ravine."

"I don't believe it," she said.

"Prove me a liar afterwards and then hang me if you will, but ride now. Every man in that company yonder has soiled his palm with a bribe."

"Every man!"

Again Bergolet turned in his saddle.

"The Prince is coming," he said. "And a trooper follows him — two, three. I think Prince Karl has discovered the treachery. We shall know when he overtakes us."

They were galloping along the green track by which Bergolet had come, and the Duchess glanced at the man

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beside her. There was little like an empty sack about him now. The dirty coat which he wore over his scarlet and green dress made him a grotesque figure, but he rode easily, and was astride an animal of mettle.

"The Prince gains on us," said Bergolet presently, "and the three troopers ride steadily."

"Thinking their Duchess is as great a fool as her jester, no doubt," she answered.

"Or working out some lie to save their skins," said Bergolet.

They rode on in silence, the horses racing side by side. Then the Duchess checked her pace.

"We will let the Prince overtake us," she said.

The jester did not answer. If Prince Karl did not believe in the treachery, he might easily persuade the Duchess that she had been deceived. Even now she might turn back towards Festenhausen. He watched the Prince as he urged his horse forwards. Was he honest? What if he too should be in this plot? The possibility of such a thing made Bergolet regret that his only weapon was the end of a pointed stake tied to a strip of his torn cloak. It was strange the Prince should have been so deceived in the men who formed the hunting party. He was alone now; the troopers who had followed him were not in sight. Either their horses were beaten, or they had given up the pursuit.

"Ride, Sandra, there is a trap, I fear," Karl said as he overtook them.

"We were a strong company," she said as she rode on.

"I think the devils were not to be trusted, for they tried to prevent my following you."

"Had you not the choosing of the men?" she asked sharply.

"I'll see to their punishment too," he returned fiercely. "What was the scheme, jester?"

"I am too much of a fool to understand it clearly," Bergolet answered. "I only heard that the Duchess was to be waylaid in the forest, that there was no man with her on whom she could depend, and I thought if I could warn her in time she might give me a crown or two to spend."

"You shall have a crown for every man I hang in this affair."

"Hanging is a big matter, not at all to my liking since I have stood underneath the Gallows Oak. Besides, a crown a man seems to me poor pay, considering the risk."

"We are not yet out of danger so it is no time for jesting," said Karl. "In what tavern did you overhear the hatching of this plot?"

"Tavern! I went into no tavern to hear it."

"Did it come from some disappointed and revengeful woman then?"

"I will tell Her Grace the whole story when we are safe in Metzburg, and when her crowns have become acquainted with my pocket. I am a poor fool, but I am wise enough to look for reward."

"Was no mention made of me in the affair?" Karl asked after a pause.

"Why, yes; you would be with the Duchess and were to be waylaid too," Bergolet answered; "but truth to tell I thought only of the Duchess. It was that which brought me riding into the forest. Forgive me, but I never thought of your danger."

"It is a strange story altogether, Master Jester, and the treachery behind us is not the only treachery we may have to deal with."

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"No, Prince, I think some of the villains remain in the city awaiting events."

"I have thought of that," was the answer, "and of other curious circumstances. You rode wildly into the clearing yonder, yet I saw that your horse was not distressed. He had not travelled far at that pace."

The Duchess had also noted this fact, and she looked at Bergolet, waiting for his answer.

"You can see he is a very good horse, Prince. I was at some pains in choosing him."

"I am asking for a reasonable explanation, Master Jester."

"That also I will give Her Grace when we are safe in Metzburg."

They galloped on in silence and came to the place where the tracks crossed, where Bergolet had encountered the woodman.

"To the left," said Karl. "We shall strike the Metzburg road that way."

"Straight on, Your Grace," said Bergolet.

"The darkness deceives you, jester. I have known the forest all my life. To the left, Sandra," and he wheeled his horse into the track he had chosen.

He had to wheel again unless he had a mind to travel alone, for the Duchess rode straight on and left him to overtake her as soon as he could, not slackening her pace at all.

"We ride into danger, not out of it," said Karl as he came up with them again.

"You were mistaken in the men you chose, you may be mistaken in the way you wish to go," the Duchess returned shortly.

"How can Bergolet possibly know the forest as I do?"

"I have a good memory for a road I have once travelled," said the jester, "and I came this way only a few hours since."

"There are scores of by-ways along which our enemies may come to cut off our retreat. How should you know them all?"

"This is the only way I know, but when I left Metzburg soldiers pursued me, since Her Grace had ordered my arrest. Pursuit makes a man ride straight, and this is the way I came."

"By the road yonder, fool, we should have struck the Metzburg road."

"But near the Festenhausen end of it I think, Prince."

The Duchess did not look at her cousin, nor at the jester, who rode on either side of her, their horses' heads at her saddle girth. She had set the pace, a canter now, for the animals were tiring and there might yet come a race for safety. She would question Bergolet later, for the present it was enough to know that they were riding back to Metzburg. Prince Karl was silent, listening for the danger into which they were riding; and Bergolet was silent, wondering whether the Prince was an honest man. He was full of doubt concerning him, yet could not understand what he had to gain by treachery.

Only the regular beat of the hoofs on the greensward, and the call of some animal or night bird from the depths of the undergrowth, broke the silence for a long while.

For a time the Duchess let her horse drop to a walking pace. There was no sound of pursuit, and no call for special haste. They could reach the city at dawn. Even if their horses had not been weary, riding

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along these narrow ways was treacherous work in the dark.

"Are you still certain of your road, Master Jester?" Karl asked presently.

"Yes."

"There is no ring of certainty in your answer, and I would we were well on that other road which I know. I am listening for the sound of galloping horses. These fellows will cut us off if they can."

The Duchess did not speak, and Bergolet peered into the darkness on either side of him. He had marked his way well, but the forest had a strange aspect in the night.

"Listen!"

The Prince suddenly drew his horse to a standstill, but the Duchess allowed hers to walk on, and Bergolet kept close to her.

"It was nothing," said Karl.

"A rat amongst the dead leaves perhaps," said the Duchess without turning her head.

The track widened a little and they broke into a canter again. So they rode for some little time, Bergolet's ears keen and at strain. It was easy to miss the way in the night, and he was not so certain of their direction as he had been.

Again Karl pulled them up suddenly, and the Duchess grew irritable.

"You seem strangely afraid, Karl."

"I do not like the way we are travelling, Cousin."

"Even so, I do not understand your fear. I only hear the cry of a night bird."

"Was it only that?"

"Nothing else, unless your conscience is calling you."

"I am thinking only of your safety, Cousin."

"You are fortunate in having so little to trouble you, more fortunate than I am. To-day has provided me with much food for reflection, which perchance you may help me to digest presently. It may ease your mind to know that I am not relying upon you for my safety."

Bergolet said nothing. He was beginning to doubt their direction. There had been nothing familiar in his surroundings for some time. This morning he had crossed two roads. To-night they had crossed only one, and even allowing for the more leisurely pace they were travelling, the second should have been crossed by this time. He did not speak of his uncertainty. Had he been alone with the Duchess he would have done so, but being doubtful of the Prince's attitude he did not want to give her any excuse for listening to his opinion or advice. Suddenly the Duchess pulled up her horse. The track had narrowed, forcing them to single file; they were in a tunnel, the trees interlaced overhead, and the ground was soft and swampy.

"Surely, Bergolet —"

"It is the right way," he answered. He remembered this bit of swamp; this morning he had passed through it immediately after crossing the first road.

They had reached the end of the tunnel, and out of the blackness of it could dimly see the white of the road, when Karl said again:

"Listen!"

A short exclamation of anger came from the Duchess, and then she pulled her horse back upon its haunches. This time it was not a false alarm. Horsemen, a dozen or more, clattered from the greensward on to the roadway, and the next moment came to a halt. Even as she drew her horse back the Duchess knew they had been heard or seen. Escape was impossible.

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"Who goes there?" a gruff voice demanded.

Bergolet was the first to come into the open, a weird figure of a man with a strange weapon swinging in his hand, a piece of heavy wood fastened to a strip of cloth. The Duchess was close behind him.

"Why, sir, there's a woman here," said another voice in astonishment.

"Nonsense," and a big man, mounted on a powerful animal, came forward.

"A woman — and more. I am the Duchess."

Bergolet realized her courage and the folly of the confession in the same instant, and was ready for attack when the men stiffened themselves in the saddle to salute.

"The Duchess!" exclaimed the big man. "Why, here's a strange meeting, Your Grace. I ride towards Metzburg to visit you, had hoped to arrive hours ago, but found the road longer than I supposed, and you —"

"I think I have just escaped capture by robbers, Your Highness."

"A strange but a fortunate meeting," said Karl.

"Most fortunate, Prince. Which way did the villains go? My men shall ride them down. Perhaps Your Grace's servant there can go with some of my men to show them the direction."

"It is too late, Your Highness. They turned from the pursuit some time since, and my jester could be of no service as a guide. Will you not rather be my escort to Metzburg?"

So it chanced that the Duchess and the Elector of Brandenburg rode towards Metzburg together.

CHAPTER X

A LESSON IN SWORDSMANSHIP

TROOPER SAXE was still asleep, and the light of early morning had no more than touched the spires and high gables of the city, when the gates were thrown open to the Duchess. With the Elector beside her, and escorted by men who owed her no service, she rode to the castle, forgetful it seemed of the villains who went unpunished in the forest, forgetful, too, of Prince Karl and the jester who rode side by side behind her. Sleepers, hearing the clatter of horses in the streets, turned drowsily in their beds and rejoiced that for them the day had not begun; but at the castle there was no turning to sleep again. Messengers hurried in all directions with the news that the Duchess had returned, bringing the Elector of Brandenburg with her, and yawning lackeys and servants were quickly busy preparing fitting reception and entertainment.

"Welcome to Metzburg, Your Highness," said the Duchess as they entered the castle. "The hour and the circumstances must excuse a meagre welcome, but we shall mend our manners a little when we are free from the effects of a night's hasty travelling."

The Elector bowed over her hand in a manner which proclaimed him more at home in a camp than at Court, a soldier not a courtier; yet as he was taken to the apartments already prepared for him, he bestowed a quick backward glance upon the woman who came hur-

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riedly to attend to the Duchess. That any of her ladies should be awake to receive her seemed to surprise the Duchess a little, but she hardly noticed which of them it was.

"What has happened, Your Grace?"

"A wilful woman has been punished and does not like it," was the short answer. "Send someone to Baron Kevenfelt. I will see him in an hour. I would see him before he visits the Elector."

"Yes, Your Grace."

"Then come and help me to be a sane woman again," said the Duchess, throwing aside her whip impatiently and going quickly to her own rooms.

When the Duchess had ridden through the city gate the guard had been far too astonished at the manner of her coming to take any note of Bergolet, and in the confusion of the castle courtyard he escaped attention for a time. He dismounted when the Prince did, stood beside him as the Duchess entered the castle, and when a groom came to take the Prince's horse he bade him take his as well.

"Should the owner call me a thief you may agree with him," he said, "for this side of the grave he is not likely to come nearer the truth. If you think him an honest man, congratulate him on possessing such an animal; but if you are convinced he is a rogue, whisper your sorrow to the horse that he has such a master."

As the groom took the bridle a trooper put his hand on the jester's shoulder.

"You are under arrest, Master Bergolet."

"I would I were under a thick blanket and asleep," was the answer.

Prince Karl turned round sharply, waking suddenly it seemed from a prolonged reverie. Since the meeting

with the Elector in the forest he had hardly spoken a word, had appeared unconscious of the jester who rode beside him; yet his brain had been busy scheming, readjusting his affairs, gathering up the ravelled ends of the network in which he was moving, weighing carefully the weakness and the strength of his position. The significance of the Duchess's attitude was not lost upon him, and the jester was suddenly important in his eyes, a tool to his hand perchance. So he turned and confronted the trooper.

"By whose order is he arrested?" he asked.

"By the Duchess's, given at the city gate yesterday, Your Highness."

"That order is cancelled."

"I have heard nothing of it, Your Highness."

"I have told you. For the present Bergolet is in my keeping. Come, Master Jester, you look tired."

"It is the effect of a saddle which troubles me most," was the jester's answer as he followed the Prince with a weary and limping gait. But under his sleepy lids his eyes were keenly alert, and his brain was full of speculation.

"Wine and a little rest will help us, Bergolet. Presently we shall both be wanted to entertain the Elector in our different ways; you with quips and a song, I as a butt for laughter probably, because I cannot tell rogues from honest men."

"That's no laughing matter. I cannot tell the difference either. Your real rogue must look more honest than does the honest man or he is likely to make a failure of his roguery. And I should not wonder if the forest yonder is full of song, and shouting with laughter, for all the quips and music have been shaken out of me. I am as empty as a barrel with the ends gone."

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As they entered the Prince's apartment a servant met them.

"There are gentlemen waiting to see Your Highness."

"At this hour! Because chance finds me out of bed, that is no reason why I should attend to business. They must wait. Send wine here. There are many drawbacks to being a prince, Bergolet."

"Aye; and being a fool is not as easy as you might imagine."

When the wine was brought, the Prince himself filled the goblets.

"Drink, Bergolet. This is a better vintage than you will find in the taverns you frequent."

"It is good wine," said the jester after a deep draught. "I am not well acquainted with tavern stuff."

"We are alone," Karl laughed. "There is no Duchess here to be shocked at our loose morals. You may speak freely. I was made a man and have not yet learnt how to be a saint."

"But you are still a prince while I am only a fool. There is a difference, though it is true a prince may be also a fool."

"Would you fit me with the cap, Bergolet?"

"No, I would show you the difference. Take a piece of knowledge. If it comes to you, you will know how to use it; if it comes to me, being a fool, I act on the impulse of the moment. There is no wisdom in what I do, and it may earn me a whipping or a pocket full of crowns, just as it chances."

"It shall be the crowns this time, Bergolet. Tell me how you got wind of this foul attempt upon the Duchess. We'll find a few to hang for it."

"Wind! Aye, it may well have been the wind since an open shutter had to do with it," said Bergolet, seating himself on a corner of the table. "An open shutter and a fool's fancy. Prince, do you remember the talk in the garden the other night? It was of love, your love for the Duchess, her love for you. I jested a little, like the fool I am, but because of the man in me my blood was stirred. I could not sleep, so went out into the city. It might happen that there was another fool in Metzburg, some woman who was a fool, and if she felt as lonely as I did, why then —"

"I knew there was a woman in it," laughed Karl.

"Alas! I was on a vain search," said Bergolet. "I doubt if there is a female fool. Give a woman wit, she may touch heaven or go to the devil. She may make fools of others, but she is never merely a fool herself. Prince, I think Mother Eve knew all about Eden before Adam entered it, but for some purpose of her own fooled him into believing that he was there first."

"Get on with the story, Bergolet."

"I was looking for the impossible, and thinking of love, when I found myself against a shutter, a little open, like that, because of the wind no doubt, as you say, and I heard voices."

"Where was this place?"

"You shall hear all I have to tell. I heard voices and a strange story. Robbers were to wait in a ravine, and the hunting party was so arranged as to be no better than a band of robbers. The opening of the shutter was so narrow, I could see no one, therefore I can take no part in any hanging. Still, your promise of a crown a head is small pay, I think."

"I will make it more, Bergolet."

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"Unfortunately that does not open the shutter any wider."

"Where was this place?"

"Alas, I cannot tell, and so stand confessed — a fool. When I found the shutter I was thinking of love; and when I ran away, wondering what to do, I turned so many corners I lost myself."

"Come, Bergolet, you must remember which way you went before you chanced upon that open shutter."

"No doubt I should but for what befell me afterwards. I was standing at a corner, wondering what I should do, when I thought of you. You were Captain of the Guard and would save the Duchess, perhaps by persuading her not to go to Festenhausen. I had started to run when — when there came an end to me for a while. When I woke up I was a prisoner, and it was day. All the senses had been knocked out of me."

"You had sense enough left to escape," said Karl.

"That was more instinct than sense. Any caged animal will get free if he can."

"You remember the robbers but not the place; that seems strange to me."

"And to me," answered the jester.

"Come, Bergolet, who is it you would shield in this affair?"

"Shield! Why, I would tear the Duchess's enemies in pieces. That I should remember part of the story is not so strange after all. The Duchess was in danger, that fact bit into my brain, and remained when memory of all else had gone. It is difficult to knock love even out of a fool. You see I love the Duchess."

As he made the statement Bergolet stood erect, and Karl looked at him in astonishment.

"It is true, Prince, absurdly true, and no fault of

mine. Of course, it is with the eyes of a fool I see her, but so she pleases me; it is the heart of a fool which quickens its beat because of her, but it is a real heart for all that. I warrant you have lain awake o' nights to think of her, and a fool has kept you spiritual company. It was love which took the coward out of me for a little while, which gave me the cleverness to escape and sent me out amongst the ghosts in the forest yonder. It's a tragedy when a fool falls in love. You will not tell the Duchess."

"I cannot promise that," said Karl. "It might amuse her."

"It might, or it might anger her, or it might please her. You never can tell."

"True, she might see the danger," said Karl; "she might come to my way of thinking and believe that you are not so much of a fool as you look."

"You will tell her!" exclaimed the jester in alarm. "Then it is a whipping that awaits me and you promised me crown pieces. You have taken me in a net, for I only spoke of love to show you why I remembered the robbers. I am a greater fool than I thought, or I had not trusted you."

"It shall depend on your behaviour, Bergolet."

"If it is to be a whipping I pray you have it delayed. At present I am too sore for such rough treatment."

"Tell me, Bergolet, was it love which helped you to ride a horse so well?" Karl asked, looking at him keenly.

"It was not so badly done, was it?" said the jester with a childish delight at the praise, "and it is so long since I was on a horse. Aye, but I am sore, and marvel that my neck is sound. It was my father taught me. He was not a fool, he was farmer."

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"And you must surely be a stout adversary or you would not have escaped from the city."

"That was a fool's wit, not muscle, though I have some strength — for that also my father's farm is responsible."

"A wonderful farm, Bergolet. I must visit it some day."

The jester shook his head.

"Why not?" asked Karl. "Where is this farm?"

"In heaven now I trust, for my father has been dead many years. Think you there will be tillage to be done there? My father had learnt no other occupation, but he was an excellent farmer, and I think I have heard of fields in heaven. Why yes, there is a sacred song about them. Shall I sing it to you?"

"Not now, Bergolet."

"There are some who do not like sacred songs," said the jester. "They bring unpleasant thoughts."

"We were talking of your escape from the city."

"Yes, and my wit. See, Prince, what a fool's weapon it was I used to clear my way," and from underneath the old coat Bergolet produced the pointed stake-end fastened to a strip of cloth.

"You must have managed to make many enemies in Metzburg," said Karl reflectively.

"And some friends," laughed the jester — "Your Highness for one."

"True, and as a friend I warn you that such a weapon as that will hardly serve to protect you against your enemies."

"It is better than it looks. Shall I show you?" he asked excitedly.

"I'll take your word, Bergolet, but for your safety we must persuade Her Grace to let you carry a sword."

"A fool with a sword is likely to be more dangerous to his friends than to his enemies."

"We shall see, Bergolet. On that wonderful farm of your father's did you not learn how to handle a sword?"

The Prince smiled into the jester's face and Bergolet looked at him vacantly, his mouth a little open, his whole figure flabby in a moment. His excitement was gone.

"I like this best," he said, holding up the stake-end.

"A sword is better."

"I am afraid of a sword."

"As a fool or as a man?" Karl asked. "You are a strange compound which I am trying to understand. Come, we will see how you shape with a sword. You shall have a lesson from a good master."

The jester watched him as he crossed the room and took two swords from a corner, thin bladed yet deadly weapons. The jester was trying to recall all he had said during the flight through the forest. Was this mere humour on the Prince's part, or was there stern intention behind his smile? Bergolet could not decide.

"Take off that old coat, Bergolet."

"No, no; it is a protection."

"Is it?"

His words seemed to hold a sinister meaning as he gave one of the swords to the jester. Bergolet put the stake-end on the corner of the table, ready to his hand though the Prince did not notice this; and he took the sword unwillingly, holding it limply, at arm's length. For a few moments Karl watched him, a smile upon his lips.

"It is a lesson, but the handling of a sword always excites me, and who knows? An accident might happen

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if you too palpably play the novice. On guard, Bergolet."

The words seemed to have little meaning for the jester as, with eyes full of terror, he watched the Prince's quick movements. He appeared too paralysed to spring back from danger, his sword was an encumbrance, not a weapon of defence. Karl laughed and pressed him closer, doing all in his power to make his opponent show fight in sheer desperation. An inferior swordsman even would have realized that time and again the Prince could have sent his blade home.

"I am afraid an accident will happen," he said.

Bergolet jumped back with a frightened cry. Steel clashed on steel it is true, but it was all the Prince's doing. The jester's one idea seemed to be to keep the weapons apart. The sound of them even frightened him. With a sudden dexterous turn of his wrist the Prince twisted the weapon out of his opponent's hand.

"I did well! You didn't kill me! You couldn't!" And Bergolet laughed like an idiot, as he sprang back towards the corner of the table and took up the stake-end in a caressing fashion as if he were delighted to be free of the sword and to handle again the weapon he understood.

"You are naught but a fool after all," said Karl contemptuously.

At that moment a door was thrown open and two or three men rushed into the room.

"What is it? What is the quarrel?" they cried, their hands on their sword hilts ready to take part in a fight. They were the friends who were waiting to see the Prince. A large man, evidently quite content to let others rush into danger before him, filled the doorway — Von Lehmann, the Burgomaster.

The Prince laid his sword upon the table, and seemed none too pleased at the interruption.

"A fencing lesson, gentlemen, that is all."

"The jester! A fencing lesson!" said the Burgomaster.

"And a very poor pupil I do assure you," said Karl, summoning a servant. "Until to-night, Master Jester, I had better lodge you here. Her Grace may still think you worth arresting, or has perhaps forgotten to cancel her orders. Should she ask for you, I must know where to find you."

"If the lodging has a bed in it I am content. I am very sore, and your sword seems to have got into my brain."

"Find the jester a lodging," said Karl to the servant who entered, "and see he does not leave it without my orders. You may thank heaven there has been no accident, Bergolet. You chose your right calling when you became a fool."

"It was no choice, I was born so. Would the gentlemen like to see how I use this?" and he held up the stake-end.

"An accident might yet happen if you do not go."

Bergolet went quickly and fearfully to the door, there he turned.

"Your Highness, where are the crowns you promised me?"

For a moment Karl looked angry, then he laughed.

"Lend me a handful of coins, Burgomaster. There, Bergolet, get drunk with them presently if you will."

"I will drink your health and my own, yours because you have no accident on your conscience, my own because I am still alive. It will take all this money and more I think to convince me that no sword point is

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in my vitals. Lead on, fellow," he added, turning to the servant, "lead on to a good lodging and in due course to good entertainment, the same wine as yonder will do to wash it down; and remember, I am His Highness's guest."

When Bergolet had left the room, Karl turned upon his friends.

"What devil of curiosity prompted your interference?"

"It was the singing of the steel, Prince."

"And still more our anxiety to know what has happened," said Von Lehmann. "It has been a sleepless night for us."

"Many things have happened," said Karl with an oath. "Her Grace has returned; the Elector has arrived; and there is a loose fitting shutter somewhere in this city at which a fool may listen and learn secrets."

"Bergolet!"

"Aye, Bergolet, Master Burgomaster, but there are other fools, many of them."

"Why didn't you run him through?"

"And throw away a tool before it is finished with?" said Karl. "That would be folly indeed. It is not only Bergolet we have to fear; there are others more dangerous, and it is through the fool we must find them."

"We have been betrayed! Then —"

"Why, Burgomaster, you grow white," laughed Karl. "It looks most unnatural in a man of your size and habits. There is another scheme we must talk of, but for the present, gentlemen, we have to deck ourselves for a festival and seem as joyous as children on a holiday. You must see that the city rejoices, Burgomaster."

"Why?"

"Dullard. Has not Brandenburg come to visit us?"

"You'll not get Metzburg to rejoice at that."

"Why then, it follows that the Elector may regret his condescension," laughed Karl. "I think we have little to fear, gentlemen, and may safely take our part in whatever festival there may be."

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CHAPTER XI

A WOMAN'S MOODS

THE Duchess showed little sign of the night's hasty travelling when she was ready to receive Baron Kevenfelt. To judge by the colour in her cheeks and the brightness of her eyes, she might have just risen from peaceful and healthy sleep. Very young she looked, a beautiful woman conscious of her power as a woman rather than as a Duchess who might command as she would.

"Is it Your Grace's wish that I retire before the Baron comes?" Bertha asked.

"No. I have been wondering how it is you are here. You rise very early."

"I think Your Grace forgets that you ordered I should be in closer attendance upon you from to-day."

"I had forgotten the day, but I remember that you have pleased me."

"I did not forget, and was excited; that is how I came to be out of my bed at such an early hour."

"Why, child, you are easily pleased," said the Duchess, who sometimes had a way of mothering her ladies-in-waiting as though she were vastly older and had had far more experience than they. "You will not be so enthusiastic in a little while. In my more rational moods I realize that I am not always a pleasant person to live with."

"Perchance that is your ladies' fault," said Bertha.

"Be natural, don't act by set rules," the Duchess returned. "You may have been taught that such an answer is the correct one, but it gives me no pleasure. I am not angry, child, but I hate flattery."

Then the door opened and Kevenfelt was admitted.

"You see, Baron, I have returned in time to take my part in entertaining the Elector; indeed, I think His Highness must already have found much amusement in the manner of our meeting."

"Your Grace, I am all anxiety to learn what has occurred."

"Be seated, Baron, and tell me: was it only your thought of what was proper treatment for our guest which made you try to persuade me to give up the hunt and my visit to Festenhausen?"

"Only that. What other excuse could I have for my interference?"

"Anxiety for my safety," said the Duchess.

"You have been in danger?" asked the Baron with quick excitement.

"Yes, Baron; there was a trap set for me in the forest yonder."

"Surely, Your Grace, someone has —"

"Misled me. I wish it were so; my position would be less difficult. I do not doubt the story although it is true I had it from a fool. We will talk of it later and you shall give me your advice. For the moment I am a repentant woman who asks your pardon for her petulance. You were right, I was entirely wrong. I ought to have listened to you and remained in Metzburg; that I have returned in safety means that I have been lightly punished. You will pardon me?"

Impulsively she held out her hand to him in an attitude of pleading, presenting as attractive a picture of

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pretty penitence as a man could wish to see. It disconcerted the Baron altogether, both as a man and as a Minister. It was not the first time she had admitted his wisdom when he had opposed her, but it had never been done quite in this fashion, and he was at a loss how to answer her.

"I feel rather like a naughty child caught in wrongdoing but let off the whipping I deserve," she went on. "It is very certain I spoke to you yesterday as I should not have done, and in a manner which I deeply regret. You must forgive me and remember that I am still my father's daughter, known to you since babyhood, carried in your arms on more than one occasion. I was wilful then I have been told, I fear I am wilful still."

"I only know you are my very dear mistress whom I delight to honour and serve," said Kevenfelt, raising her hand to his lips.

"My friend, Baron, one who will not measure out to me harsh judgment. When next I am outrageous, as it is certain I shall be, remind me of this moment."

"I think you will never be outrageous enough for that," he answered, wondering what would happen if on some future occasion he dared to take her at her word.

The smile faded from her face and the little mouth hardened.

"It is the penalty of my position to have enemies," she said after a moment's pause, "but I have more than I supposed, and they find shelter, some of them, within the walls of Metzburg."

"Spies do you mean?"

"Worse, Baron, traitors amongst my own people. Robbers were waiting in the forest to waylay me, and my escort had been bribed."

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"Would it not be well to let Trooper Saxe know of the jester's danger?" said Bertha. "He loves the fool. His comrades call him the fool's nurse, I have heard, and speak of Bergolet as Saxe's child."

"A child! Bergolet a child!" laughed the Duchess.

"Yes, Your Grace, because he is simple I suppose — just a fool."

"I think it is good counsel, Bertha."

"Excellent," said the Baron, "I will send and warn them both before I visit the Elector. Possibly Bergolet has been arrested. Your Grace gave the order yesterday, I understand."

"Yes, as I left the city."

"They were searching every corner for him; it is a marvel he escaped. That order is cancelled, I presume."

The Duchess got up and crossed the room to a table, took up some papers on it, and let them fall again.

"No, it stands," she said, suddenly turning round. "Let him be arrested and lodged in the castle."

"He has served you well, Your Grace, and —"

"And disobeyed me. I do not forgive as easily as I ask for forgiveness."

Kevenfelt did not urge her further. She was indeed a spoilt child, as full of moods as a day in April.

"We must make much of the Elector, Baron," she went on. "How long he remains in Podina I do not know, nor can I guess exactly for what diplomatic purpose he is here, but I warrant there is more scheming in his visit than courtesy."

"We may be mistaken, Your Grace."

"You love him better than I do."

"I have a certain respect for him," Kevenfelt answered.

"We must seem to be very open, but we will tell him

little," said the Duchess. "And, Baron, you may take the necessary steps to make of St. Winifried's a special festival this year. Fill Metzburg with laughter and merry making, and — and love."

"Your Grace —"

"Perhaps before the feast is over I shall have chosen my husband. I make no promise, but at least I need say nothing until then. It is a blessed respite."

"Your Grace, I trust that someone who is worthy may be in Metzburg for the festival, and that he will stand by your side to bring rejoicing to your people."

"I would I could hope to rejoice myself," she answered, "but that is wishing for the impossible."

"Why?"

"Because I think such knightly men as legend tells of have ceased to exist. Instead we have Electors of Brandenburg, Princes like my cousin and —"

"Yes, Your Grace?"

"And worse," she answered. "See that Bergolet is arrested at once."

The Baron went out determined to hurry forward the arrangements for the festival before her mood altered and she changed her mind.

The Duchess stood for some minutes by her table, fingering the papers thereon, and deep in thought. Then she turned suddenly to Bertha.

"Are you inclined to plead for Bergolet too?"

"No, Your Grace."

"Why not?"

"He does not interest me beyond the fact that he is your jester and servant."

"There is worldly wisdom in you. You answer like a diplomatist careful for his place."

"Indeed, Your Grace, I think it is only the woman

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in me which answers. Were I set in authority, I should be severe upon disobedience."

The Duchess laughed, much like a girl who escapes for an hour from the discipline of school.

"You please me, Bertha," she said, and then went on inconsequently, "but I think your hair dressed a little differently would improve you. I must show you what I mean when we have leisure."

"I want to please you, Your Grace."

"You do, both in looks and understanding. Yours was a good suggestion about Trooper Saxe. He may prove useful. Mother Saxe,—the idea amuses me. Bergolet a child! A fool, yes, and I would not have any real harm come to my fool; but a child, no. He seems to me a man, or else he is the best imitation of one I have ever seen. Come, we must think of our guest."

In spite of her professed ignorance as to the motive underlying the Elector's visit to Podina, the Duchess had little doubt that it was the question of her marriage, some scheme by which Podina should ultimately be brought under his influence. It was only natural that the Duchess and the Elector should resent each other. Her courage and prompt action on the death of her father had not only prevented her State from being absorbed by Brandenburg, but had put stumbling blocks in the way of several of the Elector's schemes. Other States had been warned of their danger, and were less willing to consider the fair-seeming designs presented to them. Furious at this check to his well-laid plans, the Elector, in his heart, rather admired this turbulent Duchess as he called her. Reluctantly he admitted to himself that he had found in a woman a worthy opponent, and the discovery stimulated him. On her side,

the Duchess was wide-minded enough to recognize her opponent's commanding personality, and to applaud his actions sometimes, but she disliked the man. His prominent nose, the double chin and thick lips repelled her; yet, while she would have been well pleased to see his pride humbled, she would not have it happen, as some would, at the expense of a French success. Would not her troops be fighting side by side with Brandenburg's to drive the common enemy from German soil? Turenne, who was even now wasting the Palatinate with fire and sword, might over-run a wider area, certainly would if his master could have his will, might succeed even to the very gates of Metzburg. France was interested in her marriage and no doubt cast covetous eyes upon her country. In the face of so much danger all private enmity must be forgotten. She cordially disliked the Elector, but she hated Louis of France as she hated the devil.

So when she walked in her garden presently with the Elector, she was ready to listen to his plans for the campaign, to discuss international questions with him; but she was equally prepared to mislead him concerning her private affairs. The Elector, at the outset, persisted that his visit was purely a friendly one, with no political significance in it; and although the Duchess gave him every opportunity to speak of her marriage, he did not say a word about it. He spoke a little of the war, exhibited some pride in his splendid force of fighting men, and was immensely gratified that they were at one in supporting the Imperial cause.

"In that I claim to have shown Brandenburg the way," said the Duchess. "When your soldiers arrive, they will find my camp fires burning."

"That will greatly hearten them, Your Grace."

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"It has astonished me that you have remained neutral so long," she went on. "France is a common danger."

"And there are covetous Swedes with whom I have a long-standing quarrel," returned the Elector. "France will seek to influence them to my disadvantage. Have you considered that, Duchess?"

"In thinking of the common welfare I am inclined to forget personal considerations," she answered.

"Laudable but not quite diplomatic," said the Elector with a smile. "That you have no Swedes to trouble you emphasizes the great difference in our positions. You must not blame me for remaining neutral so long."

"It was not blame but astonishment."

"Ah, Duchess, I am, unfortunately, most grievously misunderstood. I am considered a man of war whereas my whole desire is for peace." And the Elector began to talk learnedly of agriculture, of the redeeming of waste lands, spoke of his interests in trade, and became enthusiastic concerning the improvements he had made in his capital. "It is hard to make gardens out of the wastes about Berlin. Force must be used with Dame Nature when she is ungenerous, and we achieve something, but nothing to compare with your Paradise of a garden here. If I have sometimes envied you this good land of Podina, you should easily find excuses for me."

He wearied the Duchess a little. She made another attempt to lead him to talk of her marriage, firmly convinced that he was in Podina for the purpose of learning her intentions.

"As a visitor, Your Highness, I shall always be glad to welcome you, but my future husband —"

"Your influence, I am sure, will suffice to make him welcome me also," he answered.

"I may marry your greatest enemy."

"And who may he be?"

"Indeed, you should know better than I," she said, plucking a flower in her path with an irritability which seemed lost upon the Elector.

"He will be a Swede perhaps, or a Frenchman, or an Englishman like this fellow one hears of leading cavalry under Turenne — Churchill, is that the name?"

"I never heard of him," she said.

"He is as unknown to you perhaps as your future husband," laughed the Elector.

The Duchess laughed with him, both of them conscious of their skill in fencing questions which they had no intention of answering.

"Here comes Kevenfelt, Your Highness, most desirous to talk with you," she said.

"He is welcome, for I think you are happy in a most capable minister," he answered.

The moment Kevenfelt had the Elector to himself, he began to talk of the Duchess's marriage. He was most anxious to know who was the candidate favoured by the Elector.

"It is a very serious matter, Your Highness, of the greatest importance not only to Podina, but to other States as well."

"And to the Duchess most important of all," said the Elector.

"In her choice she will consider the good of her country, and I believe my advice will have some weight with her."

"I venture to doubt that, Baron. You and I are of a generation that is passing, and our diplomacy has no rules for dealing with a young woman like the Duchess. I find the world moving rather fast in these days,

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and Her Grace of Podina seems to me in the very forefront of the change."

"I had hoped to profit by your ideas concerning her marriage."

"A vain hope, Baron."

"Are you not interested?"

"I love women as women, but I do not like them when they rule. I confess your mistress would charm me more were she not a ruling Duchess. As to her marriage, does it really concern me?"

"I thought —"

"That I had some scheme with regard to it?" laughed the Elector. "Doubtless you hear strange tales of me, Baron, and the truth lies midway between the best and the worst. I am neither such a villain as my enemies would make me out, nor do I deserve the eulogy of my friends. As with most men, virtue and vice are mixed in me. I have my dreams, even to dreaming that Brandenburg may one day smile as Podina does now. I will tell you a secret, Baron; my great dream is that Brandenburg shall one day include all Pommern."

"I see no way in which Podina could help you to that desire," said Kevenfelt.

"Oh, there is no statecraft in this passing visit," laughed the Elector, "only a desire to see this fair land, to compare it with my own, to take some gathered knowledge away with me. It pleases me that I have one thing which you have nothing to match — my beautiful canal from the Oder to the Spree," and for the rest of their walk through the garden Kevenfelt was forced to listen to a tedious account of how this great work had been accomplished.

The Minister welcomed the coming of a messenger

with news which necessitated his leaving the Elector. Bergolet was not to be found and therefore could not be arrested. He had been seen in the courtyard upon the Duchess's arrival, and had then disappeared. He had not gone to his lodging in the round tower, nor had Trooper Saxe either seen him or heard of him. His disappearance would have impressed the Baron more doubtless had there not been other news of a more serious nature. The people of Metzburg were inclined to be sullen and were not ready to welcome the Elector amongst them. There were angry protests in the streets and in the taverns, the messenger reported, and the Baron was anxious. He did not want Bergolet to come to any harm, but after all he was only a jester; whereas any insult offered to the Elector would certainly have far reaching effects, disastrous to the welfare of Podina. For a moment he thought of warning Prince Karl to take steps to prevent any dangerous assembling of crowds, but after deliberation he went to the Duchess.

She was alone, and since the early morning her mood had changed. She received Kevenfelt's news placidly, and seemed to think it would do the Elector good to find that everyone was not willing to welcome him.

"He has grown so used to flattery that he feels himself almost omnipotent," she said; "a prick in the bubble of such a pride will do him no harm."

"But, Your Grace —"

"I give him welcome, Baron, but I refuse to be responsible for my people in this matter."

"It is a responsibility you cannot shirk."

"I shirk nothing," she answered angrily. "The Elector came to Metzburg on his own invitation, and if Metzburg will not rejoice the fault lies with him, not

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with me. Has Bergolet been arrested, as I ordered?"

"No, your Grace, he cannot be found."

"Or my pestilent servants will not find him," she burst out, rising and pacing the room. "Yes, Baron, I am more concerned for him than for the Elector. One can recover from an insult, but from death there is no recovery."

"Bergolet is only a jester."

"I am more deeply in his debt than in the Elector's," she answered.

"Then why arrest him?"

"There are moments, Baron, when you weary me. I pray you leave me alone, or to-morrow I shall have to ask pardon again for being discourteous."

Left alone she went to a window and stood there looking into the garden. In the space of a few short hours she had run through a gamut of moods, from repentance and a plea for forgiveness to self-will and anger, to self-assertion and deafness to advice; from almost a girl's excitement to a woman's calm deliberation; from laughter to the verge of tears; from happiness, which she could not have explained, to anxiety nearly as difficult to account for. But she was not in an introspective mood as she stood by the window, and had no thought of taking herself to task. The Baron had gone, shaking his head at her unreasonable anger and planning how to prevent misfortune; but it was anxiety which held her now, not anger. She was thinking of Bergolet, and then quite suddenly the Elector forced himself upon her attention. He came slowly from a door beneath her window, and was alone. For a moment he stood there, his hands clasped behind his back, then he chose his path and, walking deliberately, disappeared down one of the alleys of the garden.

CHAPTER XII

SCHEMERS ALL

THE messenger had not over-stated the attitude of the citizens. It was more significant than Baron Kevenfelt imagined. By noon the news of the coming of the Elector of Brandenburg had set Metzburg seething with excitement. That the Duchess had returned in his company before the city was awake, and without the party which had formed her escort on the previous day, was surprising enough, but of far more moment was the motive which had brought the Elector out of his way to pay this visit.

Few really doubted the power and influence of Friedrich Wilhelm; his achievements were too well known. Boastful on occasion, he had shown himself capable of carrying his words into effect, and he had built up a fighting force which at his will might easily turn defeat into victory. His friendship was sought by the Emperor and by Louis of France, while independent States nervously watched his progress and were careful not to offend him. The temptation to remove landmarks comes easily to such a man, so it was hardly wonderful that it should have become a custom to look for some hidden and far-reaching scheme in the Elector's most ordinary actions. His friends might see in him a bold, energetic and resolute leader, desirous of using his power aright and for the good of his fellows; but his enemies were easily persuaded that all his alliances, his

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neutrality on this occasion, his warlike attitude on that, were solely influenced by a mania for self-aggrandisement. They could only see in him a mean-minded and unscrupulous time-server who would grovel in the mud if by so doing he could add an acre to his dominions, who would break every oath and forsake his closest friend rather than let go the slightest advantage which he had secured for Brandenburg. Since those who were his friends and enemies to-day might have changed places to-morrow by a sudden turn of politics, the Elector's true character probably lay somewhere between these two extremes; and while circumstances had forced him to be a schemer they had not made him altogether a villain. No doubt it suited his policy to be somewhat of a mystery to his fellows.

In the past he had so evidently coveted Podina, had possibly only been foiled in his pretensions by the prompt action of the Duchess, that it was but natural the citizens of Metzburg should regard him with grave suspicion, should deem any trial of his friendship a dangerous experiment, and should be ready in the seclusion of tavern or wine cellar to resent his coming.

If the Elector had any suspicion of his unpopularity, it did not appear to trouble him as he walked in the garden, unconscious that the Duchess watched him from her window. He went slowly down one alley and up another, and in a secluded path, where no one could see them, he met Bertha von Lehmann. There was no formal greeting between them, and it was evident the meeting had been arranged.

"Last time we spoke together you were in a revengeful mood, I remember. That was in Berlin, Fräulein."

"I am still in the same mood, Your Highness."

"Then you have done nothing," he said brusquely.

"Do you mean for myself or for you?" she asked, almost in the same tone.

Friedrich Wilhelm looked at her in some astonishment. He was not accustomed to such straight questioning.

"I am chiefly interested in my own affairs," he answered.

"It seems, Your Highness, we are curiously alike in some respects," she said, not in the least flurried by his manner.

"Come, come, you must not expect too much of me," he went on with some irritation. "I am not well versed in those niceties of treatment which women expect. I am a blunt man and come bluntly to my point. It suited your purpose to become a spy, since Berlin was unkind to you; it suited my purpose to take your part and help you to your opportunity. I did not bind myself to love spies."

"No, Your Highness, but while you employ them you must not show your contempt too openly or they will do you little service."

"Pardon, I forgot how great a lady you will become if your schemes succeed."

"My schemes are not so dry cut as you imagine," Bertha laughed, "and the business of a spy does not come naturally to me. I am so well treated in Podina that it is difficult to remember how little I counted for in Berlin."

"Then —"

"Oh, I keep to my bargain, Your Highness. Affairs have moved slowly, but will now hasten to their end. The Duchess has not yet chosen whom she will marry, but certain princes are to be invited to Metz-burg for the coming feast of St. Winifried. It is a

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festival when many marriages are arranged. It has become a custom in this country, and is loved by the people. A maid's answer to a too ardent lover is: 'Wait until St. Winifried's Day.'"

"How hardly is superstition killed," said the Elector.

"It is on that day the Duchess intends to make her choice known to the people."

"What a lover of folly she is! And her husband, Fräulein, will be —"

"I know no more than — than she does herself," Bertha answered. "She wanted more time in which to decide so has put off the evil day to the feast of St. Winifried."

"And Prince Karl?" the Elector asked.

"Is hopeful, not without reason. Under the circumstances he is her most natural mate; but that which happened in the forest yesterday is likely to change matters. For the failure of a well-laid plan, I am responsible. It was my first move. Did you note who was with the Duchess when you met her?"

"The Prince and another."

"Her fool, Bergolet. It was he who saved her, with my assistance. We are two of a trade and shall help each other."

"You mean he is a spy?" asked the Elector.

"Yes, but whether circumstances pressed him into such service, as in my case, I cannot tell."

"For whom does he spy?"

"I think for Louis of France, but we have not confided in each other yet. However, he is more a lover than a spy, so is not very dangerous."

"I congratulate you and hope he is worthy of you; but I thought —"

"He is not my lover," Bertha laughed. "It is the Duchess he loves."

"The Duchess!" exclaimed the Elector. "I must certainly see this fool again."

"I doubt whether you will. He would naturally stand behind the Duchess's chair to-night, but she has ordered his arrest."

"After he has saved her from peril?"

"The order was given before she left the city, and she will not cancel it."

The Elector was thoughtful for a few moments. The unexpected had come into his calculations.

"This fool may be more dangerous than you imagine," he said.

"He is an excellent jester and would do nothing to harm his mistress."

"Or is subtle enough to deceive you, one after his master's own heart, who knows truth only when it suits him to recognize the virtue, a man Louis may employ presently to stir up the Swedes against me. I must certainly see him again. Tell me, who is it Kevenfelt would have the Duchess marry?"

"Maurice of Savaria."

"A wastrel."

"He forgets that, and thinks only of Podina. He has talked of him until the Duchess hates his very name."

"Which proves the Baron a fool in his dealings with women," snapped the Elector. "Do you suppose he knows where this wastrel is?"

"I believe he thinks he will have him here for the feast of St. Winifried."

"If he can do that he is not such a fool."

"Is it possible that Your Highness —"

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"Fräulein, few things are impossible, that is why I so often keep my own counsel. Still, there are times when I am not nearly so wise as I could wish to be. You give me far more news than I expected. I am inclined to forget you are a spy and to consider you a friend."

"It will be the surest way to secure my — my friendship," she answered.

"You are a clever woman," he said with a grave bow as he turned and left her.

And a dangerous woman, he thought, as he walked slowly back through the garden. That is the worst of a woman. When she is clever enough to be used as a tool, she is always a dangerous tool to play with.

Bertha von Lehmann had given him much to think about. Why should Louis of France be spying in Podina? The Elector had heard that the Marquis de Vannes was at Court, but he must be for show merely. The Duchess's folly in having a Court jester had afforded Louis the opportunity of placing near her person one who would learn her inmost secrets. This assumed love for his mistress was part of the fool's game, an excellent move to smother all suspicion. It was a scheme worthy of Louis. The Elector was determined to see this Bergolet. His method was direct. He asked the Duchess to allow the fool to be present at the banquet that night.

"I have heard much talk about him and should like to sample his wit," he said.

"Unfortunately, Your Highness, I am unable to gratify you. I do not know where he is."

To accomplish his end the Elector would have ordered every soldier in Metzburg to the search had it been in his power to do so; as it was, he sought out

Kevenfelt who could only confirm the Duchess's statement, and then meeting Prince Karl spoke to him about Bergolet.

"Why is Your Highness so interested in this fool?" Karl asked.

"Just because we have nothing of the kind in Berlin."

"We do strange things at the Court of Podina," laughed the Prince, "and pride ourselves on them. Truth to tell, I think our humour somewhat dull in spite of our professional jester; but we have some pretty fashions which may interest Your Highness. Our German solidity we veneer with some of the niceties they practise at Versailles. That a woman reigns over us may account for it."

"I have heard that Madame de Montespan really rules France," said the Elector, "but surely the Duchess has no admiration for her."

"I have never ventured to ask her the question," Karl returned, "but we have certainly learnt something from our enemies in dress and manners."

There was some truth in the Prince's statement. A subtle change had taken place in Court manners even in the late Duke's time. He was a man with the artistic sense strongly marked in him, a man of some learning, inclined to refinement and luxury. His daughter had inherited much from him, and being a stronger character, had discriminated between his virtues and his vices to some purpose. While she persisted in retaining those old customs which made for stateliness and dignity, and helped to preserve that personality which her people possessed, she nevertheless realized that much in the surroundings of her contemporaries was uncouth and boorish. The picturesque strongly ap-

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pealed to her, and with a considerable measure of success she had introduced refinement into her Court without destroying ancient principles. She hated Louis of France, but she recognized some worth in French ideals, and her womanly intuition had told her what to use and what to discard.

A strenuous man, familiar with the camp, and in peaceful times used to a simple and crude life in Berlin, the Elector was astonished at the entertainment provided for him that evening. Perchance he believed the simpler methods of his own Court were preferable, but with the lust of power that was in him he envied even the magnificence which he was inclined to sneer at.

"This is a reversal of the old story," he said with some irritation to Kevenfelt as they waited for the Duchess. "It is Solomon who comes to see Sheba's glory, a poor Solomon indeed, unworthy of the honour, but a Sheba —"

He stopped. The curtains across the arched entrance were flung aside and she who came was indeed a queen amongst women. The blood ran a little quicker in the Elector's veins as he bowed to her. The spell of her beauty held him for a moment, and he searched his brain for some fitting compliment. Adequate words would not come; perhaps his silence was the highest flattery. He had not realized until this moment how beautiful a woman she was, nor fully understood how great the power of such beauty must be. He had looked upon her only as a piece on the political board, to be moved when it suited his purpose, either by strategy or force; her courage and energy had caused him to pronounce her turbulent, but to-night he realized that her beauty and personality made the homage and obedience of men hers to command, that whoever would

oppose her must fight against an ideal, must stand face to face and war with that chivalry which lies deep down in the hearts of men.

"Again, and in more fitting condition, we bid Your Highness welcome to Metzburg," said the Duchess, and she walked beside him towards the banquet room.

Prince Karl, standing a little apart, watched the Elector's face as he walked with the Duchess. Karl fully realized how near he had come to disaster, and knew that the meeting with the Elector had been a fortunate meeting for him. His cousin had had no time to question him about the hunting, and during the day much had happened to strengthen his position. Whatever the Elector's schemes were, they would not recommend themselves to the people of Metzburg, and before the night was out Karl looked to see His Highness in a ruffled temper. In such a mood he was likely to be none too gracious to those about him, would unconsciously play Karl's game for him, and would show the Duchess how valuable and necessary her cousin was to her. Presently she would understand that the friend of Louis of France must be more than a figurehead in Podina. Karl looked at the Marquis de Vannes and smiled. Then he turned to a man behind him.

"See that he returns to-night. There must be force if necessary. He must return."

The man disappeared among the servants, and then Karl saw the Duchess stop to say something to one of her ladies. In that moment the smile faded from the Prince's face. His eyes were riveted on Bertha von Lehmann. The finding of the gold chain in the Burgomaster's house had told him that this woman was in Metzburg. There might be a spice of danger in the fact, and he had laughed at it; but it was another mat-

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ter to find her in close attendance upon his cousin. He suddenly understood how the plans for the hunting had been betrayed, and felt that he was in the grip of disaster again. How much did this woman know? What use did she intend to make of her knowledge? He knew she had been in Berlin, had believed that she was no longer a danger to him. He glanced from her to the Elector. Had they met in Berlin? A moment ago he had felt a keen pleasure in believing that he was making a tool of the Elector; now he realized that the Elector might ruin him with a word, would undoubtedly do so if he stood in the way of his schemes. Could he have done so, Karl would have called back the man who had hastened to efface himself amongst the crowd of servants, and would have given him different instructions. That was impossible, and he passed into the banquet room, all zest in the scheme he had contrived gone, his fertile brain utterly incapable for the time being of formulating any other plan to take its place. He found no comfort in the smiling face of De Vannes.

A sudden silence fell when the guests were seated, then came a laugh, and the rippling music of silver bells.

"Mistress, I fear you must have found His Highness, the Elector, heavy company, for I am told you have been wanting me all day."

How he had come there nobody could tell, but with his lute slung across his back and his bauble lying in his arms, Bergolet stood behind the Duchess's chair.

CHAPTER XIII

THE BANQUET

THE Duchess turned quickly and looked into the smiling face of the jester. It was not possible to read her thoughts in her eyes; certainly there was anger in them, but perhaps there was something besides anger. Trooper Saxe, on duty in the entrance, took an involuntary step forward, then stopped, uncertain what was going to happen. Every face was turned towards the jester, even Prince Karl's. He had anticipated much elation from this moment, but now that it had come was unable to enjoy it because of a woman's presence there. The silence was as the calm which presages a storm, and of all that company only Bergolet seemed entirely at his ease, apparently quite unconscious of the surprise his sudden appearance had occasioned.

The tension was removed by the Elector.

"He pleases me, this fool," he said, leaning towards the Duchess after looking keenly at Bergolet. "I beg that Your Grace will allow him to remain for our amusement."

For a moment the Duchess hesitated. Then she turned to a servant: "Loosen his tongue with a cup of wine."

"Mistress, I have tasted such an excellent vintage with a friend to-day that I would not spoil the memory of it."

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"We will enquire about your friends later. For the present it suffices that His Highness is pleased with you."

"Bow, little friend, to His Highness," said the jester, addressing his bauble; "and now to all the company. We can never have too many friends, though for some friendships one has to pay very heavily."

"How should mine prove costly?" asked the Elector in evident good humour and inclined to sharpen his wit on the fool.

"Why, I was thinking how it would be if a lady turned me out of Metzburg and I was forced to seek a welcome in Berlin."

"Truly such a change might be dearly bought, Master Jester. I see there is a courtier behind your sharp tongue."

"It is easy to grow courteous in Metzburg, for we are all lovers," said Bergolet. "Tell me, sir, have you any fools in Berlin?"

"Many, but none of your sort."

"You hear that, Mistress," and he pretended great confidence with the Duchess as he leaned over her chair. "It is certain you possess a very special kind of fool."

"Indeed, I am beginning to think so," she answered.

"And you are duly thankful for your blessing. That is as it should be. Sir, I should like to see the kind of fools you have in Berlin."

"Were I to tell you that I am an excellent example, what should you say?" the Elector asked.

"I should whisper to my little friend here that we were very fortunate to-night in meeting a man who told the truth."

The colour deepened in the Elector's heavy face when

some laughter followed the jester's words, but he would not be drawn into conversation by Baron Kevenfelt, who was anxious to change the subject.

"And why am I a fool?" he asked.

The Baron looked at the Duchess, an appeal to her to silence the jester, but she paid no attention to him. Perhaps she was not altogether sorry to see the Elector outwitted, and Prince Karl realized how much he would have enjoyed this fooling but for the presence of one woman.

"It was the Good God who designed you, but why He should have made you as you are I cannot tell."

"In what way do I act foolishly?" persisted the Elector.

"In three ways, so my little friend here thinks. You attempt to play the ruler as a man plays a game of chess, hence bitternesses which are unnecessary; you think Brandenburg is the centre of the world, which it is not, hence mistakes which hamper you; and although you are ready to admit yourself a fool, you are quite sure that all your enemies, and your friends too, are much greater fools, which is obviously absurd. So thinks my little friend, and he is a close observer."

"What you call folly, Master Jester, I call patriotism."

"I am not surprised," said Bergolet. "Men have always been able to find excuses for themselves, and have called their sins by high-sounding names since Father Adam started history."

"A sermon from the fool will spoil the feast, Your Grace," said Kevenfelt, anxious to shield the Elector. "Will you not tell him to prepare a song for us presently? His music is often better than his chatter, I think."

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"No, no, let him finish his sermon," said the Elector.
"I am wise enough at least to be willing to learn."

"Sermon, aye we may call it that for something of the same sort was said by a miner's son of Eisleben, more than a century and a half ago, one Master Martin Luther, whose creed Your Highness stands by. I think he himself erred somewhat in the same respect, not seeing very clearly the difference between black and white when it suited his purpose to be blind. To-day, your friend Louis of France —"

"My friend!"

"Pardon, your recent friend."

"Never my friend," said the Elector hotly.

"It is that chess game again, little friend," said Bergolet, apostrophising his bauble and shaking his head until the silver bells clashed musically. "Louis must have been his friend, or why has he so long delayed helping the Emperor?"

"Peace, Bergolet," said the Duchess.

"A most impudent fellow, Your Grace," said the Elector; "and it is easy to see that such impudence must have been learnt at the Court of France. Were you my fool, I should know how to treat you."

"I have made a mistake," said the jester. "I said there were three ways in which you acted foolishly; there are four. You are angry at being told the truth, and that is the greatest folly of all. We will not go to Berlin, little friend, although you know I have always told you that, in spite of all his faults, I think the Elector of Brandenburg the most honest man in Europe."

The Elector looked up expecting a further jibe, but it did not come. The jester appeared to mean what he said.

"In the midst of his folly the fool has flashes of

wisdom, Your Highness," said Kevenfelt tactfully, and Friedrich Wilhelm nodded, as easily appeased as he had been made angry.

Bergolet did not move from behind the Duchess's chair, but he remained silent, yet watchful. No one took any further notice of him. He was evidently out of his mistress's favour for the moment, and any interest in him, or any attempt to set him jesting, might be distasteful to her. He had come perilously near to offending the Elector; it was safer to leave the fool alone to-night. So Bergolet watched. He noted how closely two of the gentlemen, who had rushed into the room this morning when he was receiving his lesson in swordsmanship, observed Prince Karl, and that he seemed quite unconscious of their interest in him. The Prince was absorbed in the contemplation of Bertha von Lehmann. It was difficult to judge whether she was aware of his scrutiny, or of his presence even. It was her first appearance in close attendance upon the Duchess, and she was evidently enjoying her success. She was a pretty woman, witty, ready to meet banter with banter, and she received plenty of attention. She had seemed a little apprehensive during the jester's word passage with the Elector, but was now talking and laughing gaily. A dangerous spy, Bergolet thought, for no woman there looked more innocent.

"You shall sing to us in the garden," said the Duchess to the jester when she rose from the table.

"In your exquisite garden, Duchess," said the Elector. "I envy you your garden, though I cannot honestly say I envy you your fool."

"His song may please you," she returned.

"The noise of war has given me a poor ear for music, I fear," was the answer.

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Bergolet, grave of face, did not follow his mistress at once. He was watching Karl, who was close to him, speaking to Bertha von Lehmann.

"It is you!" she said with genuine pleasure and surprise, and as if she had not been aware of his presence until this moment.

"We must talk. In the garden it will be easy to escape," said the Prince.

"Not to-night," was the answer. "I must remain with the Duchess. Besides, is it not for me to choose the occasion?"

"Let it be to-night."

"No. It must be in the daytime when I can look into your eyes and read all that is written there."

"They are likely to be more eloquent at night."

"But not so truthful perhaps," she laughed, and left him to join the Duchess.

Karl swore under his breath, and then saw the jester.

"I shall find you another handful of coins, Bergolet, if you mock the Elector a little more. It pleases me to see him angry. Tell me, do you know the lady who has just left me?"

"She is a stranger at Court, and I do not think she was ever at my father's farm," answered Bergolet.

"I was wondering whether she was the woman you were looking for when you found that open shutter," said Karl.

"Is she a female fool then?"

"Ah, Master Jester, that is what I am going to find out, and you shall hear presently. You had better hurry after the Duchess. I think you are out of favour to-night."

"And yet I am asked for a song," whined the jester.

In the entrance stood Trooper Saxe, and as he passed Bergolet made the bauble bow to him.

"Have a care," whispered Saxe. "You are in danger. I have it from Baron Kevenfelt himself."

Bergolet did not answer, but his look told the trooper that he understood.

The Duchess was seated in the garden, the Elector beside her. Kevenfelt, Bertha von Lehmann, and a dozen others stood near her, and as the Duchess called to Bergolet for a song, Prince Karl contrived to place himself near Bertha.

"Mistress, I have no song. Disobedience put me on a horse and I have been punished; the horse has shaken all the music out of me. Had I a song, it would be of love, and love is not in the air to-night; besides, His Highness of Brandenburg has no love of music he says, therefore an angel's singing would be wasted upon him. Bid me, instead, tell you a tale of war."

The Duchess inclined her head. She was busy with her own thoughts, and cared not whether a song or a tale passed the time so long as she need not talk. Perhaps the tale was best, it would take longer.

So Bergolet, touching his lute strings at intervals to give a cadence to the recital, told his tale of two kings who long ago fought for the possession of a certain city. It was a story of camp fires, of knightly deeds, of attack and repulse; now, there was the rush of victory, now the stampede of defeat, and a sharp chord gave the exultant shout of the conquerors, while a sequence of mourning notes suggested the plight of the conquered and misery of the dying. They were two powerful kings, shaking the land with their fury, but they were not honest men. In both armies there were discontented followers. Those who murmured

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were the brave and generous, the men who scorned mean advantages and were most true to the laws of chivalry. And one day at dawn, over the eastward hills, came a knight in glistening armour. Alone he came, no herald to trumpet his coming, never a squire to bear his shield; and from both camps, resting on either side of a stream after strenuous battle, came questioning, eager or fearful according to each man's conscience. There was no answer that one might hear, but about the stranger knight were quickly gathered all those who were honest in either camp, enmity forgotten in the presence of an ideal. It was not a vast company but it moved towards the city and entered it, welcomed by the citizens, and with them manned the walls. Still were the two kings furious, but they fought no more against that city. They were afraid of the knight who had come over the hills at dawn and had drawn to his standard all that was bravest and best.

A little cadence of joyous notes on the lute ended the long story, and there was silence. By his description of the rival camps, by realistic touches in his battle scenes, it was evident that the jester had presented the Emperor and Louis of France in the two kings, and had subtly made it manifest that the knight in his shining armour of honesty, whose personality appealed to all true men, was none other than Friedrich Wilhelm of Brandenburg.

"It is a brave tale," said the Elector after a pause, and his face was wreathed in good humour, "a brave tale and with the truth in it. Master Jester, such a story would assure you a welcome in Berlin."

"I find something wanting in it," said the Duchess.

"What may that be?" asked the Elector.

"A woman."

"There was a woman, but she comes into another tale," said the jester quickly. "I will tell it some night, Mistress, when you are thinking of love. It should be soon, for there are not many days to St. Winifried's feast."

"This was a tale for men, Your Grace," said the Elector, "and by your leave I would show my pleasure by rewarding the teller."

"Pardon, Your Highness, but it happens to be one of my tales for which I never accept reward," said Bergolet. "It is meant to stir men to honest endeavour, and should be told in a cassock rather than in this uniform. Still, wisdom may fall from the lips of a fool on occasion, and since in Metzburg I live well by my folly, I can afford to give you my wisdom for nothing."

"At least you have stirred me, and made me hear the trumpet call and the marching of men. Don't you hear them, Prince Karl? Are we not to find ourselves fighting side by side presently against Turenne yonder?"

"It is my wish, but Her Grace —"

"I have sent my troops to uphold the cause," said the Duchess quickly, "but for the present my cousin remains in Metzburg. He has a place to fill which no other can take."

It was a plain statement, easily understood by those about her. The Duchess had decided to marry the Prince; her words would admit no other meaning. Baron Kevenfelt frowned and looked at the Elector who showed no sign of disappointment or annoyance. Bertha glanced quickly at Karl. The expression of his face had not changed, but he seemed to find something cryptic in the utterance. De Vannes, who was also watching him, wondered that he did not seize so

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"The Prince is a fortunate man," said the Elector, breaking the pause; "and so am I, for it is the first time I have met one who is so indispensable."

"How soon I am forgotten," Bergolet murmured.

"Indeed, Master Jester, only a moment ago I was thinking that a man of your measurements would be more honestly employed as a soldier than in shaking a cap of bells as a Court fool."

"Your Highness has not seen his handling of a sword," laughed Karl, glad that the conversation should flow in another channel. "A fool of necessity makes enemies, and only this morning I gave Bergolet his first lesson in swordsmanship."

The Duchess looked quickly at the jester, who stood in an easy attitude nursing his bauble as though the discussion did not in the least concern him.

"He did not please you?" queried the Elector.

"I never saw a man more helpless nor so fearful of his weapon. The very sound of steel on steel paralysed him, and terror did not breed even a spark of desperation. I confess the humour of it appealed to me for a few moments, and then I felt like a brute frightening a little child. You cannot judge a man by his inches or his shape. Bergolet's only weapon is his tongue."

"And a piece of wood at the end of a strip of cloth," the jester murmured.

"I had forgotten that," laughed Karl.

Though proclaimed a coward in this public fashion, Bergolet smiled. The Duchess was watching him closely. His indifference appeared to annoy her, for in the forest he had not seemed to lack courage.

"You may yet be a good fighting man, Master Jester," said the Elector, who had also been regarding him

keenly. "The Prince I am told is one of the best swordsmen in Europe, perhaps the best, unless that wastrel Maurice of Savaria is his master."

"Ah, I have many tales of him," said Bergolet. "I must tell you some of them, Mistress."

"I wish to hear nothing about Maurice of Savaria."

"He's a wastrel, no doubt," said Bergolet, "but if he is such a master with the sword I should love to see him fight the Prince — were I at a safe distance."

"For all your lack of skill the fighting instinct is in your blood," laughed the Elector.

"And goes to my tongue, Your Highness. My tongue, Mistress, may serve you better than a sword."

The Duchess did not answer him. She rose quickly as if the discussion had become distasteful.

"I think the garden grows rather cold," she said.

"Karl, see that the guard about the castle is doubled to-night."

"Doubled!" he exclaimed.

"Yes, Cousin, doubled," she said slowly as if she resented his surprise. "We have a guest whose safety is our most important business, and I have not forgotten yesterday."

At the entrance to the castle she paused and called to Trooper Saxe who stood sentry there.

"Arrest Bergolet," she said quietly.

Everyone showed astonishment at the order; even the jester, whose manner had been unperturbed the whole evening, glanced at her sharply. The silence which followed was broken by the Elector.

"If this is on my account, Your Grace, I do assure you I bear the jester no ill-will. May I beg —"

"It is on my own account," she answered.

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said Kevenfelt. "You bid me do so when I saw occasion, and indeed —"

"Baron, you use my permission most inopportunistically." And she motioned to Saxe to do her bidding.

The quick interference of the Elector and Baron Kevenfelt had alone kept Karl silent. His cousin was altogether unreasonable, and her unexpected action did not fit in with his own plans.

"You forget, Cousin, that Master Bergolet has rendered us a great service. But for his help we should hardly be here safely in Metzburg to-night."

It was an argument which must appeal to the Duchess. Everyone believed it would do so as she turned and faced the Prince.

"I forget nothing — nothing. I have ordered a doubling of the guard; I did not ask for criticism on my commands."

The deliberation of the reproof stung Karl to fury.

"Then at least, Cousin, call for an officer. It is not our custom to allow a Court official, as Bergolet is, to be arrested by an ordinary trooper."

"True, that is an error I must repair," she said, turning quickly to Saxe. "I have noted you and you please me. From this moment you are no longer a trooper, but an officer of the Guard. Your appointment shall be put in order and placed in the hands of my cousin, your chief Captain, before I sleep to-night. Karl, you will come to me for it when you have seen to the doubling of the Guard. And officer, your prisoner will not return to his lodging. There is a room in the castle here where you will keep him secure until he has been questioned. I warn you, fools are cunning, so let your vigilance be a match for cunning, and

see that no one, man or woman, has speech with him until you have our further instructions."

Saxe saluted and laid his hand on the Jester's shoulder.

"Little friend, we are prisoners, you and I. We have said too much or done too little, and in all the world there is no love for us to-night. Bow farewell to the company"; and crooning to his bauble Bergolet was led away.

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CHAPTER XIV

ORDERS FOR THE BURGOMASTER

AFTER a restless day Metzburg slept again. Here and there a dimly lighted window told of sleeplessness, some man or woman there racked with pain perhaps, or perchance two or three gathered together to plot evil for to-morrow. Once or twice a sudden footfall in a narrow street told of some purpose which belonged to the night, someone out for villainy, or a homeless wretch seeking a sheltered corner until the morning. In the castle, too, there was sleeplessness, for a light shone out into the darkness like a high placed beacon.

Some while ago Prince Karl, on his way to the market square, had paused to look at this light. Was it burning in the apartments of the Elector because he was restless in spite of the double guard which kept watch to-night? Or was the Duchess, even at this hour, questioning Bergolet, or listening to the story which Bertha von Lehmann could tell? The arrest of the jester, the sudden promotion of Trooper Saxe, and the doubling of the guard, were not mere caprice on his cousin's part. Karl knew that behind even her most impulsive actions there was usually a very definite purpose, and her attitude to-night had warned him of the danger of his position. She had thwarted his intention of getting Bergolet into his hands again after the banquet, by force if necessary, and Bertha von Leh-

mann was in her confidence. The realization of his danger had sent him forth unattended to-night. He was upon a business which could not be delayed, and in which there must be no one to witness against him.

The Burgomaster had not expected a visitor to-night. The Prince's attitude when they had interrupted his fencing bout with the jester this morning, had disturbed him a little. It had shown an independence which was not to the Burgomaster's liking, a disposition in the Prince to order rather than to play the part assigned to him. Reflection, however, had convinced Von Lehmann that there was no real cause for fear. The Prince was far too deeply involved to throw aside his companions, and the Burgomaster's surprise at Karl's unexpected visit did not shake his complacency. The Prince would not come at this hour did he feel himself strong enough to stand alone.

"A late visit, Burgomaster, but necessary," was Karl's greeting. "The position of affairs has changed since morning. We are forced to move more quickly than we anticipated."

"What has happened?"

Karl told him of Bergolet's arrest and the doubling of the guard, spoke of the Duchess's attitude in a manner calculated to raise the Burgomaster's fears. Partially he succeeded, but he raised his companion's anger too.

"This morning you had this fellow Bergolet in your hands, Prince, your sword point within an inch or two of his heart; why in Heaven's name didn't you drive it home?"

"And this morning I explained my reason," Karl answered sharply. "The jester is a tool with which we have not finished."

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others," and the Burgomaster leaned back in his chair in a judicious pose, "and now we know what an opportunity was lost. Had you sent your sword home we should have been safe."

"Is that so certain?" asked Karl.

"That was Rahmer's opinion this morning, and we agreed with him in spite of your assertion to the contrary. We must meet and consider the changed position early in the morning."

"Do you imagine, Burgomaster, I came here at this hour just to ask your advice? No. Since that gold chain was picked up in your hall the other night, it was clear to me that a little private talk with you had become necessary. The events of to-night make it advisable that the understanding between us should come now."

"My niece —"

"Is a most charming person, Burgomaster, not to be discussed in the presence of the others. They were surprised to hear you had a niece, so was I; but the fact that she was living under your roof did not seem of particular moment to them. It did to me. Perhaps I am of a more speculative nature, for I have been wondering how the jester got wind of our enterprise. To-night I am wondering whether I have not found the answer."

"Do you suggest —"

"For the moment I suggest nothing," Karl answered, "I deal with a fact. Your niece is a lady-in-waiting to the Duchess, come most suddenly and unaccountably into prominence at Court. Until to-night I did not even know she was there. How is it you have kept this niece of yours so much in the background, Burgomaster?"

"It has so happened. There is no mystery about it."

"My statements have not always convinced you," laughed Karl, "on this occasion yours do not quite convince me. They might not be altogether satisfactory to the others. You have not mentioned this niece, yet she has been under your roof, in a position to watch your visitors, has overheard enough perhaps to betray us. You see the possibility?"

The Burgomaster struck the arm of his chair with his fist.

"If I thought —"

"At least we might accuse you of a certain carelessness, Burgomaster, or we might go a little further and realize that, in the event of things not shaping favourably presently, it would be most useful to you to have such a person as your niece at Court. A word to your niece would serve to betray some scheme to the Duchess, and your niece's influence, together with your repentance and valuable information, might serve to win you forgiveness for past indiscretions. You see the possibility of this point of view?"

"It pleases you to insult me, Prince," and the Burgomaster, scarlet of countenance, struggled up from his chair.

"Be seated, Burgomaster, be seated," said Karl with a wave of his hand. "There is no need for agitation. You have only me to deal with, and I am no hard taskmaster."

Von Lehmann fell back into his chair, breathing heavily.

"All that matters is that you and I should understand each other," the Prince went on. "First of all, disabuse your mind of the idea that I am a blind fool.

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The position is this: We seek to force the Duchess to marry me, on my terms, in order that I may have power enough to favour the personal ambitions of my friends in Metzburg; but they would not have me too powerful lest I should end by sending them to the devil. You see how well I understand the position and how fast I have kept the knowledge to myself, as closely indeed as you have kept your niece."

"Your Highness, the others will —"

"For the moment we will not consider them," said Karl. "Each one has his own particular view no doubt, just as we have, and has, if he is wise, got a door of escape open, just as we have; you through your niece who enjoys the Duchess's confidence, I — well, perhaps I shall be wise to keep my secret a little longer."

"Your Highness forgets that Kurd has advanced you considerable sums of money."

"But not nearly sufficient to buy me, Burgomaster. That is his mistake. I trust you have not fallen into the same error. He is not the only man willing to lend me money, he happens to be the man I have honoured by borrowing from. There are always two points of view. We will think of the others presently; we will talk of ourselves first, and of your niece. How is it she has become so suddenly prominent in Metzburg?"

"It has just happened."

"As to that I am a little sceptical. It chances that your niece and I have met before."

"She has never spoken of you."

"That surprises me," said Karl, "and under the circumstances suggests that she too may have an axe to grind. We must be frank with each other, Burgomaster. Remember, I could make shift to do without

you, though it might give me a little extra trouble, I confess; without me you would find yourself in parlous condition."

Had the others been present doubtless Von Lehmann would have found courage enough to bluster, but alone he was easily cowed, as is the way with bullies.

"Was it in Berlin you met her?" he asked.

"No, but I understood her father lived there. Von Lehmann is a common name, I did not connect her with you."

"My brother was a merchant and a fool," said the Burgomaster. "He was successful so long as he gave his mind to trading, but the moment he meddled with intrigue he was indiscreet, and was found out. His business took him travelling and he had opportunities for gathering news."

"His daughter travelled with him at times, that is how I chanced to meet her no doubt."

"There was a scandal in Berlin," Von Lehmann went on, "but I do not know the whole story. My brother had picked up information in Lorraine, to be used against the Elector it was said, and being enamoured of some woman in Berlin, my brother was fool enough to trust her with the secret. She sold him. To escape arrest, and the death of a spy probably, he hid himself, meaning to escape from the city on the first opportunity no doubt. His place of concealment was discovered, but when they came to take him they only found Bertha. Her father had died during the night, a natural death she believes; but since in France I have heard that my brother made the acquaintance of Madame de Brinvilliers, and spoke of her as a remarkable and fascinating woman, he possibly knew something of the subtleties of poison, and took that way out of

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his difficulty. Bertha is attractive; you may have noted it, Prince."

"The fact was our introduction, Burgomaster. I do not remember ever being interested in a woman who was not attractive."

For a moment Von Lehmann looked at him, his eyes narrowed in their fat setting, and his brain was full of speculation.

"And because of her attraction people pitied her," he went on. "A great lady took her into her household, and for a little while the scandal seemed to be forgotten. Possibly it was some rival who revived it, but whatever the cause, a whisper went abroad that Bertha knew more of her father's doings than she ought to know. The father was dead but the daughter lived to be dangerous. Berlin became impossible for her, and in her trouble she communicated with me. As a child she had often been in Metzburg, and she came here as to a second home. That is the story, a private affair which has never seemed to me worthy of any mention."

"And you brought her to the notice of the Duchess."

"No, Prince. Her Grace happened to see us together and was interested in Bertha. It happened quite recently, which accounts for your not having noticed her at Court until now."

"She may be cleverer at intrigue than her father was, Burgomaster. Did that not occur to you when our secret was betrayed, especially after the finding of that gold chain in the hall yonder?"

"It did not."

"Strange. It would naturally occur to anyone, even if he were ignorant of your niece's history; to anyone knowing it —"

"What do you know of my niece?" asked the Burgomaster in the tone of an outraged guardian.

"Very little. Why grow restive, Burgomaster? If you will have a pretty niece you must be prepared to have her admired. Somewhere on my travels I met her, and we laughed through a few pleasant hours together, jested a little, perhaps knew a moment or two of sentiment. I am impressionable, my years must excuse me. Would you have a man grow old before his time? Would you have him level headed before he has known the joy of pleasure's intoxication? Youth and the wine of life are worth keeping as long as possible, and he's a fool who would wantonly take the cork out of the bottle to let the wine go flat."

"We talk of my niece, Your Highness."

"That is why I am so eloquent," laughed Karl, enjoying the Burgomaster's anger. "The charming Bertha was not toasted for the first time when I raised a goblet to her beauty, I warrant. I remember a pleasant episode, but I bear no lasting mark of it. Still, I wonder your niece has never mentioned me."

"Doubtless she was much less impressed than Your Highness," said Von Lehmann.

It was a thrust which found its way home. It pleased Karl to torment his companion, but retaliation irritated him at once.

"Impossible! Think, Burgomaster, a travelling merchant's daughter and a prince! Such a conquest might impress even your niece, and you could be trusted not to let her stand in the way of your advancement. Have you considered that circumstances might incline her to sacrifice her uncle?"

"The jester's our danger, not my niece," answered the Burgomaster, struggling out of his chair and be-

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ginning to pace the room. "Were we not all suspicious of him? Did we not take precautions that he should not be included in the hunting party?"

"True, but had I known of your niece's presence in Metzburg, and of her close attendance upon the Duchess, I should have watched her rather than Bergolet. Let that pass. One plot has failed; we have to find another way to our end, and you may live to be thankful that a wiser head than yours is at hand to do the thinking. We shall use Bergolet presently, but now there is something else to do, something for you to do."

"Why for me?"

"Because you happen to be Burgomaster," said Karl, leaning a little across the table and regarding him steadily. "This morning you said that Metzburg would not be induced to welcome the Elector of Brandenburg. The turmoil in the city to-day has proved that you were right. The people hate the Elector; only a little, a very little is wanted to turn that hate into action. That little is going to be done."

"To what end?"

"Metzburg is going to prevent the Elector going south to lead his troops against Turenne."

"It is madness."

"I did not ask for criticism," said Karl; "I want your close attention to my instructions. Do you imagine my schemes for the moment, or for the future, are bounded by the walls that enclose Metzburg? I am no mere Burgomaster, no trafficker in goods with the filling of a coffer to consider. For a prince there are wider views, and I am assigning you your part in this larger scheme. The Elector is to visit the Rathaus. There should be cheering citizens in the

streets. The citizens will be there, but they will not have gathered in crowds to cheer. Instead, they will suddenly lose control of themselves and attack the procession, because it has been told them, in no uncertain tone, that the Elector means to work evil in the city. It is for you, Burgomaster, to spread this whisper abroad, to let Metzburg know that you, as chief of the city, know the danger of the Elector's presence in it. You have so many poor devils under your thumb that you can easily employ tongues enough to scatter the news. Of course you do not desire a riot, you are only an honest Burgomaster nervous for Her Grace's safety and the safety of the city."

"But the riot will come."

"I do not expect we shall be able to prevent it; do you?" said Karl with a smile.

"And afterwards, Prince?"

"We shall have the Elector in our hands, if we can possibly save him from the fury of the mob, and shall dictate our terms. If Her Grace will not be guided by her people's wishes, why — but she will, Burgomaster."

"And if not, then Prince Karl takes her place," said Von Lehmann slowly.

"That is a possible solution," Karl answered.

"And how will you drive the army of Brandenburg from our gates when presently it comes with fire and sword for revenge?"

Karl shrugged his shoulders.

"We look a little too far into the future. Podina also has an army, and perchance my ally, King Louis, could spare me another."

"King Louis!" and the fat man started, clutching hold of the back of his chair to steady himself.

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for your handling, but now that the time is ripe I am graciously offering you your opportunity. For the man who obeys me now there is good reward hereafter."

"But the others? I dare not act unless we are all agreed."

"I may find something for the others to do. They are not your concern. Would you sooner have them for friends than Prince Karl of Podina?"

"I dare not be treacherous even in the privacy of this room."

"A clever answer," laughed Karl, "and it pleases me to reason with you. I will put the question another way. To whom do you suppose the others would cling, to you or to me? Why, it wants only a word or two to set enquiry on foot concerning Heinrich von Lehmann, Burgomaster of Metzburg, and from streets and market-places there would swarm crowds to witness that he had grown fat upon others' misfortunes, that his coffers had been filled by robbery, and that a bribe had always served to make him confuse justice and fraud. They would tear the robes of office from such a magistrate, would strip him of every ill-gotten crown piece he possessed, would cry his name at every street corner as a warning to others — perhaps hang him to some convenient lamp bracket if one could be found strong enough to bear such a weight of iniquity. I can almost hear the savage shouting of the mob."

The fat man leaned upon the back of the chair, his face moist with fear, his limbs limp, and he breathed heavily and rapidly as though there were insufficient air about him.

"I could draw another picture," said Karl after a pause, "a very different one of the Burgomaster who

obeyed me. You are at the parting of the ways and must choose which road you will take."

"The whispers against the Elector shall begin to-morrow," said Von Lehmann hoarsely.

"You please me, Burgomaster, and we understand each other," said the Prince, taking his cloak. "Your niece has done you a service. Had I not met her, I might not have given her uncle the opportunity of coming to further honour. Good night, Burgomaster. Remember there must be no open riot until the day the Elector visits the Rathaus. Before then you shall have further instructions."

"And the others?" asked Von Lehmann.

"Leave them to me."

The Burgomaster sank into his chair when the Prince had gone, his limbs trembling, his senses numb. He was a man in a trap from which there was no escape. A whisper would ruin him, as the Prince had said, and fling him naked to the fury of the mob, but was there any real security in obeying Prince Karl? With success, the Prince would easily forget him, and failure would mean the wrath of the Duchess. The minutes passed into hours as he sat there trying to see a ray of hope in the darkness. It came suddenly. Bertha! Ever since she had come to Metzburg he had appreciated that she might be useful to him, might be the way of escape as Karl had suggested; now she might serve him in a way he had not anticipated. She had attracted Prince Karl, and through her he might strike at the Prince if necessary.

"That is the road I will keep open," muttered the Burgomaster. "Bertha may save my head, or serve to force the Prince to listen to my demands presently. I will walk warily. There shall be whispers to-morrow,

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but there shall be few to swear that the Burgomaster started them. To bed now; to-morrow I shall have a clearer brain."

The morrow had come long since. The light high up in the castle was out, and even villainy had grown weary, and slept. Dawn was in the east, fast turning from grey to red and gold. Out of the country came those who would be near the gates at their opening so that they might catch the early traffic in the market-place; and amongst them were other travellers whose carts and laden beasts provoked much interest and comment. They were the vanguard of those mummers and tumblers and morris dancers who would soon turn the city into a fair during the feast of St. Winifried.

CHAPTER XV

THE PRISONER

THE day's work had well begun when Bergolet woke from his dreams to find Saxe watching him. Saxe was no exemplary gaoler. The moment he was alone with his prisoner last night he had told him of his interview with Bertha von Lehmann, warned him of their imminent danger, and suggested an immediate attempt at escape. The jester had pleaded fatigue as an excuse for not entering into a serious discussion then; but there was no getting away from Saxe's urgency this morning.

"It is too early to talk seriously," said Bergolet. "I have had such dreams, a garden of roses, and a woman —"

"I would talk of a woman," said Saxe, "and she is no dream but a real danger. After five minutes' clatter of Bertha von Lehmann's tongue, the Duchess is likely to close every road against us."

"That is a five minutes that will never come, I fancy; besides, I do not think I should dream outside Metz-burg."

There was a clicking sound in Saxe's throat, which meant extreme annoyance.

"Her part in this affair must not be mentioned," said Bergolet, "I promised that."

"I have given no such promise," was the answer.

"That is why I demand it now," said Bergolet.

"She may keep her secret so long as we get free from Metzburg," Saxe returned impatiently. "We were fools to come, and we shall deserve our fate if we remain when there is a chance to go."

"Would escape be easy?"

"When the Elector goes south he would not scorn two more fighting men in his company."

"You seem to forget that I am only a fool," said Bergolet, seating himself on the edge of the table.

"I forget nothing."

"And like a fool I am curious to know what fate holds in store for me here."

"Disaster," Saxe answered promptly.

"An opinion without hearing the whole of the story. That is not wise for an officer in the Duchess's Guard."

Saxe remembered that Bertha had said something of the same kind to him.

"Tell me the whole story," he said; "I shall be better able to judge in which directions to look for danger."

Bergolet gave him a full account of his adventure, from his discovery of the plot against the Duchess to his lesson in swordsmanship from the Prince.

"What devilish purpose had he in that?" Saxe asked.

"I cannot tell, for we were interrupted. Straubel, Kurd and Rahmer rushed in, and the huge carcass of the Burgomaster filled the doorway. We were an excellent company."

"You have evidence that the Burgomaster is a villain, so we may easily judge his companions."

"I think the Burgomaster carries his villainy in his face, but it is not so with the others. We have no evidence that they are scoundrels and we should be laughed at for calling them so."

Saxe walked to the end of the room and back again.

"I am wondering what plot they are hatching against the man who chanced to see them together at such an hour."

"That is the kind of knowledge that always comes without troubling to acquire it, and usually without undue delay," said Bergolet. "All yesterday I remained the Prince's guest, and so anxious was he for my safety that my door was locked and a man set to watch it. Towards evening the Prince came to me in the most friendly fashion. The Duchess, it appeared, was still determined to have me arrested, but the Elector desired to have me present at the banquet. Prince Karl bade me use my best wit against the Elector if I would win Her Grace's forgiveness, and promised me a further handful of crowns if my sallies were cutting enough. Then he sent his servant to my lodging for my bauble and cap, and I duly took my place behind the Duchess's chair."

"To find yourself her prisoner now," said Saxe.

"I find it a good exchange, and you should not complain since it has promoted you to be an officer in the Guard."

"I put no great trust in Her Grace, and in Prince Karl I can see nothing but a traitor."

"I respect your judgment except where a woman is concerned," said Bergolet, "but I do not understand the Prince. Why should he play the villain when honesty would seem to serve him so much better? The Duchess is inclined to marry him. I had it from her own lips."

Saxe glanced at the jester from under his shaggy eyebrows.

"Poor devil, I pity him."

"Why?"

"'Tis a dog's life he is destined to, for she would not

marry him unless she intended to rule him with a rod of iron. That's a heavy punishment for any man."

Bergolet laughed aloud at the soldier's solemnity.

"And how would a man fare with Mistress Von Lehmann, my good gaoler? What did you think of her?"

Saxe looked again at the jester as if he were seeking for some special meaning behind the question.

"I didn't think of her at all, I was thinking of you."

"While you had a pretty woman beside you! You'll not deny that she is pretty?"

"She forced me to tell her so," was the answer.

"Is that the kind of power that is in her? Have a care, Saxe. There is no doubt she is a most dangerous woman. You'll be trying to write love stanzas before next month's moon. There must be divine fire in Mistress Bertha's eyes."

"You waste wit when you use it on me," said Saxe, going to the window. "It is true I told her she was pretty, forced to the admission, mind you; but I also swore I would wring the life out of her if she spoke a single word that would bring harm to you."

"You were determined that she should not mistake you for a lover," laughed Bergolet.

"Lover!" snapped the soldier without turning from the window. "I hate the word. Lover! Men seem to have turned it into a profession."

"You are hard, Saxe."

"Honest. If a new moon could bring you some of my indifference it would be well."

Bergolet did not answer at once.

"I think you are a little hard upon the Duchess," he said after a pause. "I have noted some tenderness in her."

"Are you capable of judging?" said the soldier, turn-

ing sharply on his heels and facing him. "You run easily after a pretty face, it seems to me."

For a moment a smile played about the jester's lips, but it went suddenly, leaving his face grave.

"What, have you no gibe to fling at me?" Saxe asked.

"No. You hit me deeper than I like to own. It is an easy matter to jest about women. Your lout in the fields is equal to the task, and your tavern haunter, half full of raw wine, can always raise a laugh by such cheap wit. The world's at fault a little, for you are only in its fashion if you profess love for every pretty face you see, whether some high born dame possesses it or some wench who tends cows in a farm yard. You are right, Saxe, it's a profession, a hateful profession for a man to have any dealings with, and he is likely to find a moment in his life when he will taste the bitterness of the past just because the one woman has looked into his eyes."

"It may be so," Saxe answered.

Bergolet went to him and let his hand fall heavily on his shoulder.

"I know. It is so. Deep down in the worst of us there lies good buried under heaps of rubbish, and worse. There are few who do not come to that hour when they would fain stand Sir Parsifals. Thank Heaven for woman's Godlike forbearance, for without it I know not how the world would go on."

Saxe did not speak but he looked steadily at his companion.

"Yes, old friend, for me that hour has struck. I cannot tell what is to come after, but it is useless to talk to me of danger. Until the heart is dead in me I shall not leave Metzburg."

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"It will not rest with us what we will or won't do when Bertha von Lehmann becomes confidential," said Saxe.

"Do you know what she would tell the Duchess?" asked Bergolet.

"Not a complete story perhaps, but enough to ruin us."

"And not the story you imagine. She would tell the Duchess that her jester was a spy in the pay of Louis of France."

"Then it is a worse danger than I thought," said Saxe.

"But she will not speak. She is a spy herself. You must humour her, Saxe, and let her think she has charmed a woman-hater. Play the lover to please her vanity and force a way to her confidence. We must find out for whom it is she spies. There is some personal motive at the root of it, she almost confessed as much."

"It would be easier to —"

"Twist her neck?" laughed Bergolet. "The other way should be pleasanter work and less dangerous. Hush! I think that is the second time there has been a knock at the door."

It was loud enough this time, and in an instant Saxe was the gaoler, stern of aspect, determined to allow no one to hold communication with his prisoner. He opened the door slowly and only a little space, then he saluted and threw it wide open. It was the Duchess.

"Has anyone sought access to you since last night?" she asked.

"No one, Your Grace."

"I wish to speak to your prisoner, and alone. Be within call."

She entered, closed and locked the door, leaving Saxe outside. The jester had risen, but she crossed the room without taking any notice of him, and for some time she stood silently looking from the window. Last night she had been only the Duchess, proud and imperious of will; this morning she was only a woman, just a beautiful woman.

"It is not such an unpleasant prison," she said presently.

"Mistress, it ceased to be a prison when you entered it."

"I want neither jest nor compliment," she said impatiently, seating herself by the table near which Bergolet was standing. "I have not come to visit the jester but to talk to a man who is a prisoner, and I require serious answers to my questions."

Bergolet quickly adjusted himself to her mood.

"If for the time I am to play the man, I would ask how I have offended you? Why am I a prisoner?"

"I will answer that question presently," she returned. "Bergolet, I have sent a company into the forest to hunt for robbers and rebels; do you think they will find either the one or the other?"

"Your Grace, they have had many hours in which to hide themselves securely."

"The robbers, yes, but how about the rebels?"

"Fearing your just anger they are likely to have turned robbers."

"Unless they have friends in the city powerful enough to protect them. You can appreciate that possibility. Should they return and laugh at your story, and find half my Court ready to laugh with them, who is going to prove them liars? Would your word against theirs

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suffice? There is strong argument on their side since they would declare the story had come only from the lips of a fool."

"Your Grace forgets that Prince Karl has most solemnly sworn to have a hanging if these men are caught. He must believe in their guilt, and it would look strange if he went back upon his word."

"Bergolet, I have seen the Trooper Hans this morning, and heard his version of your capture and escape. Tell me the full story. There are missing pieces in the puzzle which I must find."

He told her of his going to the saddler's shop, but he did not name the woman he had gone to visit, nor did he say it was the Burgomaster's house into which he had been taken, nor that it was the Burgomaster who had given money to the robbers. For his own sake, and because of his promise, he must keep faith with Bertha von Lehmann.

The Duchess listened attentively, asking no questions, her eyes steadily fixed upon him as though she would convince herself that he was speaking the truth.

"By good fortune, I succeeded in reaching Your Grace in time," said Bergolet, "and that I was not upon a vain mission the conduct of your escort seems to prove."

"This woman you visited must be deep in the schemes of my enemies," said the Duchess. "Trooper Hans declares that it was in my name the saddler's shop was searched."

"Officer Saxe says the same. He was of the company who came to arrest me there."

"And I gave no such orders," said the Duchess. "I knew nothing of your visit to the saddler's. It was only as I left the city that I ordered your arrest be-

cause — because you had disobeyed my instructions and were not in waiting to ride with me to the gate.”

“Mistress, you were right to punish a disobedient fool, but —”

“Wait,” she said. “I want the rest of the story. Prince Karl thinks you a coward.”

“Only when I have a sword in my hand,” Bergolet said quickly.

“Was there no profit in the lesson?” she asked, looking up at him keenly.

“I think he must be an excellent swordsman,” Bergolet answered.

“The best in Europe, it is said. Rather strange he should trouble to give a lesson to a fool.”

“I think he felt friendly towards me because I had helped to save Your Grace. He seemed to think the service might bring me enemies, so would teach me how to defend myself. When he found me hopeless as a pupil he rewarded me with a handful of coins. He borrowed them from the Burgomaster, who was somewhat reluctant, I fancy, to play his part in enriching me.”

“Borrowed them! From the Burgomaster!”

“Yes, Mistress. The noise of the swords brought those who were waiting to see the Prince rushing into the room. The Burgomaster was one of them. They thought the Prince was being attacked. No doubt they laughed over the matter afterwards, and by this time quite a number of people in Metzburg know that I cannot handle a sword.”

“Who was there besides the Burgomaster?”

“Your minister, Straubel; the gossiping gallant Rahmer, who never allows any tale to lose in the telling; and Herr Kurd, who looks so much like an Israelite that

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his strenuous denial of the kinship does not convince me."

"They were early visitors."

"So thought the Prince, and he kept them waiting while he drank wine with me. He was angry at their coming."

"You owe them thanks perhaps," said the Duchess with a touch of contempt in her voice as though she wished to raise the man's anger. "Their sudden entrance may have saved your life."

"The lesson was really over when they came," said Bergolet.

"You are so reluctant to think evil that I might reasonably doubt your own honesty," she returned impatiently. "A fool I can understand, but a blind fool —"

"Pardon, Your Grace, but you most particularly said you had come to speak with a man."

"Then why persist in talking like a fool?"

"Mistress, to avoid hasty judgment is one of the marks of a wise man," Bergolet answered. "If Straubel and the others are scoundrels, you must perforce believe Prince Karl has something to do with villainy."

"Why not?" she asked. "When he borrowed from the Burgomaster to pay you, did he buy you to speak in his defence?"

"I am not prepared to accuse him," Bergolet answered. "Possibly — I do not say it is so, but possibly he has listened to some scheme which he may think good for Podina, and has been led to act unwisely and to choose dangerous friends. What has he to gain by villainy? He has every reason to hope he may rule with you in Metzburg, he —"

"Who gave him any such hope?" the Duchess demanded sharply.

"Your Grace forgets that I was called to take part in the interview."

"I spoke of marriage, not that he should rule with me. The one has nothing to do with the other. Statecraft demands my marriage, and since I am not free to love as other women are, I choose the puppet who will dance most easily to my tune. It is a position no woman need envy, Bergolet, nor any man either for that matter."

"I think there must be men who would envy Prince Karl, no matter what price they were called upon to pay."

"I am not here for compliments," she said impatiently.

"Indeed, Mistress, it was the man in me which spoke."

She smiled suddenly as if she saw the humour of his answer, but was grave again directly.

"Were I to love it would certainly be someone I could not possibly marry, so it is as well that I am heart whole. Tell me, Bergolet, since it pleases you to have such care for my cousin's reputation, would you still advise me to marry him?"

"I would counsel that you let him think you are of the same mind for a little while, so you will hold in check any villainy with which he may be in touch."

"I think you give me good counsel."

"Not until St. Winifried's feast do your people expect you to make definite choice. Who knows that one may not come then who shall set the world singing for you? I wish it might be so, Mistress, for without love I think the flavour is out of life."

"It might not be difficult to set me dreaming," she returned after a pause.

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"The fool shall help if he can, Mistress. I shall spur my memory for brave tales concerning those who come to the feast."

"The fool has already served me sufficiently to bring him enemies," she answered. "They might have tried to silence him last night, before he had opportunity to tell his story. I deemed you safer here, with Saxe for gaoler, than in your lodging in the West Tower, so you were arrested. All the Court knows of this visit, so the need to silence you is gone. You are free, but —"

"Yes, Your Grace?"

"Bergolet, all danger will not be gone. You are a marked man to my enemies. Last night the Elector noted your inches and saw the soldier in you. If you will, go with him when he leaves the city. A man may win much honour against the French."

"Mistress, I am happy in Metzburg."

She looked at him for a moment as a woman will when she would read a man's thoughts.

"Who is the woman you went to visit that night? The saddler has no daughter."

"I did not know that," Bergolet answered.

"She is dangerous, this woman, she knows too much," said the Duchess.

"She used that knowledge to help me save Your Grace."

"For that I would thank her. Tell me her name."

"Pardon, Your Grace, but I promised secrecy."

"A fool falls in love like other men, I suppose."

"Yes, Mistress."

"If she is an honest woman I am inclined to show her some favour for the fool's sake."

"I think she is honest," Bergolet answered.

"What does she in Metzburg? Is it in some tavern

she serves? Or is she a wench one may see about the market? Is she a mere plaything, or of sterling worth, or something between the two, poor stuff that only a fool would marry?"

"Mistress, I think a fool might marry her and be happy enough to be unconscious of his folly. I am sorry I may not tell you her name."

"Keep your secret, it does not really interest me. Thinking of you as a man has made me curious I suppose, set me wondering what sort of woman would attract a man like you."

She got up and crossed to the window.

"You may easily learn that, Mistress."

"How?" she asked without turning her head.

"In your garden there is a fountain with a wide basin held by laughing cupids. It stands by a hedge of yews, and is so placed that when the sunlight is not falling upon it, or in the moonlight sometimes, and when the fountain is not playing, the smooth water is as a great mirror. I have seen my cap so clearly reflected that an echoing tinkle of its bells seemed to rise from the cool depths. If you stand on the stone step, Mistress, and look into that water, you shall see two stars which are a woman's eyes, and you shall see a face that is a poet's dream, and even while you note its beauty something in it will warn you to beware of offending. So, if you will, you may see my ideal."

She did not turn for a moment, then she came slowly back to the table.

"To Bergolet, the fool, I might say it was a pretty conceit; but to-day I came to speak to a man, and Bergolet, the man, presumes."

He threw out his arms in a gesture of contrition.

"It is the uniform which confuses me," he said, look-

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ing down at his dress of scarlet and green. "As a fool I might counsel you to punish most severely the presumption; but as a man I would say that the truth is ever worth suffering for. Mistress, have you finished with me as a man?"

She went to the door and unlocked it. "Indeed, I think as a jester you are more amusing. You are no longer a prisoner. To-night the Duchess expects to hear the fool's bells behind her chair." And she went out, calling for Saxe.

CHAPTER XVI

THE SECRET LEAGUE

BERGOLET stood by the table looking at the open door through which the Duchess had passed. He was no longer a prisoner, and to-night the Duchess expected to find the fool behind her chair. For a little while she had encouraged him to be only a man, but when he spoke as a man she could see nothing but presumption in him. He had not expected such treatment. Though the Duchess might speak, he had looked for the woman to peep from her eyes, and had looked in vain. He picked up his cap, put it on firmly, and shook his head to make the bells ring, as though he would forcibly remind himself what it was he wore; then he took up the bauble and laid it across his arm, but he did not speak to his little friend, nor was there the shadow of a smile upon his face. It was a serious and depressed looking jester who stood by the table waiting for Saxe's return.

It was some time before the soldier came, and when he did he paused in the doorway to laugh at his companion. Bergolet's wit seldom appealed to his humour, but this doleful jester did.

"You're no longer a prisoner," he said, "yet you look as serious as if I were the bearer of an order for your execution."

"I ought to rejoice since I have been graciously restored to my office of fool."

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"I did not know the office had been taken from you," Saxe answered.

"How should you? You were locked on the other side of the door. But for a while I was raised to the dignity of a man, and my success was such that I was speedily commanded to become a fool again. Did I tell you my dream, Saxe, about a rose garden —"

"I want to hear no dream."

"I would not tell it to you for all the gold in Israel," Bergolet answered. "I only want you to know that a mist like a great cloud has come down and blotted out my garden."

"Can there not be plain speech between us?" demanded the soldier irritably. "Her Grace has talked with me. I am no longer your gaoler, but I am bid to keep near you, to have a wary eye for those who would be in your company, to act promptly if I think you are in danger. She is strangely careful of you."

"She is afraid she may lose a good fool," said Bergolet.

"Is that all?" Saxe asked.

The jester nodded and the bells jingled. He was not disturbed by the keen enquiry which looked out from under the frowning, shaggy brow of his companion.

"Then why should we not leave Metzburg?" Saxe asked.

"Because the fool's mistress treads a slippery path," Bergolet returned, "and we must be at hand to keep her from falling. Had you been of those who listen at closed doors, friend Saxe, you would have heard that Her Grace has small trust in her cousin Karl, and I think she has convinced me that he is a scoundrel."

"Were you fool enough to doubt it?"

"I was wise enough to let her think so, and to counsel her to take no action. The Prince is Captain of the Guard, and has influence with the men we know. How deep does that influence go? A bribed guard has served to make and unmake rulers before now."

"If that is how the wind is, have you and I any power to stop its blowing?" Saxe asked.

"We are two men who count, friend Saxe. The jester is in the way of hearing secrets from behind the Duchess's chair, and there may be men in the Guard who have a liking for their new officer. There is another who may help us."

"Bertha von Lehmann?" Saxe asked.

"She comes easily into your thoughts," returned Bergolet. "Certainly she may be useful, and the sooner you make love to her the better. I was not thinking of her but of that stout fellow Hans whose head I cracked. He's honest, I think, and may know other honest men. We will find out."

"How?"

"Since Her Grace left it, this room is very like a prison," said Bergolet. "Shall we go? I shall talk more easily in my lodging in the West Tower."

That afternoon found them in a wine cellar, the jester without his cap and bauble and wrapped in a cloak to conceal his dress; Saxe stern of face as a man who faces a difficulty but fears the worst. It was a poor place, dark, ill-ventilated, pungent with the fumes of stale liquor, but it was in a narrow, unfrequented street, and a man could slip in and out of it without attracting attention. There were corners in it, too, where round an old stained table men could talk over their wine and not be afraid of eavesdroppers.

"Wine, the best you have," said Saxe to the pro-

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prietor. "I entertain friends. When they come see to it that we are not disturbed."

The man hurried to obey, protesting that he had the best wine in Metzburg although time and the weather had taken the paint from his outer doors.

The guests came singly, all men of the Guard, and as each one came to the table Saxe poured him out a liberal measure of wine.

"Drink, comrade. We'll to business when the others join us."

Then came Gustav whistling a stave, and a few moments afterwards the great form of Hans filled the doorway.

"We are complete," said Saxe, handing him wine as he reached the table.

"It's a new thing to find the liquor waiting and with an officer to hand it," laughed the burly trooper.

"Do you resent my promotion?" Saxe asked.

"Not I, comrade. You're a good man and deserve it, so am I a good man and deserve it. We don't all get our deserts, that's the devil of it. Luck's jumped your way, and you won't have much trouble with it if you hold meetings of this kind occasionally."

As he drank he looked round upon his companions for endorsement of this statement. The light in the cellar was dim, and he had finished his wine with an appreciative smack of his lips before he noticed the figure in the corner. Bergolet had let his cloak fall apart to show his dress of green and scarlet.

"By thunder, I've an account to settle with one of this company!" Hans exclaimed.

"This way. I'm sorry."

The jester stood up and stretched out his hand, but the trooper shook his head.

"It's not a debt that words can pay. There's still a drumming in my brain, and I carry a mark that will spoil my beauty for some time to come. And that's not the worst of it; there's the being laughed at that a man like me should be beaten by a fool like you."

"Aye, we did laugh," said Gustav.

"And I'm not built to be laughed at," said Hans. "It's payment in kind that I'm looking for, not in words."

"This is part of the business which brings us here," and Saxe poured out more wine. "Let us sit. Come, Master Jester, what have you to say to Comrade Hans?"

"He is generally a coward who hides behind an apology," said Bergolet.

"That's plain speech and true," returned Hans.

"Would you call me a coward?" the jester asked. The trooper rubbed his chin reflectively.

"You're more a liar than a coward. You fooled me into thinking you an idiot, without sense, without memory. You got at the softness in me, and when I turned away, pitying you, you struck me down with that infernal sling of yours."

"To save the Duchess," said Bergolet. "You know now what her danger was. Had I told you then, would you have believed me and let me go? Of course you would not. You believed you were my gaoler by her command. Had I attacked you man to man —"

"It would have been a very different matter," said Hans, squaring his shoulders to emphasize his strength. "I warrant you'd be still abed and still repenting your foolishness."

There was a laugh at this sally, and then Bergolet leaned across the table. He had bared his right arm to

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the shoulder, and now bent it slowly that his companions might see the play of the hard muscles.

"I have known quite big men treat that arm with respect," he said. "You might have held me, Hans, but you would have had no babe to battle with."

"It's wonderful development for a fool," Gustav remarked after a pause.

"Good enough to make a man fight squarely," said Hans, "and you didn't."

"How could I know you were alone in the house?" Bergolet asked. "I was thinking of the Duchess. You would have done as I did for the sake of the Duchess."

"Not then, but I would now," said Hans in a burst of confidence. "Why, this morning she had me to talk with her — about you it was, Master Jester,— and I was talking to her as easy as if she weren't a Duchess, but just a woman. I'd do a great deal for the woman who talked with me this morning."

"So we stand together on common ground, Hans," said the jester. "The Duchess is in danger still, as Saxe here will tell us. When she is out of danger we'll face each other for a bout if you will, but until then —"

The trooper looked at the outstretched hand for a moment, then took it.

"I bear no malice, Master Jester. With an arm like yours there must be times when a fool's got other uses than being laughed at. We'll have that bout later, and when you're laid by for a few days you must remember it's the result of a friendly fight and has no malice in it. What's this about the Duchess being in danger?"

It was Saxe who told the story, and he was careful to leave much unsaid. The facts he emphasized were those which would appeal to Hans, and the truth of

which Hans could vouch for to his companions. Bergolet's arrest had not been ordered by the Duchess that night, therefore someone had treacherously used her name. Had it not been for the jester's timely warning, Her Grace would have been captured in the forest. Not only robbers had been bribed to the deed, but it was almost certain that the escort had been bribed not to fight.

"I can make no definite accusation, or we'd have the scoundrels by the heels," said Saxe; "but while they are at large the Duchess is in danger."

"I've noted whispering and discontent in the Guard," said Hans.

"So have I," Saxe answered. "That is why we are here, six men of the Guard who love the Duchess. Are we prepared to defend her with our lives if necessary?"

"Aye," came the quick answer.

"Show us the way, Captain Saxe, and to defend her we'll cut through though all the Guard prove traitors," said Gustav.

"Bravely said," and Hans brought his hand down heavily on his comrade's shoulder. "That's the spirit. I swear it shall be death to the man who says a word against her in my hearing."

"It is more than words I am afraid of," said Saxe, "that is why I would bind to me a few true men. It falls out fortunately that I have been made an officer, it gives me some power in setting the sentries, and I shall so arrange that we six may be in easy call of one another. We are six men, a secret league, sworn to protect our Lady, the Duchess."

"And the jester there?" queried Hans.

"He's no fighting man," laughed a trooper. "It went all round the drill yard this morning that Prince

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Karl had tried to teach him sword play and that he was afraid of the naked weapon."

"It's a pity, and with such an arm too," Hans murmured.

Bergolet did not move.

"We are six fighting men and a fool," said Saxe. "The fool is sharp enough to hear many things not intended for his ears as he stands behind the Duchess's chair. He will be useful to bring us news. Is it a solemn oath between us?"

Hands shot out across the table and were firm-clasped in the centre.

"May Heaven's curse light on the man who breaks this oath," said Saxe solemnly. Then pouring out more wine he stood to the salute. "To our mistress, Her Grace of Podina."

The toast was drunk.

"We look to you for orders, Captain Saxe," said Hans.

"Thanks, comrades. Leave as you came, singly. Metzburg must know nothing of the league."

Saxe settled the score and left the cellar with Bergolet, and the proprietor hoped for their further custom, little guessing how important a league had been formed over his wine.

That night Saxe set the sentries and no one noted anything strange in his arrangement. Passing him, Prince Karl smiled a little contemptuously at the trooper turned officer, but saw no powerful enemy in him, nor did it interest him what men stood on guard. He was holding the threads of a scheme which should shake Europe, and was not concerned with small matters. Only Bertha von Lehmann troubled him, and it would have astonished the Prince could he have known

that the same woman was uppermost in the thoughts of the man he passed so contemptuously.

And that night Bergolet stood behind the Duchess's chair. She glanced at him, the interview of the morning evidently in her mind, but the moment he essayed to jest she silenced him. She was not in the mood to be merry, and the fact astonished her, for she had passed a dull day. More than once in it she would have welcomed Bergolet's coming; indeed, she had almost sent for him. The Elector had not required much entertaining, but Baron Kevenfelt had wearied her with a long explanation of his plans for the feast of St. Winifried. Before she could change her mind he had taken advantage of her permission to make what arrangements he deemed best, and had handed her a paper containing the names of the guests who had been invited to Metz-burg. She took the paper, but had not opened it even when the Baron had bowed himself out well satisfied with what he had accomplished.

She withdrew to her own apartments early to-night. She wanted no song. She did not want her jester, but she took Bertha von Lehmann with her to the disappointment of Prince Karl and Saxe. The Prince invited the Marquis de Vannes to cards after cursing the Burgomaster's niece underneath his breath, but Saxe waited, hoping to see Bertha when she left the Duchess.

He did not see her that night nor could he get speech with her next day, but on the following morning he saw her giving a message to a page.

"Mistress, when can I speak with you?"

"Why, now — Captain Saxe," and she dropped him a little curtsy.

"It is important and secret. The retired alley where we first met would be a convenient place."

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"Is it as important as that?" she asked.

"Will you come?"

"At sundown," she answered. "It is condescension, Captain, but not quite such condescension as when I invited a trooper to walk with me."

"And for all his rough exterior put pride in his heart, mistress," was the answer.

She laughed, and he wondered whether he had made a very clumsy compliment.

It never occurred to Saxe to wonder if she would keep the appointment, and this trust in her promise was a clear indication that she was not quite as other women to him. He was conscious of looking forward to the hour of sunset. Of course he was meeting her only for the purpose of obtaining information, yet there was pleasure in the thought of seeing her. He was to play the lover in order that he might learn her secret, and the scheme had a meanness in it which irritated him. The safety of many might depend upon his knowing that secret, but was there not an honest way of learning it? All day he had speculated how he could be honest, and the obvious way was hidden from him until the moment he saw her coming along the secluded alley towards him. He hurried forward to meet her.

"Mistress, I have been here only a few minutes yet the waiting has seemed long," he said.

It had troubled him how he should commence to play at being in love with her, but these first words came quite easily, and no consciousness of lying pricked him.

"You astonish me. I thought women had no interest for you."

"I thought so too," he answered. "I was mistaken."

"It is a pretty compliment. But for the failing light you would note my blushes."

"I'm not good at compliments," said Saxe. "What I say is true. You said the other day that some woman must have treated me badly to make me despise women so much. You were right. Another woman may easily alter my opinion."

"Was it only to tell me this that you made me promise to come here?"

"No."

"I am staying only a few moments," she said, "you would do wisely to come to the important matter at once."

"That you should not misunderstand me seems the most important matter now," Saxe answered. "You see how far I have travelled since the other day."

"I understand. Now tell me the real purpose of our meeting."

"Mistress, you make it difficult. I came for one purpose, but your presence gives me another, and between the two my courage fails me."

She paced slowly beside him in silence for a few moments.

"I will try and help you," she said. "You are curious to know why I am in Metzburg, what knowledge of affairs lies behind this pretty face of mine — we decided that it was pretty, didn't we?"

"You must pardon my former insolence, mistress."

"And to gain your end it seemed to you a good plan to alter your opinion of me, to simulate a new-born reverence for my sex and play the lover with me."

Saxe did not answer.

"Or perhaps it was not your idea, but another's. Your kinsman, Bergolet, perchance suggested the means

to the end. The scheme savours of his fertile brain."

"Bergolet is —"

"Is only a jester," said Bertha quickly, "and I fancy Captain Saxe is rather too honest a man to be altogether mean."

"Bergolet is honest too; I would not have you think ill of him," Saxe returned. "You have hit the truth, mistress. We are men, Bergolet and I, and we argue after our kind. Flatter a woman sufficiently by giving her homage and love, and you will learn her secrets. It is true in most cases. Many women have done their part in making it safe for men to argue in this fashion. Not for our own ends, but for the sake of others, it seemed necessary to understand your secret. I undertook to play the mean part willingly — no, hear me to the end,— willingly because I wanted again to talk alone with you. The reason — I could not have told myself the reason until I saw you coming to me just now. Then I knew. I knew there was one woman in whom my interest was great. Believe me, mistress, all I have said to you to-day is true, all of it."

"Captain Saxe, why is it so necessary you should learn my secret?"

He looked into her eyes steadily.

"Dare I trust you?"

"It is a strange question after what you have said," she answered.

"And much is at stake," he returned.

"You may trust me, Captain Saxe, in the same measure as you trust your own honesty. You tell me that what you have said to-day is true, all of it, judge of my honesty by your own truth."

"Mistress, you know that the Duchess has just passed through a grave danger, saved by the jester. She is

still in danger, though what her exact perils are I cannot tell. Only this I know, that the Guard is not to be trusted. There are whisperings and discontent. The men are ripe to be used against Her Grace by her enemies. Who those enemies are I can only guess. Can you tell me?"

"No."

"I will tell you more, judging you always by my own honesty, remember," Saxe went on. "There is a little band sworn to protect the Duchess with their lives. It is a secret band of men who are ready to obey me. Such men do not swear an oath together unless they are sure of the danger."

"Is there room in such a band for a woman?"

"For you, yes."

"Captain Saxe, you and the jester have a secret, what is it?"

"You told Bergolet you knew it. You were two of a trade, you said."

"Yes, but I am not sure that I was right. Will you tell me the secret?"

"I cannot; it must be kept in the Duchess's interests. This much I swear, heart and soul we are both bound to Her Grace."

"So am I," Bertha answered, "and I cannot tell my secret for the same reason. But I am one with you in all you do for Her Grace's safety. I am as ready to obey Captain Saxe in this matter as is any man in his band."

"Mistress, I thank you."

"But you are not satisfied?"

"Your secret might be of much service to us," said Saxe.

"It would not help you," she answered. "I will tell

you this, chiefly it is a personal matter, of no moment to anyone but myself."

"I must be content although I have achieved nothing," he returned.

"You may have achieved more than you imagine, Captain Saxe. I know you for an honest man. I think you are my friend, and I may sorely need a friend presently."

"You may command me, mistress."

"I shall remember, but I have also said you may command me. Is there anything that I may do?"

"At the moment, no, but —"

"If you will, I can come to this alley at sunset for a moment just to learn if you have any commands."

"I shall wait here every sunset," he said.

"And be watchful lest we are spied upon," she laughed. "We have both become more important since we walked here last."

She turned and left him, quickly disappearing from his sight at a turn in the alley. She was a born coquette, yet this triumph over a woman-hater gave her no satisfaction. Two thoughts were in her mind as she hurried away. What was the special danger which threatened the Duchess? and what kind of woman was she who had treated Captain Saxe so badly?

She was crossing a courtyard when a man came out from the shadows.

"Fräulein, your uncle, the Burgomaster —"

"I have already sent him word to-day that it is not convenient to visit him until to-morrow or the day following. That is again my answer. He is not so ill as his other messenger would have me believe, for I hear he was abroad in the market-place to-day."

"Fräulein —"

She moved to pass the man, but as she did so a cloak was thrown over her head from behind and powerful arms were about her. She cried out once, but it was a feeble cry, for the cloak was thick and tightly held. She could not cry again, there was no air, she was being suffocated. She would not be in the alley to-morrow at sunset. It was her last thought as she slipped into unconsciousness.

"Wait," whispered one of the men to his companions. "Wait until he has gone. Grip her throat hard if she seems likely to cry out."

Saxe heard no cry. For a few moments he stood looking along the path by which she had gone. He was not thinking of the ill-success of his mission, of his failure to learn her secret; he was only conscious of a strange feeling of renewed youth in his veins, and of the weary hours that must pass before the sun set again. For that few moments he was a lover, and nothing else; then he quickly left the alley — a soldier, a Captain in the Guard, and more, Captain of that secret league formed to defend the Duchess.

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CHAPTER XVII

THE GUESTS FOR THE FEAST

THE Elector showed no haste to leave Metzburg. His coming had been sudden and unexpected, he declared, but his going should be more leisurely. He did not mind a day or two passing before the Burgomaster and the citizens welcomed him at the Rathaus. The Duchess was convinced that curiosity concerning her marriage kept him; Baron Kevenfelt believed that he was merely emphasizing his importance with the Emperor, and did not wish to reach the seat of war until the exact moment when he would be hailed as a hero. Friedrich Wilhelm was in the habit of keeping his own counsel, and was not above delaying the limelight until he occupied the centre of the stage. Of the dozen men who had formed his escort, four had left Metzburg, two riding after the army on its way to Alsace, two back to Berlin, all carrying despatches. Perhaps there was some truth in the Duchess's conviction, and Kevenfelt's idea might not be altogether wide of the mark; the Elector's diplomacy was wide enough to contain both reasons for his stay, and many other reasons besides. He was afraid of the Swedes now he had left Brandenburg, afraid of the machinations which Louis of France might use against him. Also he had been astonished to find the Marquis de Vannes at the Court of Podina, and had wondered whether the Turbulent Duchess was being stirred up

against him. Perhaps it was this possibility more than any other reason which had kept him in Metzburg.

The Burgomaster turned this delay to account. Officially he spoke nothing but good of the Elector, but he set tongues to work in every quarter of the city, hinting here and suggesting there, and many who listened were dangerous men. For daily there were strangers coming in at the gates, mummers, fortune-tellers, acrobats and the like, ready to play their part in the feast of St. Winifried; it was easy for a robber to slip through the gates in this company, and once in, there were plenty of hiding places in Metzburg. Though the robbers had failed to earn that second bag of money which the Burgomaster had promised, because a fool had ridden into the forest to betray them, they might yet earn it in the city, and more besides, if men were careless and walked the streets singly.

Outwardly Metzburg was calm, small excitements being easily accounted for by the near approach of the feast, and Captain Saxe found no reason to give special warning to the secret league to-night. He was disappointed that Bertha was not in attendance upon the Duchess, but to-morrow at sunset he would see her, and the thought set his pulse leaping. He smiled at Bergolet when he passed, and cared nothing that he would be jested at presently for being a lover.

There was a serious tone at the Duchess's table to-night, and the jester's efforts did not avail to dispel it. The Elector was in a pessimistic mood, and the Duchess was preoccupied; only Kevenfelt seemed satisfied with the world as it was, and his good spirits did not prove infectious. The Duchess rose as soon as possible. The garden did not attract her to-night,

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but in her apartments the jester might sing to them.

"It must be a merry song, mistress," said Bergolet, "or we shall be in tears before an hour is gone. I never jested to so dismal a company."

"Maybe it is the effect of your jests," she answered, looking at him for a moment.

"Indeed, mistress, there are times when I know myself for a very indifferent fool, and long to be —"

"A soldier?" asked the Elector.

"No, Your Highness, a king."

"It is not easy being a king. What would you do were you a king?"

"Ah, I am not paid to give lessons to Your Highness," answered Bergolet; "but should your Electorship ever become a Kingship, summon me to your capital, gown me and call me a learned professor, and I will teach you your business."

Friedrich Wilhelm smiled. The idea of being a king was not a new thought to him. Had not Louis of France hinted at it, and after this campaign in Alsace, who could tell?

Only Bergolet remained with the Duchess, the Elector and Baron Kevenfelt, the other attendants were dismissed; but there was no song. Even as the jester fingered his lute Her Grace picked up a paper and handed it to the Elector.

"Those are my guests for St. Winifried's Feast," she said.

Bergolet sighed as if he were annoyed at not being allowed to sing, but he watched the Elector as he read the paper.

"A good list and comprehensive."

"The Baron is responsible for it," returned the Duchess. She had a purpose in showing the Elector

the paper. His manner might betray which name there interested him most.

"A very wise list, Baron," the Elector remarked. "I presume, Your Grace, if the name of Prince Karl be added to it, somewhere here we shall find the name of the man you will honour by marrying?"

"The Baron thinks so."

"Hopes so, Your Grace. Your loyal people are eagerly waiting for the feast."

"The choice is wide," said the Elector.

"Is my name down?" Bergolet asked.

"It is not so wide as that," laughed the Elector.

"That is a pity. There should be a fool in the list. It might suit Her Grace's purpose best to marry a fool. She could go on ruling then without any danger of interference."

"I don't think the list lacks fools," said the Elector, scanning it again, "it is only that they lack the uniform."

"Your Highness, tell me who you think are the fools," said the Duchess.

"And make a life-long enemy of the man who may presently become your husband! That would be to beg Bergolet's cap of bells and find it an excellent fit."

"Then Bergolet shall tell us," laughed the Duchess. "He has told his stories and sung his songs in many a camp and castle; he will have seen some of these princes and heard tales of others. Read out the names, Your Highness, and the jester shall fit them with a character. It will be more amusing than listening to the merriest of songs."

"Wait," said Bergolet. "I spy a trap."

"What trap?" asked the Duchess, turning to him quickly.

"His Highness has some friend's name written there, if I speak against that friend, the Elector is my enemy henceforth. Your Grace may love a man whose name is written there, if I call him a worm and no man, you may hang me for a scandal-monger. And since the Baron made the list, and they are all presumably his friends, he is likely to hate me a dozen times over."

"We'll not punish you by hating you, or in any other way," laughed the Duchess; "tell the truth as you know it, and if need be we will forget that we have heard it. Read out the names, Your Highness."

"It's to be the truth, little friend," Bergolet said plaintively to his bauble. "See that you whisper nothing but the truth to me, so shall I have a clear conscience though a whipping should presently prevent me lying in bed with comfort."

"Godfrey of Prague," read out the Elector.

"He is just Godfrey of Prague, I know no more of him," said the jester.

"Prince Rupert of Ausburg," read the Elector.

"Of him I could talk all night, mistress. He is a good fighting man with square jaw and steel blue eyes. When his blood is up he would charge an army, when his blood is cold he might hang his servant for dropping a dish. Romance makes much of him, but sober history has little to tell. His hair is red, too, and I like not red-headed men. As a husband he might be satisfactory, for camp gossip gives him many unofficial wives."

"A scandal I warrant," said Kevenfelt.

"My litt'e friend and I once met a lady who had been so honoured,—save the mark," said the jester.

"I said it was a comprehensive list, Baron," laughed

the Elector. "The next name is Bertram of Weimar. What have you against him, Master Jester?"

"Nothing. He is a student, so after my own heart. He has science as easy as his alphabet, and can order his wine in several languages. He is a doctor, for Greek and mathematics hold no mystery for him. He can read the stars and has foretold many things which have not come true. If he ever come to rule a kingdom, he'll pick his crown to pieces to get at the elements it contains. His sceptre will be a pair of scales and he'll force all his ministers to be chemists. As for women, I much doubt if he really knows what they are like. The universities much respect Bertram of Weimar, but the world has little use for him. If you marry him, mistress, you may give him a room, high up in a tower, call it a laboratory, and you will hear no more of him until some day a servant comes and tells you that unfortunately he is dead. I've heard of wives who like husbands of this kind."

"I know him," said the Elector, "and there is some truth in what you say."

"A pretty list so far," said the Duchess. "You expect me to entertain some strange guests, Baron."

"Prince Hugo of Baden," the Elector read out.

"I know nothing of him," said Bergolet.

"Stephen of the Palatinate."

"Were I a woman he is not a man I would marry," said Bergolet.

"They are both good men, Your Grace," said the Baron. "When there is good to tell of a man the jester seems to know nothing about him. I fear he has kept most indifferent company."

"Prince Albert of Wurtemberg," said the Elector, "what of him?"

"A man who talks much and does little, and has never been accused of keeping his oath. When he speaks of a man as his friend, keep away from that man, for he is not to be trusted."

"I know Prince Albert," said the Elector with a frown, "and you do him a scandalous injustice. He is an honest man, Your Grace. What of Konrad of Coburg?"

"A saint, or as near to it as a man may get in this sinful world," Bergolet answered. "Over their wine men may sneer at him, and he is no companion for a camp fire, but in distress many a one has sought his help, and in perfect trust a maid or a child might claim his protection."

"I swear, Your Grace, this same Konrad is a fool," laughed the Elector, "a mystic who misreads religion and whose saintship is only lack of courage to be anything else. I thought your wit would have led you to clearer perception, Master Jester. Then we have Maurice of Savaria."

"We know quite enough about him," said the Duchess.

"A wastrel, a man of small account," said Bergolet.

It was Kevenfelt's turn to frown. Here was a chance of which he had expected the jester to take full advantage.

"That is what is said of him," Bergolet went on, "but it is not all there is to say. I have seen this Prince Maurice. I think he would please Your Grace."

"Please me?"

"Indeed, I think so."

"Why?"

"He loves the sunlight and the green earth, he cares

nothing for what men think of him, his acts are often unexpected, and he is as inconsistent as —”

“As I am. Is that what you would say?” she asked, showing anger.

“I am trying to be truthful,” Bergolet pleaded.

“An apologist for Prince Maurice is something new,” laughed the Elector.

“And it falls to a poor fool,” was the answer. “I grant you he is a careless fellow, whose father even would give him a poor character, yet he has ridden a hundred leagues to stand by a friend in his hour of trial; he has gone hungry that some poor fellow of no worth might not starve; and no one can say his sword has ever been drawn on the side of injustice.”

“A hero to wine bibbers and profligates,” said the Duchess. “If he were ever unselfish enough to give up a crust he knew full well where to find a feast, and I warrant he has more often ridden in pursuit of a pretty hussy than he has to the help of a troubled friend.”

“Mistress, I doubt not he has sinned, but it may be he has repented. There are pretty maids in Savaria, perchance he has kissed more than one of them, and I doubt not they have boasted afterwards of the honour.”

Kevenfelt still frowned. This was not the way to make the Duchess desirous to see Prince Maurice.

“Are the women such fools?” she said.

“I warrant they don’t think so. In Savaria I would gladly have done some kissing myself.”

“Enough. I want to hear no more.”

“But, mistress —”

“No more I say,” and the Duchess rose angrily. “I would not have Prince Maurice in Podina, Your Highness, but that Baron Kevenfelt says diplomacy de-

mands it. Though he live for a century he shall never forget the time he rode to Metzburg to see a woman."

"I would tell you one thing more about him," said Bergolet.

"I will not hear it."

"But one thing —"

"Silence!"

For a few moments there was not a sound in the room.

"I should have been wiser to keep you a prisoner," said the Duchess after a pause.

"I thought the truth might prove dangerous, mistress. Did I not say so? The Elector frowns because I do not like his friend, the Baron because I know nothing of his good men, and you are angry because I would show you the real Prince Maurice. I —"

"Go," said the Duchess. "You will not come to me again until I send for you."

Bergolet went slowly, twice looking back as he crossed the room. At the door he paused.

"Say good night, little friend. We're in sad disgrace. We wanted to sing a merry song, and instead we are banished for telling the truth."

The Elector and Baron Kevenfelt left the Duchess almost directly. She was no longer in the mood for their company.

"You have a turbulent mistress, Baron," said the Elector with a smile.

"A very dear mistress, Your Highness," was the answer, though Kevenfelt wondered if he were acting wisely. If Maurice of Savaria was to be insulted when he came to Metzburg, better that he should not come to the feast at all.

As the jester hurried to his lodging, Saxe met him.

"Have you seen Bertha von Lehmann to-night?"

"No."

"She is not with the Duchess?"

"No."

"She was with me at sunset," said Saxe. "Not an hour ago I went to the place where we had met."

"Why?" asked Bergolet.

"Does that matter? What is of consequence is this," and he held up a handkerchief. "I found it in a courtyard she must have crossed on her way back."

"A handkerchief is easily dropped."

"It is trodden and soiled, Bergolet, and Mistress Bertha is not with Her Grace. I fear they were enemies who trod this handkerchief."

"Did she tell you enough to-day to suggest where we should look for her?"

"No," Saxe answered, "but she is of the league, Bergolet, and it is the business of the league to find her. I have passed the word to the others. In half an hour they come to my quarters."

"And in my lodging?" Bergolet asked.

"Everything is there," Saxe answered.

The jester hurried away. For a little while a dim light illumined the room high up in the round tower, then it was dark again, and silent, dark and silent for many hours, silent when the dawn came creeping in at the window. On a stool was a cap and bauble, on the bed a heap of scarlet and green, carelessly thrown there—the jester's dress. The door was not locked, but no one climbed the stairs to look into the room and then hasten down again to tell the Duchess that in the night Bergolet had fled, leaving the panoply of his office behind him.

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CHAPTER XVIII

PRINCE KARL IS HONEST

BERTHA VON LEHMANN opened her eyes to look upon familiar surroundings. She was in the Burgomaster's house, lying on a couch, and her uncle himself was bending over her. For a moment she smiled at him, forgetting how she came to be there; then she remembered and sat up. He turned quickly to a table behind him.

"Drink this wine, Bertha. It will do you good."

"Why am I here?" she said, putting the proffered drink aside.

"Because, overcome by a little excitement, you fainted," said the Burgomaster. "You owe some thanks to the good fellows who brought you here."

"I want the truth," she returned. "What is the meaning of this outrage upon me?"

"Outrage!" Von Lehmann exclaimed, and then he smiled. "Ah, perhaps it does seem so to you, ignorant as you are of the circumstances. Great events are going forward in the city, Bertha, events beyond my control. If a man will stand against a rushing torrent, he must be swept away; if he sees the danger, and has time, he climbs up a steep bank for safety. I had time, time to reflect that my destruction would serve no one, while by holding on to life I might do something to stem the force of the torrent. So I climbed to safety, and my first thought was for you."

It was in her mind to let her indignation have its

way, to accuse him of treachery, but she forced herself to be calm. She put out her hand for the wine she had refused a moment ago. She was likely to want all her strength.

"What are these events?" she asked.

"The sudden and fierce assertion of the people's will," he answered, "against which even the Burgomaster is powerless. All that is purposed I cannot say, I am not in their confidence, but it is revolution."

"You have not told the Duchess?"

"I could not stir a yard from my door without a crowd escorting me to make sure I was not bent on betraying its intention and thwarting its will. I have no means of communicating with the Duchess. Only by a favour was I allowed to send word to you. You were in danger, Bertha, because of your close attendance upon Her Grace. You were of no account except that you were my niece. I was allowed to send a message to bid you come to me, because I was ill. It was untrue, but I trusted that your love and gratitude for the past would bring you to me and to safety. I was mistaken. I was allowed to send a second time. Then, when you would not listen, the fellows took the matter into their own hands and brought you by force. Although the people will not listen to my counsel, there remains some respect for me. Their method was rough, perhaps, but you are safe here."

The Burgomaster sighed as if he were resigned to anything that might happen now that Bertha was safe.

"What will they do to the Duchess?" she asked.

"No violence, but they will get her into their hands and compel her to their will. Certainly she will have to rule as they demand, not as she wishes; she will have

to marry as they dictate, and have in her Council men who are of the people's choosing. If she persists in refusing their demands, they may go so far as to set another in her place. It is always difficult to predict what will be the end of a revolution."

"Do you suppose even a revolution will move Her Grace?" Bertha said after a pause.

"I hope so. She has often shown her willingness to please the people. She will surely be wise enough to yield now."

"And if not?"

"I will not contemplate such a contingency," answered the Burgomaster.

"There are some who will stand to defend her."

"A few, Bertha, a very few, and them I pity. If they show too bold a front, there will be blood to christen the new order in Metzburg. Poor Bergolet, the fool, may have sung his last song."

"And the Elector?" Bertha asked.

The Burgomaster held up a warning hand as he glanced fearfully round the room, as though he expected some sudden intrusion from behind a spreading curtain, or through some door concealed in the panelled wall.

"Softly, Bertha. It is dangerous to show solicitude for him. He is the spark that has set the train on fire. What does he in Metzburg? That is the question which men are asking in market-place and tavern, and there is always someone to answer that he is here for his own designs."

Bertha got up suddenly and faced her uncle.

"If the people are in this temper is it likely they will respect the person of the Duchess?"

"Yes — yes, I think so."

"You don't think so, but you care little so long as you are safe."

"Bertha!"

"Or is it something worse you are than a coward?" she asked.

The Burgomaster's face reddened with anger; yet behind this show of anger there was a malice he could not hide, and a cold calculation which would use any means to gain his end no matter how foul they might be. He believed he had put on the mask of righteous indignation, but his niece saw through it, not down to the very dregs of the man's character perhaps, but deep enough to hate him.

"I think it is the worse thing that you are," she said slowly.

"I would help Her Grace if I could, but I am powerless," he said.

"I would I were convinced that you had the will," she answered almost carelessly.

"I swear to that," said the Burgomaster.

"Then I can show you the way," she said. "If you have the will, I can be with the Duchess in less than half an hour, and no one the wiser."

"The house is watched."

"No watcher will see me by the way I shall go. Sit down, write word of this plot to the Duchess, and give me the paper. It shall reach her as surely as the sun will rise to-morrow."

"How?"

"Write the letter."

"What use when I know —"

"That you have not the will," she said. "Do you suppose you deceive me? You are a traitor, and of the worst kind, for yours is the treachery which lies

concealed beneath a mask of sincerity and friendship. Such men are cowards to the marrow of their bones. You think by dragging me from the Duchess you have done something to isolate her; you have but given the alarm. There are honest men who know something of your scheming, men who will bring your rabble to its knees, men who have dealt with traitors and cowards before this. When I am not seen to-night, the warning word will pass quickly from lip to lip; weapons will be naked and ready, and to-morrow, in spite of your rabble, they will be hammering at these doors, demanding word with the Burgomaster. I did not look to see you die the death of a traitor on your own hearth, or to witness a Von Lehmann dangling from a lamp bracket, but that is your fate as surely as I am here to tell it. I'll be honest, too. If a word of mine could save you from the penalty, I'd pluck out my tongue rather than speak it."

Rage and fear struggled for mastery in the Burgomaster. Had he been convinced that his niece had power to ruin him her life would have paid the forfeit, but at the back of his brain there was the thought that, if disaster threatened him, Bertha might prove his salvation. His clenched hands relaxed and he forced himself to humility.

"You shall understand how powerless I am," he said. "Others will prove it."

He walked heavily across the room as a man dejected, hurt by her want of faith in him, and went out. In a moment Bertha was at the door. Her uncle had locked it after him. She stood there for a while looking round the room, awaiting some inspiration which should tell her how she might escape. The window. So obvious a way must be guarded; but anything was better than

inaction. Half way towards it she stopped and turned. The door had opened again, and Prince Karl entered.

"I come to crave pardon," he said.

"For what?"

"Your manner of asking the question has not the spirit of forgiveness in it," he laughed, "and I think you know the answer. It is a woman's prerogative to flout a lover and make him miserable, but a bold lover makes his opportunity. Whenever I have sought to get word with you alone you have refused me so — so you are here. Love has used force. When a woman loves it is her way to forgive such violence."

"My uncle has just left me," she answered. "He tells a different tale."

"He is the Burgomaster, so is full of politics. I am a lover, only a lover, and we are alone. For an hour let us forget the world and talk of ourselves. Let us take up the story at the point we left it when last we were alone together."

"I wonder how you will do it," she said.

"Most easily. Bertha —"

"Stop where you are," and she moved as he came towards her so that a table might stand between them.

"You must not make it so difficult," he laughed. "I have a good memory. Last time you were in my arms while I whispered love, and my kiss was on your lips. It would be only natural to continue the story with a kiss."

"For a Judas — yes."

"A Judas! What strange dream is in your head?"

"Was I dreaming when you asked me to marry you?"

"You look so angry, Bertha, you would frighten a less determined lover; but I swear it only makes you

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more beautiful. Come tell me all my iniquity and I will answer it. We may be friends afterwards, and the kiss only delayed a little."

"You do not answer my question. I will answer it for you. I was not dreaming except as a fool dreams. I believed that I might be a happy wife. Even when you did not come to me when I expected you, I believed, thinking that my lover was no ordinary man. I came to Metzburg because I heard that Prince Karl was to marry his cousin, the Duchess."

"With mischief in your heart, I warrant."

"With a mission — yes. When you spoke of love to me, you aroused the best and worst in a woman who must henceforth be to you either your heaven or your hell."

"I knew it. Be my heaven, Bertha."

"Your wife! Now!"

"Why, Bertha, even convention cannot claim that a wife always means heaven to a man," laughed Karl, "and most certainly it is not so in the case of princes. It is true there are rumours that I am to marry my cousin, indeed she has set her heart upon it, not for love, that is not part of the bargain, but for State purposes. It is a secret, but I tell you in confidence it is not so certain that I shall marry her, and if not, some other princess must be my wife. It is one of the necessities to which birth compels us. But our heaven is outside such necessity. You must see that it is so."

"Was all this calculation in your mind when you kissed me?"

"Heavens, no! I was a lover and thought of nothing else."

"You said wife distinctly."

"Meaning it in its best sense and forgetting that I was a prince as well as a lover."

"And afterwards did you laugh to think what a fool I was?" she asked.

"I was aglow with my good fortune."

Her eyes did not leave his. There was no sign of the disappointed woman in her, contempt rather than anger was in her face, and there was not a tremor in her voice.

"And my uncle?" she asked. "Was he aware of this — this arrangement of yours?"

"Your uncle is — is just the Burgomaster," Karl answered. "After his kind no doubt he has speculated on the advantage of having a niece who is loved by a prince. I wager he would urge you to seize a golden opportunity, thinking only of his money bags. Truth to tell, Bertha, I am not very fond of your uncle, and in the future I would not have you see too much of him."

"That is strange since you visit him so constantly."

"State matters; and for your sake I would treat him as courteously as I can."

"I shall not see much more of him," she answered. "So far you are likely to have your desire. If truth can come from his lips there is revolt in hand in Metz-burg. He is far too poor a thing to sway men, that is a strong man's work — yours. Why not tell me all that is in your mind? My uncle locked the door when he went out of this room just now, so it is evident that I am a helpless prisoner — his or yours. Why not speak plainly?"

"It is the people's doing, not mine," he answered, "but it is true that they look to me to help them. My cousin has acted foolishly for long past, and with the

coming of the Elector affairs have reached the breaking point. I know that the people are right and I am forced to their side against the Duchess. Who can say where revolution may lead? I do not think it will lead to marriage with the Duchess; it may mean — Bertha, throw in your lot with mine. The world is changing. My cousin's Court, with its ceremonies, its jester, her imperious will, are things of yesterday. To-morrow — Bertha, I may have such power to-morrow that I shall be able to tell the people that I have chosen my wife, and so claim you before them all."

For a moment she was silent, then she laughed.

"To marry you would be a worse crime than to be merely your victim. You confess your iniquity without troubling me to tell you of it. Why, Karl, I would sooner trust a liar's word than your oath," and she laughed at him in derision, stirring the brute in him.

"There is a limit even to love," he said.

"I found it long ago," she answered. "I said I came to Metzburg with a mission. Partly it is accomplished, part of it is yet to do, if not by me, by others. You think I came to whisper against you to the Duchess. There was no need. She knows you for what you are and despises you even as I do. Marry you! Why, it would be difficult to find a man so mean that she would not rather call him husband than marry you. And there are men, men who are not mean, who know you for what you are, who watch you and are armed against you, who will ruin this scheme as surely as I helped to ruin that other scheme of yours when you would have captured Her Grace in the forest."

"You are a strange woman, Bertha," Karl said quietly. "You seem to hate me, yet until now you must have set some value upon my love. Did you al-

ways wear the chain I gave you until by accident you dropped it in the hall yonder?"

"Always. Love is dead, deceit has killed it as effectually as a dagger thrust which reaches the heart, yet for the sake of the past I would have saved you. I ruined your scheme, but the Duchess had no hint from me who it was who had plotted against her. You see how great a fool a woman can be."

"I understand how dangerous she can be, but this time I have you safe. A little reflection may convince you that you do not hate me as much as you imagine. For the moment I am content to know that it is not in your power to do me harm."

"You have men to deal with now," she answered, "and there will be small leniency for traitors."

"Brave words," he laughed. "It is the lady-in-waiting who speaks, the lady-in-waiting who has forgotten she is only the Burgomaster's niece, and the daughter of a merchant who was a traitor, a woman who could not face the scandal talked about her in Berlin. It is an unsavoury record, my dear Bertha. You cannot afford to be too particular. You will have time to reflect before we talk of these matters again."

Karl went to the door and called for the Burgomaster, who came so promptly that it was evident he had been waiting for the summons.

"We must keep your niece securely for the night, Burgomaster."

"There are good cellars in the house, Your Highness."

"That would be too great brutality for so fair a lady," laughed the Prince. "You must take lessons in gentleness, Burgomaster, or you will get a reputation for barbarity. If the lock on the door is strong

enough, and the window not within jumping distance of the street, the lady's own chamber will be prison enough."

"As you will, Your Highness, but I'll have a man guard the door, and one outside to watch the window."

"Well, I cannot blame your precaution. I like not playing the gaoler myself; you will see to that, Burgomaster. Come to me afterwards, there are one or two orders for to-morrow I must give you. Good night, Bertha, and good rest."

"You fool," hissed Von Lehmann at his niece when the Prince had gone, "why don't you conform to his wishes? It would be the making of us both. By to-morrow night he will be Duke of Podina."

"Let it be a cellar if you like," she answered. "They will certainly find me even there, when they come to clear this house of traitors. You would be wise to get clear of Metzburg to-night."

All the answer she got was a coarse oath. He dared not risk disobeying the Prince, or the Burgomaster would certainly have locked her in a cellar to break her spirit. She was taken to her own room, her uncle himself seeing that the door was secure, and he placed as sentry before it Long Joachim, who since the failure of the Festenhausen scheme had smuggled himself into the city, and had found good quarters, good pay and little work in the Burgomaster's employment.

"She's there until she's wanted," Joachim said, "and I'll look for some one to bring me a flagon of wine presently, eh, Burgomaster? Night watching is thirsty work."

"You shall have it," Von Lehmann answered. He could not refuse, but presently there should be a sharp dealing with these fellows who now preyed so heavily

upon his powerlessness. He cursed his niece again as he went to the room where the Prince was waiting for him. Were she sensible, what a strong weapon she would be in his hands to use against Karl. His face was black with rage as he paused for a moment at the door, but it was a cringing Burgomaster, ready to take any orders which might be given him, who entered the room. So easy was it for Prince Karl to play the strong man now that he had the promise of Louis of France behind him.

There was no sleep in the house to-night, and the robber Joachim kept his watch, caring little what the morrow should bring so long as he had food and drink in sufficiency. At intervals he heard his prisoner move, and twice the Burgomaster came to see that he was not sleeping. If men were abroad in the streets to-night they made no noise, and the dawn came, and the day, and still Joachim kept his post, unconscious of the eyes that watched him from the crack of an opened door.

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CHAPTER XIX

WAITING FOR TO-MORROW

THE Elector was to visit the Rathaus to-day that the good burghers of Metzburg might give him official welcome to the city. There would be ceremonious and set speeches. The Burgomaster would voice the welcome in high sounding phrases, and His Highness would tender his thanks, speak of his pleasure at visiting their beautiful and famous city, and declare his lasting friendship for their Duchess and this land of Podina.

The Burgomaster had said that it would be difficult to make the citizens rejoice at the Elector's coming, but he was wrong apparently, for flags fluttered gaily in the light breeze, and carpets and tapestries hung from many a window. The Rathaus hid its sombre time-worn walls behind a riot of colour, and the house of the Burgomaster showed tapestry and decoration at every window that looked upon the market place.

Metzburg woke early this morning. Men and women began to loiter in the streets not long after daybreak. There would be little business done in shops or market-place until the Elector had come and gone. If they had no great love for His Highness of Brandenburg, they were all desirous to see him. Some secured a point of vantage early, settling themselves to wait patiently; others moved about, leaving it to chance upon which part of the route they might ultimately find themselves; others again were eager to reach some defi-

nite spot that they might be with certain of their comrades, and manœuvred until they had accomplished this end.

By the castle the streets were thinly peopled, it was the market-place and the adjacent streets which drew the crowd. There the air pulsed with excitement, and Bertha von Lehmann, standing by her window, was conscious of the fact. Her room looked upon a narrow street which gave on to the market-place. Hurrying feet had passed and repassed under her window since dawn, but looking down she had noted one man who remained in the angle of an opposite wall.

Her uncle's sentry, no doubt, though the caution seemed unnecessary. Escape that way was impossible without help and a rope. It was the street into which she had let out Bergolet by a side door, a deserted street after nightfall, yet twice during the night the watcher had seen men pass, two troopers of the Guard in eager conversation. They conversed in whispers, had stood for some time looking up at the walls, and one of them had tried the door. The watcher had flattened himself in the angle of the wall and remained unseen. He was there to give the alarm if anyone attempted to escape from the window. He was there to do the Burgomaster's bidding, that and no more. These men might also be there at the Burgomaster's bidding, to see that he had not deserted his post.

Only with the dawn had Bertha become aware of the watcher's presence there; she knew nothing of those other two who had come and gone so stealthily. She had told her uncle and Prince Karl of brave men who would defend the Duchess and ruin their schemes; she knew there were such men, but they were few, and what

could they accomplish against a determined rabble if the men of the Guard refused to interfere? What could they do? What had they done during the night? Had even a rumour of the danger reached them? If she could only win free to warn them, and prevent the Elector leaving the castle! It was a subtle plot the schemers had devised. It was easier to persuade the crowd to attack the Elector than to make it turn upon the Duchess, but through the Elector, as the price of his safety perchance, the Duchess was to be brought to her knees. There might be even more in the villainous scheme than this. Who could tell how rebellion would end?

There was no escape. Bertha had realized this when the door had been locked and a villainous man, past all cajolery, set to watch it. If he slept, she had no tool with which to make even an attempt upon the lock. She was in darkness, no light had been left in her room, and she had no knowledge of the hour when the door had been locked upon her. She could not tell how long a time had elapsed between her seizure in the castle courtyard and her waking to find her uncle looking down at her. Possibly it was only in the small hours of the morning that she had been locked in her room. Daybreak came long before she expected it. She had thrown herself, dressed as she was, upon the bed, not to sleep, but to rest a little and be prepared for whatever might happen; and then she had opened her eyes suddenly to find the light creeping into her room. Perhaps she had slept for some time.

And from daybreak there had been hurrying feet under her window. All Metzburg was abroad to — to do what? There was some shouting from the direction of the market-place. Had the Elector come already?

It was too early surely, and that was not the shouting of an angry crowd. She put her ear to the panel of the door and heard her gaoler move, otherwise the house seemed strangely still and empty. Then she went back to the window and waited for the angry shouting and tumult of riot that must come presently. What had the league done in the night, those brave men who had sworn to obey Captain Saxe? She did not think of her own danger, nor speculate upon what her position might be a few hours hence. She thought only of those men and the Duchess.

All night long there had been a search for Bertha von Lehmann. One man, by strategy, had penetrated to the apartments of Prince Karl. The Prince was not there, nor was there any sign of a prisoner, nor news that a woman had passed along these corridors during the last few hours. Another, feigning drunkenness to protect him from too close questioning, had gone from tavern to tavern seeking news, hoping that some well paid villain might be making merry with his gains and grow boastful in his cups. Hans searched the house where Bergolet had been kept a prisoner, and bluffly questioned a woman there, who laughed when he had gone, thinking he was a lover hoodwinked by some clever rival. One had stood all night in the shadows near the Duchess's apartments, not a set sentry but a watcher of the sentries, a watcher for any man or woman who might seek to approach the Duchess. Two had wandered the city together, this way and that, Captain Saxe and Gustav. Twice they had passed along the street which ran behind the Burgomaster's house, and once Saxe had tried the door. They had lingered in the market-place noting that lights burned in the Burgomaster's house all night, but of course this

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might mean nothing. He was likely to be full of business preparing for the morrow.

Earlier in the evening they had knocked at the saddler's door and the old man's keen eyes had quickly recognized Saxe.

"I saved you from a sword thrust once, saddler."

"Aye, I remember it. Is Bergolet missing again, and are you come expecting to find him here?"

"No, it is the woman who is missing this time, Bertha von Lehmann."

"Lies, I warrant, same as it was with the jester. You found no jester here, you'll find no woman."

"The jester was here, Master Saddler," Saxe answered. "He told me so, and that the Burgomaster's niece had a secret way of escape."

"He was laughing at you," chuckled the old man. "That's what a jester's for, to make a fool of you."

"I tell you Bertha von Lehmann is in danger, saddler. She has been kind to you; won't you help her?"

"Aye, that I will," was the answer. "Bring her here, and I'll hide her as best I can. There are a lot of ruffians about the streets to-night. I've noticed it. It's this feast of St. Winifried brings them. It's always the same at the feast time."

"Shall we look in the room up the narrow stairs yonder?" said Saxe.

"That's no good as a hiding-place. Didn't you break in the door last time? And there's been nobody round saying he's got orders from the castle to mend it. Money is too scarce for me to pay for the mending. I'll ask Her Grace next time I fashion a piece of harness for her and she comes to look at it. In the Duchess's name was it that you came? I'll be sworn she never gave orders to have my house searched."

"We have no orders to-night. We are all friends of Bertha von Lehmann. Saddler, there is a secret way of escape from that room upstairs."

"Ah, that's good. Bergolet's joke, is it? Oh, it's a good one. Come and show me. I'm an old fool who doesn't know his own house though I was born in it, and my father before me. Aye, it will be main useful to me, this secret way out, when someone I don't want to see comes knocking at the door."

He lit a lantern and led the way. Saxe closely examined the room. Bergolet had passed from it into the Burgomaster's house; he might do the same and learn whether Bertha was a prisoner there. The saddler watched his search, holding up the lantern to give him light, but Saxe tried the walls in vain.

"Cannot you help me, old man?" he pleaded presently.

"I am, holding the lantern. I can see no hidden door with it."

"It's well hidden, that is all," Saxe answered. "Our being unable to find it may cost a woman her life."

"Finding it might be the death of us," was the answer. "Where would it lead to, think you?"

"Into the Burgomaster's house," said Saxe.

"And we believe she is there," said Gustav.

"With her uncle? Then she's safe enough," said the saddler.

Gustav looked at Saxe, ready at a word to seize the old man and force him to speak, but no sign was given. Once before Saxe had stood in this room watching the saddler and wondering if he knew the secret. He watched him now. Bertha had hidden the saddler on the night of Bergolet's capture, but it was quite possible that she had taken the precaution to preserve her

secret from the old man even as she had kept it from Bergolet.

"She couldn't be in a better place than with her uncle," said the saddler. "One of you's her lover I suspect, afraid to go to an ordinary door to ask for her, so come looking for a secret entrance some fool has made you believe in. Aye, that's the way of it, I expect. You'd be using me in your love affairs — me, an old fellow who's not thought of love for thirty years. You're a fine fellow," he went on, turning to Saxe, "and if anything could make me young again you and your love business would."

"I'm a lover right enough, Master Saddler, and I've a mind to go knocking at the Burgomaster's door."

And perhaps Saxe would have done it had Bertha been the only woman he had to think of to-night, had he not been forced to think of the Duchess too.

The saddler bolted the door when his visitors had gone, and muttering, blew out the lantern and went to his bed. But not to sleep. What lay behind this visit to-night? True this man had saved him from a sword thrust, but he had been with those who had used the Duchess's name without orders. He had stood by when a devilish officer had struck him in the face, and he had raised no protest. He was in the company of liars that other night, and that made him a liar. There had been villainy then, though the saddler did not understand it all, doubtless there was villainy in the wind to-night. They had come on a fruitless errand. They had gone, and the door was shut. He would not open it again before morning, even if they demanded it in the Duchess's name. Mistress Bertha would not be safe in the hands of scoundrels of this sort. If they had any business with her, she would have told him as

she had done that night when Bergolet came. So he argued and settled the matter, but he did not sleep nevertheless. He lay in his clothes hearing strange sounds, now in the street, now in the shop, or thinking he did. Twice he felt his way through the dark shop to make sure the night had not peopled it with danger, and once he crept to listen at the foot of the narrow stairs which led to that room above. He was alert all night, and was moving about the shop at dawn. Metz-burg was awake strangely early this morning. Why?

"Aye, it's the Elector coming to the Rathaus," he murmured. "I'll get no work out of my apprentices to-day. What's the good of his coming to the Rathaus? Aye, but folk have gotten up early. I'll be out early too. There's been whispering about the Elector. There's been — I wonder whether that big fellow is a liar and a villain. He might have misused me last night and he didn't. There were two to one. I wonder? Is it possible Mistress Bertha might not be safe in her uncle's house. The Burgomaster —"

He listened for a moment to the hurrying feet without, then he became stealthy, and with an iron tool, which he had picked up from a bench, still in his hand, he went towards those narrow stairs.

And with daybreak the men of the league met at an appointed place. They had no news of the woman they had searched for during the night, but they had overheard whisperings in taverns and they had noted things in the streets. Saxe listened and then gave his orders. The streets were filling rapidly by the time their actions were decided upon.

At the appointed hour the Elector rode from the castle, his own men, eight of them, with him, and an escort of the Guard with their Captain, Prince Karl.

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The sun flashed upon a brave company, and there was cheering as it passed towards the Rathaus. Some looked for the Duchess, expecting her to ride with the Elector, but from the first this had not been intended. There had been no alteration in the plans.

The Elector acknowledged the cheers, and spoke to Prince Karl from time to time as he rode beside him. The company went at walking pace, by a prearranged route, traversing many streets on their way to the market-place. At a corner, when the Elector and the Prince had passed, a little knot of horsemen, waiting in a side street, took their place in the cavalcade. It was an unexpected addition, but had been ordered, no doubt. They were men of the Guard, only six or seven men, no one counted them exactly; it was a very small addition to the company.

So they came to the street running into the market-place. The crowd had grown denser, and in the last few minutes the Elector's face had become grave and thoughtful. There was little cheering. It might be the way of these people to hide their enthusiasm, but he turned to look at the company which surrounded him. Surely with such a company there could be no danger from unarmed citizens.

"They do not shout easily, your people of Metzburg," he said, turning to the Prince.

"It is a typical Metzburg welcome," was the answer.

Just then there came an ugly rush, and a burst of roaring voices, but it was not a welcome. The Elector looked quickly at Karl, waiting to hear his sharp orders. They did not come. One of his own men pressed to the Elector's side.

"Sir, I do not like the look of things," he whispered.

"Nor I. Be ready."

Swiftly upon the first followed another rush, from another quarter of the surging crowd, and again a roar of voices — an angry roar. A thought flashed through the Elector's brain. Was this a carefully laid scheme? Having him in her power, had the Duchess dared to plot against him?

"Close up! Forward!" shouted the Prince.

The Elector checked his horse. To ride forward would only be to get further wedged in the midst of the angry crowd.

"Forward!" shouted Karl again.

The eight men had closed round their master, their hands on their weapons, waiting only his word; and then there was confusion in the company behind. The crowd had rushed in upon the horsemen, was separating them, carrying them to this side and that. But through the confusion came six or seven men, a compact mass; and as they came their swords sang from the scabbards and flashed in the sun.

From the Prince came a loud oath. Who had dared draw weapons without his orders?

"Back, Your Highness, we may win through," shouted a stentorian voice that rang clear above the roaring mob.

It was Captain Saxe. The Elector and Prince Karl recognized him at the same moment. He turned his horse quickly, making it plunge to hurl back the crowd, while the Prince, with half-a-dozen troopers, seemed to be swept aside in the rush, as he shouted:

"Curse you for a fool. You are bringing disaster."

For a moment the rush was stayed, and through the narrow lane forced through this seething mass of humanity the Elector began to move.

"The flat of the sword, not the edge unless I give

the word," Saxe called back over his shoulder, and the men of the league, and the Elector's men, nodded that they understood.

Then came another rush, men acting in consort, villainous fellows, and armed. Against them the flat of the sword could not prevail.

"Back! Back!" Saxe shouted, "or it's the point and edge."

An oath, then a flying stone which struck Gustav on the arm. A flash in the air — a yell — then blood on the cobblestones of the street. A mighty roar, madness let loose, surged up from a thousand throats, and the flashing swords fell, edge downwards, dealing death.

That roar made Bertha tremble as she stood by her window. The man still watched in an angle of the opposite wall. Again she listened at the panel. Her gaoler was still there. She heard him move quickly, perhaps that sudden roar had startled him too.

Long Joachim was not greatly concerned with what was happening in the city. He kept the post which had been assigned to him, and when the spoil was divided he would get his share. Hard jobs had often enough fallen to his lot, an easy one like watching a fast locked door was not distasteful to him. At early morning his flask of wine had been refilled and he was contented.

Yet behind him along the corridor there was a door which was not locked. Joachim was of no sensitive make, or he must have felt the eyes which had watched him continuously from daybreak. Stealthily the saddler had crept through the secret entrance, stealthily he had opened this door a little space and seen the man seated there. Yonder was Mistress Bertha's room, and he never doubted that this man was seated there

to see that she did not escape, and that no one came to liberate her. But the saddler dared not come from his hiding-place. It was not that he feared this man or any other man, but there were many others in the house. He heard them crossing and recrossing the hall below. A sound of struggle would mean a fight against odds, and how could that serve Mistress Bertha? He waited — waited, a set purpose in his mind, and in his hand a heavy iron tool which he used for his leather.

Joachim sat with his back towards him, not once had the saddler a sight of his face. He did not know whether he had ever met him in tavern or market-place; he did not want to know. He was Mistress Bertha's enemy, that was all that mattered.

The house grew still. There was shouting in the streets without, but within — silence. For a long time there had been no footfalls on the stairs or in the hall below. The door opened a little wider, then wider still, and the saddler came out on to the landing. Once he had begun to move he did not stop. Quite silently he moved, and quickly. Then Joachim turned. The saddler's suddenly lifted arm dragging the sleeve of the coat may have made a slight sound, but Joachim had turned too late. Down came the heavy iron tool, striking in the skull, striking with all the force of an arm which work had kept muscular in spite of age, and the robber dropped from his chair without a groan.

Quickly the saddler took the key and opened the door.

"Escape, Mistress."

"You!" Bertha exclaimed.

"The secret way, mistress."

She picked up a cloak.

"Dead!" she said, seeing her gaoler.

"Does it matter?" the saddler asked. "Quick, mistress."

So it was that, at the moment the men of the league had begun to use the sword edge in defence of the Elector, the one woman of the league was set at liberty to do her part. Wrapped in a cloak to conceal her identity, she made her way by side streets to the castle, a prayer on her lips that she might not be too late to warn the Duchess.

CHAPTER XX

SHOWS HOW THE ELECTOR CAME TO THE RATHAUS

THE Elector had drawn his sword to defend himself, but he had not struck a blow. Even in a supreme moment like this, he exercised caution. He would give none an excuse to say that he had led an attack upon the crowd. He gave no orders, not even to his own men. He was content that they should fight under Saxe's leadership, who was dealing with the position in the only way it could be dealt with. He had held back the sword edge as long as possible, but with the order to strike he had struck home.

It was soon evident to Saxe that although the greater part of the crowd might have come together with the intention of showing disapproval of the Elector, it had not meditated violence; but it was just as certain that another part of it had been organized for this very purpose. Bands of men had gathered in places advantageous for attack and best placed for cutting off retreat. They acted under appointed leaders, and at a given signal had moved from different directions upon the little company which surrounded the Elector. The conspirators must have determined that the Rathaus should never be reached. It was a plot against the Elector's life. If he fell in a riot, the crowd would be to blame, not individuals. A devilish scheme, the work of a clever brain, not emanating from some ruffian like the one Saxe cut down as he dashed forward to seize his horse's bridle.

Saxe was fully persuaded that it was Prince Karl who had given the signal agreed upon when he had called to the troopers to close up and go forward. It was not obviously a wrong or a foolish order; he would be able to justify it afterwards. The escort might have forced a way through the crowd had there been the will to do so, but the troopers had allowed themselves to be scattered, and although they were now attempting apparently to get together again, they made no desperate effort to come to the rescue of the Elector. They, too, were acting under orders, and it was significant that the organized part of the crowd made no movement at all against them; in fact, if the action of the troopers had any effect, it was to help rather than impede the movements of the organized bands by keeping back the rest of the crowd from overwhelming them.

"Keep a watch upon the Prince," Saxe said to the man beside him.

The answer was an oath as the man's sword swung down, and his horse, rearing, cleared a little space about him. He was of the Guard, and must lately have been in the wars, a loyal man fetched out of hospital perchance, for his head was heavily bound with a cloth, slantwise, giving him a fierce and sinister appearance. It must be a sore wound to need such a bandage, and only desperate circumstances could have brought him out of hospital so soon; yet his arm was strong. He had already drawn the fury of the assailants, who made desperate efforts to drag him from his horse.

"A good move, comrade," Hans shouted as he pressed near him into the cleared space. "There'll not be wine enough in our cellar to quench my thirst by the time we're through with this."

The great trooper laughed with the lust of this business, and then was struck across the leg. He let out a roar of fury, and two men went down with successive strokes and were trampled under the horses.

"Kill that devil!" someone shouted.

The same shout had come before, and there was a desperate rush upon the man with the bandaged head. His sword flashed this way and that, while Hans cut at a musket levelled at his comrade. Fortunately there were few muskets in the hands of the crowd, and those that had them were afraid to use them, so mingled were friends and foes.

Saxe glanced back as the little company, closing up to meet the onslaught, forced its way a few paces further through the crowd. Prince Karl, with some troopers who had joined him, was endeavouring to force his way through the mob, but they had not drawn their weapons and seemed to be careful not to offend. One thing was evident, they had no intention of attacking the little band round the Elector; they were content to let the crowd work its will. Then Saxe raised himself in his stirrups and looked before him over a surging sea of humanity. The way by which he had hoped to retreat was blocked to them. It was hopeless to attempt to force a passage to safety in that direction. His original intention was evidently apparent to the organized companies in the crowd, for they had concentrated to defeat it. At first the non-combatants in the market-place had hampered these men, but now the position had changed. The companies had come together and effectually barred retreat. With all the bravery and will in the world, Saxe realized that his men could not force their way through. Still standing in his stirrups, he looked round him and decided

quickly. The concentration of the attack might have done something to equalize the odds. A plan came to him, a manœuvre which might by its unexpectedness throw the enemy into confusion. It was at least worth trying; indeed, it was the only thing which seemed to hold out any chance of success.

"The Rathaus," he whispered to the man beside him, the man with the bandaged head, and the word was passed quickly to the men behind. The Elector nodded.

"Wheel together to the left when I raise my sword in signal," said Saxe, and again the whispered order was passed back.

For a few moments longer they fought against the men in front of them, as if determined to break down all opposition; then Saxe's sword flashed as he raised himself once more in the stirrups.

"Now!" he cried, and as one man the little company wheeled to the left. The crowd enveloped them, but it was a crowd chiefly anxious to escape the horses' hoofs. The manœuvre had the effect of pressing a mass of non-combatants between them and their worst enemies.

"Way there! Give way, good people! In the name of the Duchess give way!"

Saxe shouted the words, and his men shouted them too. They did not use their weapons. A roar of fury came from those who imagined they had concentrated upon their victims so successfully. They struggled to overtake them but were hampered by the crowd, and they could not afford to use the rest of the crowd too roughly; that might spell disaster to themselves.

The Rathaus faced into a street at right angles to the market-place. If they could gain its shelter, Saxe

argued, the door might be shut upon their enemies, or at least it might be defended and the Elector held safe until help arrived. It was not possible that all the men in the Guard, except the handful which formed the league, were traitors. He still looked for help. At any moment a troop might come from the castle, and even waverers were likely to turn loyal if the schemes of traitors seemed on the point of failure. It was almost certain the traitors had intended that the Elector should not reach the Rathaus, that he should fall a victim to the fury of the mob; the conspirators would lament the accident, and then proceed to force their will, as the will of the people, upon the Duchess. This seemed plain to Saxe, and he argued that no plans for an attack in the Rathaus itself had been made. It was likely to be a place of temporary safety at any rate.

"In the name of the Duchess, good people, in the name of the Duchess."

There was still magic in the cry though rebellion was alive. Granted a few moments speech, a strong man might have set one part of the crowd at the throats of the other.

"Forward!" cried Saxe. "Forward," and then to Hans beside him he shouted, "Look! He's afraid of his cursed skin. By heaven! It's my sword point for him if he comes within reach of it."

Hans looked. There was no doubt about Prince Karl's intention now. He was using every effort to bring his men to the corner of the street first. Whatever orders he gave were only audible to those who were with him, but he was even less careful of the crowd now than Saxe was.

The crowd was dense at the street corner, and it was the Elector's company which ploughed into it first.

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At the corner there was no disposition to fight, only a desire to press back out of danger; but beyond, in the street itself, resistance was to come.

"Forward!" said Saxe, and his sword was dangerous again.

"They'll shut the door against us," said the man with the bandage.

"Forward, and beware a rear attack," cried Saxe again.

It was the Elector's own men who protected their master in the rear. Saxe saw this and was satisfied. They would be less likely to feel any scruple in killing even Prince Karl himself if necessary.

The Rathaus lay not seventy paces along the street, but for the whole distance it was a fight, the most desperate of the day. The very scum of rebellion was here, known criminals who could not afford to be taken, who, once prisoners, would certainly be sacrificed by the very men who had used them if their own safety depended on it. What defence had they? On their word no man would rely; no one would feel justified in hanging the greatest villain on their evidence. They were men who lived by plunder and rapine, who had grown courageous in evil doing, and they fought now as if they were defending their last stronghold.

In the forefront were Saxe and Hans and the man with the bandaged head, three fighters who seemed instinctively to understand each other, knowing exactly the moment to strike with most effect, and the exact instant to shield one another. And of the three, if choice could be made, it was the devil with the bandage who was most prominent. Time and again it seemed that half a dozen weapons cut at him simultaneously,

yet like lightning his sword seemed to meet them, or Saxe's blade came to defend at the very moment disaster seemed sure, or the sweep of Hans' mighty arm accounted for some enemy especially dangerous. And close behind them Gustav and his comrades saw to it that none of the enemy slipped past the trio to take them in the rear. It was death to meet those first three blades, it was death to slip past them. Step by step the Elector was taken along the street. He would have struck now had any slipped past those in front of him, or had any come pressing through from the rear. From behind came no attack. The Prince and his men seemed still wedged in the midst of a dense crowd which, for the moment at any rate, held back those other organized companies struggling towards the scene of conflict.

The door of the Rathaus was near.

"In the name of the Duchess!" Saxe cried.

The shout reached the keepers of the door. Perhaps they made a mistake, perhaps they thought those whom they expected to enter the Rathaus had come, or the magic in the command might have affected them; but the door was not hastily barred.

Just as the little troop had fought its way to the door, a horse plunged and fell, wounded to death by a sword cut, and a yell of fierce triumph rang out, for the man with the bandaged head came to the ground. He was on his feet again before the crowd could get at him, and had his back to the wall, his sword effectually keeping a space clear in front of him.

"Down with him! Spit the devil!" and a man rushed in — but only to his death.

"Dismount!" Saxe shouted.

Every man was out of his saddle in an instant, and

the freed horses, rearing and plunging forward, drove back the crowd. In the midst of his defenders the Elector entered the Rathaus.

"Quick! The door!" cried Saxe.

One glance at the great hall had shown him that here was temporary security, at least. Once the door was barred, and busy hands were already at the bolts, it would take some time for their enemies to break in. During that time help might come. The Elector, as calm as if he had come through no peril, walked up the hall towards the dais at the end.

"Pardon the drawn sword, Burgomaster," he said, "but your citizens have chosen rather a rough method of welcome."

The Burgomaster was standing in his robes by his chair of office, other burghers on the dais beside him, and a few people were grouped in the body of the hall. Von Lehmann did not speak. The yelling in the streets had not frightened him; he had expected it, had been explaining it in his own fashion to those upon the council who had no part in the plot. He had looked to see a crowd burst into the hall, Prince Karl and guardsmen amongst them, unable to resist the people. He was prepared to hear of death and disaster in the market-place, a sudden attack upon their guest which his escort had been powerless to prevent; he was prepared to face a howling mob making demands in the people's name; but for the coming of the Elector he was not prepared. His face showed utter consternation, and his tongue, so ready with lies as a rule, could find no words of regret to utter.

There had been a yell of execration as the door was closed, now it came again in tenfold volume, and the door seemed to give inwards with the pressure upon it.

Saxe realized that the respite might not be long after all.

"To the dais!" he shouted, running up the hall. "Heaven knows how long that door will hold."

The Elector was already on the dais, but the Burgomaster moved suddenly to protest as Saxe and his companions mounted the steps.

"Captain, I—"

"Stand back!" Saxe said, pushing him roughly aside as he spoke. "Which is the door which leads to your private entrance to the Rathaus?"

"It leads only into my house and is private."

"Which is the door?"

Saxe had to shout to make himself heard above the howling mob without and above the hammering against the great door of the hall. The turmoil seemed to lend the Burgomaster courage, for he did not answer.

"Which is the door?" demanded Saxe, and his threatening sword compelled speech.

"That is it," said Von Lehmann, pointing to one which opened on to the dais behind his chair.

"See that he speaks the truth," said Saxe, turning to Hans.

"His house may be full of conspirators," whispered the man with the bandage.

"That way is only a last resource," returned Saxe in a low voice, and then loudly he went on: "Be seated, Burgomaster, and you councillors gather round your chief. Your robes of office may protect us better than the Guard. Sit, Burgomaster," and he forced the fat man into his chair. "I'll prompt you what to say, if I want you to speak, and see you say it quickly or you'll feel the point of this sword as others have felt it to-day. No protest; do as you are told,"

he went on to the burghers, who were inclined to resent his orders. "If you are villains, you have come to the reckoning time; if you are honest men, you suffer because of the company you are in. Will Your Highness take your place here? We'll see to it that every one of these gentlemen shall give his life in your defence."

The Elector without a word moved to the place Saxe indicated. His implicit faith and obedience had throughout made Saxe's task of command easy.

It had taken only a few moments to make these arrangements, and all the while there had been fierce battering at the great door. It was a stout door, but time or neglect had weakened its hinges, and its bolts had worked loose. It was not capable of resisting the strain now brought to bear upon it. The bolts were torn from their sockets, and the crowd was hurled into the hall, some falling and being trampled upon by those behind them. In a few seconds the hall was full, almost to the foot of the dais. The front ranks pressed back to keep out of sword sweep of the determined men who faced them from the vantage ground of the dais, and the sight of the seated Burgomaster with the councilors standing close to him, fear on every face, hushed the shouting for a moment.

Keenly Saxe noted the composition of this crowd. Organized ruffians were there in plenty, thirsting for blood and revenge, but there were also many who had been forced forward in the rush and were there unwillingly. Now there were troopers at the door, evidently trying to prevent others from entering, and for a moment Saxe believed the help he longed and hoped for had arrived. He was quickly undeceived when Prince Karl and half a dozen troopers pushed their way

to the dais. The Prince would have mounted it, but two sword points barred his way. Hans and the man with the bandage stood firm above him.

"Make way, fellows," he said fiercely.

"Stay where you are, Prince," said Saxe, from his post beside the Burgomaster. "Your place is with the crowd. To-day any soldier without a naked sword is a traitor."

In a moment Karl's hand went to the handle of his weapon.

"It's too late now," said Saxe, and then he whispered to the Burgomaster. "Demand of him the meaning of the riot. Assert your office or —"

A touch with the sword loosened Von Lehmann's tongue.

"Prince Karl, what is the meaning of this riot?"

The Prince was too furious to note the look of appeal the Burgomaster gave him.

"How dare you question me?" he said.

"Demand an answer," whispered Saxe.

"I demand to know. As Burgomaster I demand to know. Are you not responsible for the Elector's safety?"

"I was until that fool beside you drew his sword upon peaceful citizens, and infuriated the crowd. Do you imagine the Guard draws upon the people of Metz-burg, upon women and children? There are dead men in the market-place, and women trampled under foot. Order those villains to come down and you shall see quicker justice than this hall is often a witness to."

A yell of acclamation rang to the rafters, but not all the crowd shouted.

"Demand silence," whispered Saxe to Von Lehmann.

ELECTOR COMES TO THE RATHAUS 269

The Burgomaster stood up and raised his hand.

"Silence for the Burgomaster," Hans shouted.
"Silence for the good Burgomaster."

It was some moments before the tumult ceased, and the silence which followed enraged the Prince. He cursed the ruffians who stood to listen instead of rushing to the attack. Five minutes' work and there must be an end to this scene.

For a moment the Burgomaster stood there dumb before his audience.

"Speak," said Saxe, and in whispers he prompted him, his sword touching him sharply, if he did not respond quickly enough to the prompting.

"Good people, the Prince misleads you," said the Burgomaster. "I know there are many of you who have no desire to riot, but there are certain villains amongst us who have organized this scheme for their own ends. Your Burgomaster and your Councillors demand that all loyal citizens resist these rioters. It is only against these villains that swords have been drawn, and they will not be sheathed until His Highness the Elector is safe again in the castle. Honest people need fear nothing either here or in the streets. But mark this, good people, if there be any further attack, your Burgomaster and every Councillor dies here where we stand. We are a living shield to protect the Elector. Go peaceable, good people. I swear to you, Prince Karl deceives you."

The last words came almost like a wail from the fat man, and having spoken he collapsed in his chair.

"Your Highness has one chance," shouted Prince Karl to the Elector. "Withdraw with me from this hall and leave these fellows to their fate, or you have only yourself to blame if you are counted amongst

them. Your choice." Quickly. I have no power to hold back the crowd in its righteous anger."

"Prince, I have found my friends," the Elector answered calmly. "I have not yet struck a single blow to-day, but my sword takes its part now if attack comes, and God help you if you come within reach of it. Your place is yonder I fancy, at the head of the scoundrels who have made this riot," and he pointed with his sword to where a band of men grasped their weapons menacingly.

A moment's silence, then the Prince's sword sang from its scabbard, and a furious shout came from the body of the hall.

"Ready!" Saxe cried.

"It means death to me," shrieked the Burgomaster, and a contemptuous smile was on the Elector's face as he took his place to fight with his friends.

"Strike home!" came Saxe's order.

There was a rush towards the dais.

"Stop!"

It was a new voice which gave the clear command. The rush was stayed, even as the foremost reached the foot of the dais, for a woman stood beside the Elector — the Duchess.

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CHAPTER XXI

HOW THE ELECTOR LEFT THE RATHAUS

THE tumult fell to sudden silence. Every eye was turned to the woman who stood there, imperious, courageous, commanding. It might be only that silence which presages the fiercer outbreak of the storm, but for the moment she dominated the crowd and held it. As if she were fully conscious of the power of her personality, she stood looking down at the upturned faces, silently forcing that personality upon those who watched her. The Elector glanced at her, wondering how she had come there, and for an instant he speculated again whether she had schemed to entrap him. The Burgomaster, fearful apprehension in his face, terror in his soul, turned towards her, knowing how it was she had come. The door in the wall behind him was open, and near it stood his niece. In a dull way he wondered how Bertha had escaped, and realized that she must have told the Duchess enough to ruin him, enough to hang him.

Prince Karl and Saxe became aware of Bertha's presence there at the same moment. Karl's fury almost overmastered him, but he did not move. He had not to defend himself, but to accuse those who had drawn the sword unnecessarily. The Guard was with him, and was not Louis of France his ally? To Saxe, Bertha's presence brought relief, dissipated the anxiety that had been with him through all the strenuous hours since yesterday; it brought back the joy of life, it

seemed to stamp success upon the league he had formed. Bringing his sword to the salute he broke the silence.

"Long live the Duchess!" he cried.

From the troopers on the dais came a great shout, and there was an answer from the crowd in the hall. It was not a roar of acclamation, not that full-throated welcome to which the Duchess was accustomed, but it was evident to Saxe that there were many there quite prepared to fight in defence of the Duchess who would not have jeopardized themselves to help the Elector. Her coming had done something to equalize the odds.

The Prince had saluted mechanically, now he walked to the steps of the dais. Sword points again barred his way. The Duchess looked at him for a moment, then crossed to the Burgomaster's chair. The fat man sank lower into it as one who expects a blow and is too cowardly to attempt any defence.

"You seem to have lost all authority," she said. "I will take your office for a while."

Von Lehmann did not seem to understand, so Saxe roughly pulled him out of his seat.

The Duchess did not sit, but stood by the chair facing the crowd.

"The Rathaus of Metzburg stands for justice," she said. "If there has been injustice, we have had no knowledge of it; your Burgomaster is to blame. For the moment I take his place and promise you careful and patient hearing. Who is your spokesman? Let him stand forward."

There was a movement in the crowd, the shuffling of many feet, a low inarticulate murmur of voices, but no one came forward. She looked from side to side, waiting, then fixed her eyes upon a ruffian standing below her.

"Since you carry a weapon and still look hot with fighting, be you spokesman," said the Duchess. "You need have no fear. We are here to listen to your grievances."

The man pressed back amongst his fellows.

"You were one of the leaders just now in the rush upon this dais, but you are evidently a man of action, not of words," she said a little contemptuously. "Come, there must be some among you who know why you have rioted."

"Your Highness —"

"Are you their spokesman, Cousin?" she asked, turning to the Prince.

"I am Captain of your Guard, Your Highness, and speak in that capacity. Crowds will press in the streets if there is a procession through them. At certain points the pressure may grow great and inconvenient, but that is no excuse for drawing swords upon the citizens. There may be other grievances to deal with — I am not a Burgomaster; but this was the reason of the riot to-day. I accuse Captain Saxe and the troopers he has bribed to obey him. I accuse the men brought into Metzburg by the Elector, who himself stands at this moment with naked weapon in your Rathaus."

"When did you draw your sword, Cousin?" and she pointed at the weapon in his hand.

"A moment before you came, and it was drawn against the traitors who hold this dais."

"In a Captain of the Guard too much diplomacy savours of weakness and neglect of duty," the Duchess answered. "It was the duty of the escort to defend His Highness the Elector. You will not try and persuade me that he was not in danger?"

"There would have been no danger but for those who stand about him now," Karl answered. "The Guard was there to do its duty, not to attack a peaceful crowd."

A loud murmur of approbation came from the hall. Saxe watched the crowd keenly, and the trooper with the bandaged head shifted his position. He was strangely alert, the Elector noticed, and watched the Duchess as though he expected her next words would precipitate the danger.

"A peaceful crowd!" exclaimed the Duchess. "How comes it then that I see so many armed?" And she pointed in the direction of the man who had drawn back from being spokesman. "Did they come out peaceably, only intent on watching a passing procession?"

"I have said there may be other grievances," said Karl.

"And you are no Burgomaster. Come, Burgomaster, can you not tell us what these grievances may be?"

Von Lehmann made an effort to pull himself together, but before he could speak a man had stepped forward from the crowd.

"Your Grace, may I say a word?"

The Duchess motioned to the Burgomaster to stand back.

"Speak, friend. You look an honest man."

"A smith, Your Grace, and not one to push myself forward," answered the man. "I have waited for those who know more than I do to speak, but since no one will, why —"

"Andreas the Smith! Speak up, Andreas! We're with you, Andreas!"

The cries of encouragement came from various parts of the hall.

"Common consent makes you spokesman," said the Duchess. "Speak plainly and without fear."

"I carried no arms to-day, Your Grace," he said, spreading out his hands to show they were empty, "but there have been hints and whispers in the market-place and in workshops that there was dissatisfaction in the city. I looked not to see any fighting in the streets, but I did think there might be groaning instead of cheering. It was said Your Grace would use the Feast of St. Winifried to carry through some purpose which would not be for the city's good, for the people's good. I know nothing of that purpose, for we of the workshops take things as they come, grumbling sometimes may be, but loyal for all that. But there was another whisper, which it seems had some truth in it. What was he of Brandenburg doing in our city of Metzburg? That was the question. We have heard enough not to love him over much, and hold that, but for Your Grace, we should have been crushed under Brandenburg's heel by this time. What does he here then? And there have been plenty to answer that question. He was here to have his will of us, to bribe or force us under the yoke, to show his power in Metzburg. The people would stop that. The people would show their teeth because Your Grace had let him come and were therefore to blame."

"Aye, Andreas speaks the truth," said the crowd.

"Some of it seems true at any rate," said the smith, "or why have those who are with the Elector killed Metzburg citizens? Isn't that proof enough? Had we known there would be fighting in the streets, more of us would be carrying weapons. That's our grievance,

Your Grace, and we want justice of the men who stand there with you, ready to cut us down."

"And give us that devil first," shouted a voice from the back of the hall.

The Duchess did not know who was meant, and she took no special notice of the man with the bandaged head whose back was towards her as he watched and waited for the first sign of renewed attack.

"I know not who set going these hints and whisperings," she said. "Andreas the smith has spoken like an honest man and we would answer him just as honestly. It is true that I would use the Feast of St. Winifried for a special purpose this year. I thought it was well known to you all what that purpose was. Maids plight their troth on St. Winifried's day, and your Duchess would be one with the maids of Metzburg and name her a husband then. She may not choose quite as other maids can, and in this matter would be just a woman and no Duchess were that possible; but at the Feast she will choose and ask her people's acceptance of her choice; and this she swears, that no man who does not love Podina, or who is hateful to her people, shall have her hand in marriage."

There was a shout of acclamation.

"Andreas the smith has heard whisperings of some other purpose," she went on slowly. "I believe he speaks no more than the truth; but whoever started such a whisper has lied. If we find him presently I promise, from this chair in the Rathaus I promise, that justice shall be done to him."

She seemed so certain of her power that those who had heard the whispers, and had helped to spread them, instinctively sought to be inconspicuous.

"Also is it a lie that His Highness of Brandenburg

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is in Metzburg to aid me in any unlawful purpose, or to cause dissension amongst my people," she continued, still in a calm voice as if she were totally unconscious of the stormy passions about her. "He is our honoured guest, and to-day should have been received by you with acclamation, for he goes southward to war against the French, our enemies as well as his. It is true that in the past there have been differences between Podina and Brandenburg, hard words between us, but they are forgotten. Had His Highness not known that the quarrel was a thing of the past, would he have dared to enter Metzburg with a dozen men? Would he have been fool enough, think you, to trust his safety to a dozen men — eight men now since he has used four of them to carry despatches to Berlin and towards Alsace — if he were here for the purpose of raising riot?"

"Why is he here?" came the question from the back of the hall.

The Duchess's eyes quickly sought the speaker, but he was content to shout the question without revealing his identity.

"He is here as my guest, at my invitation," she said, a note of anger sounding for the first time in her calm voice.

"Then how dare he draw sword against us?" came the quick question.

"Aye, that's what we would know, Your Grace," said Andreas, who still stood apart from the crowd.

With a sudden fury which hushed the crowd to silence again, the Duchess pointed to the armed men who were grouped together, only waiting for the opportune moment to storm the dais.

"Do you, Andreas, and you who are honest men here,

associate yourselves with this rabble? Look at them! Have they toiled in the shops with you? Have you bargained with them in the market-place, or drunk wine with them in the tavern? Look at them! Is not the mark of their calling upon them? You may meet them prowling the streets in the night looking for a victim; you may meet them on a lonely road outside the city ready to attack an honest traveller; or you may find them lurking in the forest bent on plunder. What do they here in Metzburg? Where are your eyes, Burgomaster, that you have not known how these men have crept into the city to be the tools of those who have lied to my honest people, those who have attempted to undermine their loyalty? It was against such a rabble that the sword was drawn, drawn in defence, by these few brave men. Why the Guard failed in its duty and left the sword in the scabbard, we shall enquire presently."

It was an intense moment; the issue hung on a single thread which might snap at any instant. The Duchess had thrown down the challenge to divide honest men from villains.

"Ready!" whispered Saxe, and the man with the bandaged head moved a little nearer to the Duchess that he might the more easily spring forward to defend her.

The rush was imminent when the Duchess spoke again.

"I call on all who love me to protect me," she said passionately, "to protect my honour and dignity. The Elector of Brandenburg is my guest, and were he ten thousand times a villain, as my guest he is sacred. I call upon you to obey, citizens and men of the Guard alike, yours is the choice. I make my choice

here and now," she cried, turning to a trooper beside her and demanding his pistol. "I choose death rather than dishonour, an end rather than that my guest should come to harm in my city of Metzburg. Allow this rabble to have its will, and I swear this weapon shall take my own life. It is an oath. Is there man or woman in Metzburg who has ever known Sandra of Podina to break her oath? Choose."

Deliberately, and with steady hand, she turned the weapon upon herself, and waited. The Elector started forward in protest. Saxe barely prevented himself from grasping her arm, and a little cry, like fear, came from the men about her. In the hall was a moment's silence, then quick movement, a swirl in the crowd which bore the armed men backwards and interposed a body of unarmed citizens between them and the dais. Then came a murmur, then a shout, half stifled because men were afraid, brought suddenly to the edge of a precipice overhanging an awful abyss. Saxe, keenly watchful, noted the changed disposition of the crowd. Some men of the Guard were together in the mass before the dais, at one with the crowd in sweeping back the rabble. Prince Karl had not moved.

It was the Elector who broke the strain.

"Long life to Her Grace!" he cried.

In an instant an answering shout rang through the hall. A woman's sublime courage had conquered, but the Duchess was not yet content. She lowered the weapon, but kept it, and she showed no gratitude for that answering shout.

"There shall be justice," she said proudly, her head thrown back, anger still in her eyes, "there shall be justice and such mercy as we can give. Even the rabble may hope for mercy, for I hold them most guilty

who have used and paid the rabble. You bid me live; then am I still your Duchess, and I shall relearn your love by the measure of your obedience. You shall find me no more a laggard in demanding obedience than I am in ruling for your good. What grievances you have I am always willing to listen to, but no rioting shall force me to act against my judgment. I am your Duchess, therefore I claim obedience."

She paused, but there came no question. Her will held them, and she meant to drive the lesson home.

"Heinrich von Lehmann," she cried, turning suddenly to the Burgomaster, "you will retire to your house and remain there until we send for you. It seems you are too blind to do justice to your office."

"Your Grace —"

"At present I am not judging you," she said sternly, "but I doubt not I shall find men of the Guard, or failing them loyal citizens, to see that you do not leave your house until you are sent for. Go."

The crowd made no sign of opposition.

"You, Cousin, will retire to your house at Festenhausen," she said, turning to Prince Karl.

"I protest."

"It is not the time to protest but to obey," she answered. "It seems evident that, for a time at least, a new Captain of the Guard is needed. You will retire to Festenhausen. When I need you again at Court I will send for you."

There was an ominous movement in the crowd, significant that the Prince had friends in it. There was a murmur of defiance, but no attempt was made to come to the Prince's aid. He stood for a moment, irresolute, then sheathed his sword.

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"The weapon was drawn in your best interests," he said. "I shall think well before I draw it again."

"And, Cousin, choose the moment more opportunely," said the Duchess quietly. "You may find the crowd in the streets somewhat unfriendly, so you have my permission to leave this hall by the same way as the Burgomaster has gone."

She called it permission, but it was a command. Karl hesitated, then came towards the steps. The swords which had barred his progress were lowered, and he crossed the dais in silence and went from the Rathaus by the Burgomaster's private way.

Immediately the Duchess pointed to a trooper standing in the hall below her.

"See that horses are brought to the door yonder, and let it be known in the streets that His Highness of Brandenburg and the Duchess return together to the castle."

The man pushed his way through the crowd as if he would show by his prompt obedience that he was no traitor.

"Is it safe yet, Your Grace?" said Saxe.

"Yes, Captain. You may be certain that the news of what has been done here this last hour has been whispered in the streets. It is well to act once and for all." She had answered him in an undertone, now she turned once more to the crowd. "Good people, your Duchess trusts to your honour and your love. Make a way for us. We go with drawn swords only because villains have found their way into Metzburg. I carry a weapon to prove that I break no part of my oath. Make way."

As if by magic, a straight path from the dais to the door opened through the mass of humanity, and with

the pistol in her hand, the Duchess came down the steps side by side with the Elector, followed by Bertha von Lehmann; and, surrounded by the men of the league and the Elector's escort, they passed slowly through the hall.

Furious Prince and trembling Burgomaster had found the body of Long Joachim when they heard the shouting in the market-place as the cavalcade rode back to the castle.

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CHAPTER XXII

THE AFTERMATH

HORSES were in the courtyard pawing the stones impatiently, filling the air with the ring of bit and harness, and a little apart, as if his dignity were offended by their impatience, a richly caparisoned ass stood motionless. From beyond the castle walls came no stir of excitement; peace seemed to reign in the city; the storm of yesterday had melted into a calm.

Before sunset it had become known throughout the city that His Highness of Brandenburg would leave Metzburg on the morrow, that the Duchess would ride with him to see him safely upon his road, and that she expected all those who loved her to go quietly about their business and make no demonstration of any sort. Let them reserve their holiday making for the Feast of St. Winifried.

Some of those waiting in the hall remembered that other morning when the Duchess had ridden forth to Festenhausen; and when she entered with the Elector and Baron Kevenfelt, they were reminded still more of that morning, for just as she had done then, she called sharply for the jester:

“Bergolet! Bergolet!”

There was no need to send for the jester on this occasion; he came quickly, his bells jangling, his bauble in his arms.

"I rejoice that Your Grace has need of me."

"I hardly expected so prompt an answer to my call," she said. "Where were you all yesterday?"

"In a miserable plight."

"And afraid?"

"Indeed, Mistress, I was — afraid that you would never want to see me again."

"Did the noise of the rioting reach to your tower then?"

"It may have done but I did not hear it," Bergolet answered. "I was wondering whether you would send for me."

"You should have come, fool. Though I was too occupied to miss you, a song last evening might have soothed me and given me a better night's rest."

"Ah, conscience, conscience! Even a Duchess's will have its revenge," said Bergolet. "Never be unjust to a fool, mistress."

"Unjust!"

"Why truly, for you seem to blame me for staying away when your last words to me were that I was not to come until I was sent for."

"True, I had forgotten. I would I could always count on such obedience. You will ride with us to the gate this morning."

"Surely, mistress, you will not present me as a parting gift to His Highness?"

"It might be the wisest thing to do," she answered as she motioned him aside and called Saxe to her. He was standing with the men of the league ready to ride with the Duchess.

"Is the city quiet, Captain?"

"Yes, Your Grace."

"And Prince Karl?"

"He rode out of Metzburg early this morning," replied the Captain.

"Alone?"

"One servant with him, Your Grace."

"Evidently he has no fear of that ravine towards Festenhausen," she said slowly.

"Perhaps it is his unselfishness, mistress," said the jester. "In case of accident he leaves his friends behind him."

She was thoughtful for a moment, finding more counsel than jest in the remark; then she turned to Kevenfelt.

"Have the Burgomaster brought to the castle this afternoon, Baron. We will question him on our return. I am ready, Your Highness."

"A word by your leave, Duchess," said the Elector. "In private I have thanked you, but I would not depart from Metzburg without making public acknowledgment of my great indebtedness to Your Grace. Yesterday, but for your timely coming and your courage, I and those who were with me, were in so tight a place that I doubt whether by any means we could have won through to safety. The passion of a crowd is a dangerous thing, and I know that your life was placed in jeopardy to save mine. I thank you. For such a service words must ever be mean thanks. I would show it in some other fashion, but am poor in opportunity. There have been hard thoughts between us in the past, but they are gone and forgotten. I would be henceforth fast friends with Podina, not for the purpose of policy, but because of the reverence in which I hold Podina's ruler. I trust the necessity may never arise, but should Your Grace meet with difficulty, should the time come when a stout ally would be of the utmost importance,

you may count on Friedrich Wilhelm of Brandenburg, and I swear that Brandenburg shall give that help without thought of profit or reward."

"I thank Your Highness," the Duchess answered, "yet I want no thanks. I hold myself responsible for the actions of my people, hold that their dishonour would be mine. I have done no more than a ruler's duty."

"May Your Grace long be preserved to reign over Podina with such wisdom," said the Elector, raising her hand to his lips. "I wish you many peaceful days, and happiness and love, Your Grace. From my heart I wish you love."

A murmur of approval went through the hall, but the Duchess made no answer to this wish. Her eyes were a little wistful and strangely soft for a moment, a look in them to delight a lover. Then she took her whip and gloves.

"Yet one other word," said the Elector. "I have another debt to pay, to Captain Saxe and to his companions of the Guard who acted so promptly and so splendidly in my defence. Captain Saxe, I have Her Grace's permission to confer upon you the Order of the Eagle of Brandenburg; I have never given it with more pleasure, and no man has ever more justly deserved it."

"I thank Your Highness, but I have done no more than my duty as Her Grace's servant," said Saxe, as the Elector fastened the Order on his breast.

"You are fortunate as well as deserving, friend Saxe," said Bergolet. "In this world it oftens happens that one does the duty and another gets the reward."

"For your comrades," the Elector continued, putting a purse into the Captain's hands, "will you divide this

gift amongst them. The gift does not measure my gratitude. Gentlemen, I thank you."

He looked at each man individually.

"There is one missing. I trust —"

Saxe looked at the men.

"There were seven," said the Elector. "One had his head bandaged."

"Who was it, Captain?" the Duchess asked.

"A Guardsman, but his name —" Saxe turned to the men enquiringly.

"I did not know him," said Hans. "Perhaps he had been some time in hospital, and has returned there; but he was a fine fighter."

"You must find him, Captain Saxe," said the Duchess. "We will not let him go unrewarded."

"See to it, Captain," said Bergolet, "and if he is in hospital I will visit him and sing to him. With the Duchess's thanks, His Highness's gift, and my song he should do well."

"And when he gets well, Master Fool, he might give you some lessons in swordsmanship," said the Elector.

"And when I have mastered all he has to teach, perchance I shall join Your Highness in Alsace."

"Is that a bargain?" said the Elector, laying his hand on the fool's shoulder.

"Yes, if Her Grace has no need of me," Bergolet answered.

"As a soldier I think I shall like you better," said the Elector, "though even as a fool I wish you good luck."

"I'll go tell that to my ass yonder. He looks strangely miserable for all his scarlet and green dressing. There's a wonderful sympathy between us, and he doesn't know that I have been taken back into favour. An ass and a fool are soon made happy."

Once again Baron Kevenfelt watched a cavalcade ride out of the courtyard, but this time there remained no lonely ass to be led away by a groom. Bergolet rode sedately beside his mistress, a bright spot of colour in the company, his bauble his only weapon. The Duchess looked down at him as they went, remembering many things, the night ride through the forest, her interview with the jester after his arrest, the scene in the Rathaus yesterday. To-day she carried a pistol, but there was no crowd in the streets which led to the southern gate. Men going about their usual business stood for a moment to watch the passing horsemen, but there was no demonstration of any kind. There might still be a rebellious spirit in the city but it did not show itself in the streets.

At cross roads some distance beyond the city the Elector parted from the Duchess and rode south to war against Turenne, meeting on his way a small company going towards Metzburg — Rupert of Ausburg journeying to take his part in the Feast of St. Winifried. The Elector stopped to greet him and wish him good fortune, a mere courtesy, for he had other hopes for the future. His visit had been a stirring one, and he had passed through a peril he had little anticipated, but he was not ill-pleased with it. He had a new impression of the Duchess Sandra. He would still describe her as turbulent, but her courage, her resource and her personality were greater factors than he had imagined. More than ever was he desirous to have her for a friend, and he smiled to think how others, unconsciously, were labouring for him towards this end.

And on his way to Festenhausen, Prince Karl had turned aside to avoid a company travelling towards Metzburg, but he had not lost his interest in St. Wini-

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fried's Day. Other things might happen upon it besides feasting and his cousin's betrothal. He had still his friends in the city. Was not De Vannes communicating immediately with Louis of France? One real step towards success, and success was won, for the crowd was fickle and would as easily shout against the Duchess as for her. But for Bertha von Lehmann, yesterday would have had a very different ending. He was full of schemes and not without hope as he rode towards Festenhausen.

Hope may have been with his friends in the city too, but for the moment they thought chiefly of their own safety. A rabble did not listen easily to explanation. These men from the forest and the discontented idlers were convinced that they had been betrayed, not by the Prince perchance, but by some of those in whom he had trusted. They made haste to hide themselves in various corners of the city, and concealed their weapons, but the spirit of rebellion was not quenched in them, and a lust for revenge had been aroused. For the moment they were powerless, the crowd had decided for the Duchess, but a few days hence the circumstances might be changed. But for Saxe and that devil with the bandaged head, the rebellion would have been accomplished. But for them, whispered a ruffian to two or three comrades, but for them and a traitor in our camp.

Hope may still have been with those who had met so often in the Burgomaster's house, but it was safer to keep out of sight for a little while. So Kurd and Rahmer and Straubel gave out that they had left the city on urgent affairs, and hid themselves in a house close to the east gate, a house well known to Prince Karl.

The Burgomaster would gladly have been in their company, but he could not leave his house. He knew noth-

ing of that secret way through the saddler's shop, and every door was watched. Men of the Guard had become suddenly keen to show their loyalty. Many had not joined in open rebellion, others had been half-hearted, or had merely obeyed their leaders without any very definite idea, while even the worst had little ambition to be associated with a ruined cause. Whether her rule were right or wrong the Duchess had proved herself all powerful in Metzburg, so they were very careful that the Burgomaster should not leave his house.

Heinrich von Lehmann had not slept all night. He had sat in a great chair, a crumpled mass of humanity, looking vacantly before him, fear in his eyes. He had made an effort to remember the past, all he had done since he became Burgomaster, all he had neglected to do. It was a formal array of offences, for which he must find excuses, for which he would have to answer when he faced the Duchess's questions. For this action there was an answer so like the truth that no one could tell the deception; for that — what excuse had he for that? His brain refused to frame one. His coffers were full, too full for honesty. Even if the Duchess did not realize this, the people would; and he remembered how Prince Karl, in this very room, had drawn a picture of what would happen if the mob once had their will of the Burgomaster. What a mob his fancy saw as he remembered those he had cheated and deceived and left to ruin and starvation!

He passed the night in a waking nightmare, too terrified to move, too inert to tremble. He wanted wine to moisten his parched throat, but he had no voice to call for a servant, and his limbs refused to move. The streets were quiet, the house was quiet, horribly still. Was that dead man still lying in the gallery? Who had

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killed him? Who had helped Bertha to escape? Only Bertha could have brought the Duchess to the Rathaus. Bertha was his enemy; she had said she would not utter a word to save him. Where were the others, Kurd and the rest? Why had they not come to him? Together they might think of some scheme. How still the house was! How could it be anything else with that dead man lying in the gallery? And the lamp was burning low, the oil was failing. He must call a servant; he could not be left in the dark. But the lamp went out, yet he did not move, he could not. Terror bound him as with a strong chain, and he sank lower and lower into his chair, seeing hideous visions.

When daylight came he moved. His brain began to work. He could think. There were no excuses he could make for the past. Why think of them? His coffers were full; money had never failed to appeal to him. Every man had his price, it was only a question of how much. A little gold to the guard at the door, and he could go his way. He struggled from his chair and went to the door which opened into the narrow street behind. He offered gold, first a little, for he was ever a bargainer, then more, astonished that the price should be so high, then more and more, pleading desperately. And he pleaded in vain to men whose fear was greater than their greed.

"You cannot leave the house, Burgomaster, until the Duchess sends for you," answered a trooper, "but we have no orders to prevent your sending out a servant or receiving a visitor."

"Let me go and I'll give you —"

"It's no use, Burgomaster."

"But yesterday you were with the Prince."

"Some of us were fools yesterday," was the answer.

Back to his room staggered the Burgomaster where he collapsed into his chair again, and then once more he thought of Bertha. She was with the Duchess, she could speak to her for him if she would. Would she? He had done something to make her hate him, she knew him for what he was; but he had also done many things for her, shielded her when she fled from Berlin, given her a home. She was his niece, and in his necessity might remember these things. He wrote to her, a letter of such pleading as he had never written before, asking for that mercy which he himself had never extended to a living soul. His hand shook as he wrote, showing the terror that was in him. Then he called a servant. Twice, thrice, half a dozen times he called before any man came.

"Where are they all? Asleep?"

The tardiness in answering his summons had called up some of the brute in him.

"Gone, sir."

"Gone?"

"Afraid to stay," the man answered.

A fit of trembling seized the Burgomaster as he realized how absolutely his authority had vanished. His servants had fled, fearing to share in his ruin, perhaps eager to witness against him. He changed his tone.

"This letter, good fellow, it must go to the castle at once and be delivered into the hands of my niece. They are foolish servants to be afraid. To-morrow Her Grace will understand, and the Burgomaster will have more power than ever. There shall be good reward for your faith, my friend, now and in the future. See, here are some crowns, an earnest of more to come. Take this letter and bring me an answer. There are more crowns for your pocket when you return. Go quickly and

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come quickly back. Deliver it only into my niece's hands. You understand?"

"Yes, sir."

"Go. The letter is for Mistress von Lehmann, favourite lady-in-waiting to the Duchess, and my niece. Ask for her, and servants will answer you almost as quickly as if you had come with a message to Her Grace. You have done well not to run away with the others. Your reward shall be equal to your faithfulness. I trust you, good fellow. Think of that. The Burgomaster trusts you, and there are not many he so honours."

He babbled even to himself when the man had gone. For a little while he believed his own statement that to-morrow would see him in power again, and then fear came once more. The house was so still, even the city seemed hushed to-day. How long the man was in returning. The minutes slipped by — an hour, two, he lost count of time. He sank lower and lower into his chair, and even in the daylight the room was full of shadows, ghosts of the men and women he had cheated and wronged, not one there to whom he had done any good.

Suddenly the door opened.

"At last! At last! The letter — give me the letter." And then he fell back in his chair. "You!"

The robber captain with whom he had conspired in the back room of the Rising Sun stood on the threshold. He looked a peaceful, honest citizen to-day, had passed for one as he walked the streets, had so impressed the guard who had let him enter; but the Burgomaster knew him.

"You! What do you want with me?"

"Perhaps another bag of money, perhaps to ask you

about a comrade — Long Joachim; perhaps to talk of something else," and he closed the door.

The servant delivered the letter into Bertha's hands. She read it. There was no answer, she said, and her tone frightened the messenger. He did not return to the Burgomaster's house. He looked at it from a distance. Tapestries and flags were still fluttering at the windows, but guards were before the door. His master was a prisoner. Even Mistress von Lehmann, his niece, would send no message to him. How was it possible that he should come to power again to-morrow? The servant turned away, jingling the crowns in his pocket, and went to friends he had in another part of the city.

Bertha had sent no answer. The letter was almost an insult after what had happened, after what she had suffered at her uncle's hands, and what he was perfectly willing she should suffer. But she read the letter again, noted the trembling writing, realized the terror of the man who had penned this appeal. He was her uncle. That he was black to the very heart of him, a traitor through and through, could not alter this fact. He was her uncle; and when the Duchess returned she showed her the letter.

"Are you pleading for him, child?" the Duchess asked when she had read it.

"Perhaps Your Grace can punish but be a little merciful too."

"I owe you much, Bertha, for yesterday. Leave the letter with me. I will remember it when I question the Burgomaster presently."

Bertha thanked her and went out, meeting Baron Kevenfelt on his way to the Duchess.

"Her Grace is alone," she answered to his enquiry. The Duchess looked up as the Baron entered.

"Have you had the Burgomaster brought to the castle?" she asked.

"Your Grace, I sent to fetch him. He was alone, lying upon the hearth — dead."

"Murdered do you mean?"

"I am making enquiries, but I do not think it was murder. I think it was fear that killed him."

The Duchess looked at the letter in her hand. Was it possible a man could die of fear?

And even at this hour the robber captain was talking eagerly to two companions in the miserable wine cellar where they had found a refuge. He was telling his story in excited tones, and in the manner of a man who had received a shock from which he had not yet recovered.

"I went to him. He was alone, afraid, doubly afraid when he saw me. That pleased me. I played with him, laughed at him, as I proved him a traitor. He had no answer. He sat staring straight before him as if he saw shapes in the room behind me, and he seemed to shrink lower into his chair. It was horrible to see, and the hand that fingered the knife with which I was to despatch him trembled. I had to glance behind me to make sure there was nothing there. And suddenly, quite suddenly he stood up, and a sound like the whine of a wounded animal came from him. Then a louder cry that was like nothing I had ever heard, and his hands shot out as if to grasp something, and he fell upon the hearth. Death had struck him; there was no need for my knife. Give me some drink, plenty of it. I'll be trembling with terror all night unless I can drink deep enough to forget the Burgomaster."

CHAPTER XXIII

THE BEGINNING OF THE FEAST

SEARCH was made for Straubel, Rahmer and Kurd, but no one knew of that house towards the eastern gate. A few malcontents who had carried arms in the crowd were seized and locked up to prevent their doing further mischief, and others, under various guises, had succeeded in slinking through the gates and making for their lairs in the forest. The robber captain was amongst them. While he remained in the city even deep drinking could not dispel a constant fear of what might be behind him.

For the time being Saxe acted as chief Captain of the Guard. Certain men he had ordered to keep to barracks, he was watchful of others, but he was at pains to show that his faith was not really shaken. The league was not disbanded, however, and its members were always so placed that they could quickly come together in an emergency. A new Burgomaster had been hastily appointed, for during the feast there was much for a Burgomaster to do. Altogether it was difficult to remember that rebellion had seethed in the streets and market-place so recently.

Yet there was excitement in Metzberg, crowds were in the streets from dawn to dusk, a slackness was evident in the workshops that had not yet frankly closed their shutters, for the Feast of St. Winifried had commenced. From every window, carpets and tapestries

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hung, many of rich texture and exquisite workmanship. Flags fluttered gaily in the breeze, and the market-place was turned into a playground. There were none too proud to take a part in the festival, none so poor that they could not exhibit some piece of coloured bunting. Clad in holiday attire, men, women and children were out to enjoy themselves. They crowded about the booths, watched the mummers in some miracle play, marvelled at the agility of loose-limbed tumblers, were mystified by subtle conjurers, and gathered to hear the song of some wandering minstrel, doubting if the Duchess's jester Bergolet were half as clever. For long past money had been set aside to spend lavishly during the feast, for there were many desirable things to purchase from stalls, and many booths with strange sights to be seen within; here some wonder from the East, there some marvel which until now had only been seen by kings and princes, so it was said. Within this booth you might see the only astrologer who had ever made gold from base metal, and he would sell you, in a strangely sealed bottle, not actually the elixir of life, perhaps, but a potion almost as good. Behind this canvas sat an old dame, sore stricken in years apparently, who talked of Egypt and the long past, one who would tell of the future by looking at your hand or by cards, or by watching how the sand fell when shaken over her square of carpet. She was hard worked was this ancient dame, for she was learned in the lore of love and lovers, and was not love the very spirit of this feast? There were girls in plenty who would say yes on St. Winifried's Day, some with more than one lover to choose from; there might come some guidance in the choice by listening to the fortune-teller.

Then for the men there were sports, trials of skill

and of strength, while sparkling eyes looked on ready to praise the victor, equally ready to console and find excuse for the vanquished, for such is the way of women. On every side there was something worth seeing or hearing, and every hour brought some new interest. The Duchess herself had ridden amongst the booths this morning, a smile on her lips and no pistol in her hand to-day. People had turned from their amusements to run and welcome her. She, too, was a maid of Metzburg and would be betrothed on St. Winifried's Day. She, too, like some other maids, had many lovers. To-day and yesterday and the day before they had arrived in the city, little companies each with its central figure who might presently be the Duke.

"Aye, but there's sadness behind her pretty smile," said one old woman after the Duchess had passed. "I doubt if she's found a lover amongst them."

"Why should she not, mother?"

"Maybe the man she could love wouldn't suit us for a Duke," was the answer. "All those who have come to Metzburg may be good enough for a Duke, but that doesn't mean they're good enough for lovers."

"She can do as she likes, she's a Duchess," said a young girl who had two swains in close attendance.

"That's the very reason she can't."

"I would if I were a Duchess."

One of the two with her whispered in her ear.

"No, not till St. Winifried's Day; I'll tell you then," laughed the girl, and her other lover seemed to take fresh courage as the trio went its way.

"Well, I'm for Rupert of Ausburg," said one. "I liked his laugh when he came amongst the booths yesterday."

"And I'm for Konrad of Coburg," said another.

"I was all for Prince Karl at one time," said an old man. "It would have been a natural marriage, that would."

"Natural or unnatural it's done with," said another. "Myself I incline to Maurice of Savaria."

"But you haven't seen him."

"I've heard of him."

"That's all you're likely to do," was the answer. "He's not come to Metzburg, and there's a rumour that he won't come."

"Not come! That's an insult to the Duchess."

"Maybe we'd pay him for it if we had him here," was the answer, "but we can't if he keeps out of Metzburg."

And then some new excitement attracted their attention and banished everything from their minds but the delights of the passing hour.

The afternoon shadows were growing longer in the market-place when Saxe walked slowly through the booths. He stood for a moment to look at a tumbler, and then passed on to the edge of the crowd gathered to watch a play which was about to commence, a morality play which a leather-lunged mummer had just declared had thrilled all Europe, and had even penetrated into the land of the Scythians. Saxe had come out to catch the general tone of the crowd, to assure himself there was no danger of renewed rebellion; and he had heard nothing to trouble him. He might have continued to stand on the edge of the crowd to watch the play, had not a closely cloaked figure come suddenly from a neighbouring booth. The crowd was so intent on the play that she would have passed unnoticed except for Saxe.

"Fräulein!"

She stopped, looked back at the booth for a moment, but made no attempt to conceal her identity.

"I doubt if it is very wise for you to be alone in the market-place, Mistress Bertha."

"I have passed quite unnoticed until now, until you saw me," she answered. "I have been to the church yonder to pray."

"I had forgotten," said Saxe. "The Burgomaster was your uncle."

"I do not grieve, Captain. He was a traitor, and might have plotted mischief more successfully had he lived; but he is dead, therefore I have prayed for him, and for the Duchess too."

"For the Duchess!"

"Indeed, I think she needs our prayers. Is she not to be betrothed directly, and I do not think she is in love with any of the Princes who have come to Metz-burg."

"There are penalties for being a Duchess," said Saxe.

"That is why I prayed for her," she answered.

"And after that?" he asked, glancing back at the booth she had just left.

"I am returning to the castle. Oh, no, not quite by the shortest route. It pleased me to look at the booths, even as it has pleased you. Are you returning to the castle, Captain?"

He turned and walked with her.

"I do not like you to go alone," he said, and then after a pause, "Did the gipsy give you good fortune?"

"The gipsy!"

"I saw you come from her tent. It astonished me, for do you not tell fortunes yourself? Bergolet told me you did."

"And told one to some purpose, Captain, although I

remember you were a little — a little brutal at the time."

"And have suffered remorse, mistress. Was the Egyptian's tale to some purpose just now?"

"How can I tell yet?"

"I thought you too wise to believe in such foolery."

"Perhaps I am, but you must not blame me if I am touched with the spirit of the feast."

"Blame you! Why, St. Winifried has even got into the blood of a rough fellow like me."

"Have you visited the tent of the fortune-teller?"

"No."

"She might — But I forgot, you hate women. Indeed, Captain, I think it would be quite safe for me to return to the castle alone."

"Did she promise you a husband, mistress?" asked Saxe, taking no notice of the suggestion that he should leave her.

"Why, of course; if she is pleased with your coin a gipsy will always do that. A husband, I should think so, and a mate to make one a man-hater for ever. He was fierce to look at, she said, a barbarian, coarse and rude in his speech, with a temper to match. He would love me after his fashion, but it would be a strange fashion. When he was pleased he would give me kisses that repelled me, and when he was angry he would beat me until he brought me to my senses."

"Heaven save you from such a fate as that."

"Heaven may have inspired the gipsy to tell me the truth," she answered.

"Then, mistress, I would conspire to defeat it."

"But how?"

"There are more ways than one. I might persuade the Duchess that no such barbarian should be allowed to enter Metzburg, and take care that Mistress Von

Lehmann should not run into danger by leaving the city; or I might wait for him beyond the gates and fight with him; but —”

“The gipsy said he was a great fighter, you might —”

“If we fought I should win, my heart tells me so, and the beasts from the forest would devour him. But there is a third way. I tell Mistress Bertha that I am no longer a hater of women — of one woman.”

“She is surprised at the power of St. Winifried, Captain.”

“It was the power of the woman herself,” Saxe answered. “I am a rough soldier, mistress, you know it, I need not tell you that. At times I can speak roughly, you know that too. Indeed, I think you know the worst of me. Believe me, I could be very gentle to a woman. Once, long ago, I loved, but she proved unworthy. It is true, mistress, and it is so long ago that it does not matter saying it now. She is dead, God rest her. Since then I have been called a woman-hater, with reason no doubt; but love has only been waiting, growing silently to be ready for some woman when she came — if she ever came. She did, Mistress, when you condescended to speak to a trooper of the Guard.”

“It was condescension, Captain.”

“I am not learned in the difference between rank and rank, but surely love might bridge whatever gulf lies between Mistress von Lehmann and a Captain in the Guard. Remember, I am no longer a trooper, I am a Captain, and Her Grace has almost promised me greater promotion. Besides, have I not the Eagle of Brandenburg? That would give my wife position wherever the Elector is powerful.”

“And in your own country, Captain Saxe?”

"Some day we may go there. We must talk of it."

"And my position there?"

"I can promise you the reverence due to the wife of an honest man."

"Yes, yes, I believe that," she said, "but I had looked higher than a Captain in the Guard."

"I think you could not have looked too high, mistress, but it is a Captain in the Guard who loves you."

"Indeed, there is much to talk about," she said quickly. "You say I know the worst of you, I think it is true, but what do you know of me?"

"All that a man needs to know. I know that you are brave and loyal. I know that you are beautiful. I have looked into your eyes and seen love there, deep down perhaps, hard to come by, but I am content."

"You have much yet to learn."

"You shall teach me when you will," he answered.

"And then you may hate me."

"Bertha! Bertha, a word, a promise, give it me now."

"No, no. I must tell you all first."

"Now, Bertha, give me the promise now."

"No," she answered quickly. "At least I will claim the privilege of a Metzburg maid. Wait, wait until St. Winifried's Day."

As they crossed one of the castle courtyards presently, Bergolet saw them, but they were unconscious of the fact. The jester smiled and slipped away quickly. He would not break their idyll, and his brain was full of his own affairs. He found it difficult to be merry at the very time when he ought to have found jesting so easy. Was it not a humorous thing that these princes should have come a-wooing, and without quarrelling amongst themselves, should vie with one another for a

woman's favour and patiently await her choice? To all of them her choice was a matter of moment, else would they not have come to Metzburg. To win the famous Duchess — the Turbulent Duchess — would be an achievement in itself; to become Duke of Podina would be a diplomatic triumph likely to have far-reaching effects; and doubtless in the hearts of one or two of them she had stirred real love, so that mere triumph and achievement were forgotten. These princes had much to gain and nothing to lose, therefore there was no anger that she used the Feast of St. Winifried for the purpose of her betrothal. Had not Rupert of Ausburg toasted his rivals in the Duchess's presence, and declared that the mere fact that she had invited them to Metzburg, deeming them worthy to be suitors, had bound them in a brotherhood which should not be broken, no matter to which of them she should give her favour? Yes, there was humour in the situation, yet Bergolet could not be merry over it, and had kept in corners and stayed in his tower as much as possible.

Once he had looked at the clothes which he had worn, when, taken for spies at the tavern of the Three Shields, he and Saxe had been dragged before the Duchess. It was not so very long ago, but how long it seemed. How much had happened since then. And before that how much happened. Bertha von Lehmann, playing the fortune-teller, had pretended to read his past; she exaggerated, oh, yes, she greatly exaggerated, but there was enough truth in it for bitterness. He remembered that she had said nothing of his virtues, surely she could have told of some, but he was in the mood to think only of his worst side. Little things that, as a man, would have troubled him not at all, become magnified in his eyes as a lover.

"Man is a poor thing when judged from the high standard of a good and brave woman," he murmured. "It might be well to put on these clothes, slip quietly out of Metzburg, and forget that I ever had the honour of being her fool."

But he did not strip off the scarlet and green, and presently put away the sombre suit. How could he go away? How could he forget?

There was hardly an hour now in which such introspection did not come to him. The sight of Saxe and Bertha — lovers surely — had made him smile for a moment, but he was quickly grave again as he went towards the Duchess's apartments. She would be expecting him at this hour. She was full of business in these days, but this was her quiet hour before she prepared to take her place in the evening festivities. He had a song ready to soothe her.

Suddenly he encountered Baron Kevenfelt walking slowly, and as grave of face as he was himself.

"Bergolet!" said the Baron, stopping in his walk. "You look strangely solemn, Bergolet."

"It is the way with a fool when he stops to think," was the answer.

"And I am grave too, Master Bergolet. It is the way with a wise man when he has been made a fool of. My messenger has returned from Savaria."

"And Prince Maurice refuses to come?"

"He will not be here. He is not to be found."

"Can you wonder at it? He is a wastrel, and I said at the first he was no fit mate for our Duchess. Doubtless he is speeding upon some journey half across Europe to pay some pretty woman a compliment. Have you told the Duchess he will not come?"

"Yes."

"Was she sorrowful at the news?"

"No, glad. Had he come she would only have been rude to him, she declared. You have not talked to her about him to much purpose, Bergolet."

"I have done my best. Perhaps she is not so glad as she declares."

"The fact remains that he will not be here," said the Baron, "and I am at a loss how to advise her."

"Take counsel for once from a fool. Do not advise her at all. A woman sees clearer into the heart of a man than any Minister can do." And with a jingle of bells he went his way.

"Perhaps he is right," mused Kevenfelt, gazing after the jester's retreating figure.

The Duchess was alone when Bergolet entered.

"Fool, come and talk folly," she said. "I see so many new faces in these days that the sight of an old friend is a relief."

"But why talk folly?"

"I have no use for a serious fool just now," she answered. "Why should you be serious? Is there some minstrel in the market-place who you think may rival you?"

"No, mistress. I was thinking of Prince Karl's friends. I hear they have not been found."

"They are too intent on hiding themselves to do mischief," she answered.

"And the Marquis de Vannes?"

"Has gone back to his master," said the Duchess.

"Then Podina is not to have a Duke out of France," said Bergolet; "that is excellent news. Shall I sing to you?"

"No. My ear for melody has gone. Life is a discord."

"Your Grace must have made your choice to speak so certainly. Surely nothing else could make you so despondent."

"I think I have," she answered. "Come, Bergolet, call them all to mind and see if your choice would fall the same as mine."

Bergolet was thoughtful for a few moments, then in a low tone began humming.

"Well, Bergolet?"

"It is a little verse or catch they sing, mistress; it goes:

"The first had fame for his deeds in war,
Learned was the second in scholar's lore,
The third was a sinner and little more;
'Twas the sinner that love was waiting for,
So, Hey for his time of roses.'

And it means, mistress, I suppose, that in her infinite kindness a woman ever pities the sinner."

"Would that help me to make choice, think you?" she asked.

"It might if you were in love and one of them was a sinner."

"Truly I have my wish, for you are talking folly," she said. "There is no love, Bergolet, and I doubt not they are all sinners."

"I hope it is not Rupert of Ausburg," said Bergolet. "He is too great a sinner to be interesting. I think the scholar Bertram of Weimar would be my choice."

"I think you might choose worse," said the Duchess.

"Does the choice agree, mistress?"

"You will know at the feast."

"It is a pity there cannot be love," said Bergolet. She looked at him quickly.

"Have no fear, mistress. When the fool lifted for

an instant the corner of the curtain which hides his soul, he learnt how great a fool he was, a romantic fool who sets too much store on love. I shall not again transgress. Of course, nothing can matter so long as Podina has its Duke. Still, I would ask a favour, Your Grace."

"What is it, Bergolet?"

"Last night, mistress, you thought me dull."

"And a little sullen too. You were never near me when I wanted you."

"True, mistress. I have said I am a romantic fool. I am your jester to be laughed at by you and your guests, but to be laughed at by these princes who come a-wooing hurts me."

"What is the favour, Bergolet?" she asked after a pause.

"Mistress, that I may not stand behind your chair for a while. Let me lurk in the shadows and be noticed as little as possible until St. Winifried's Day is past and gone."

She was silent for a moment.

"Have your way," she said, and then she crossed the room hastily. "Your folly tends to make me more miserable. Leave me. It might be wisdom to have no jester, to —"

He went slowly to the door.

"Mistress, now and always I am your servant, a loyal and most humble servant. I shall obey you, whatever your commands may be. You have only to speak the word, and you shall find this dress of scarlet and green lying in the West Tower, and Bergolet gone."

CHAPTER XXIV

IN THE SHADOWS OF THE GARDEN

SHE turned hastily as the door closed. For a moment it seemed that she would call him back, but she did not do so. She stood there a very lonely woman, facing the inevitable, forcing herself to face it with courage and dignity. She would have put back time and set St. Winifried's Day months in the future if she could; she would have delayed her choice, delayed it for all time unless love came to her; but the time for delay had gone. She had given a promise to her people and that promise she meant to fulfil.

She had easily granted Bergolet's favour. She had said he had not only been dull last night but sullen, that he had not been beside her when she wanted him. It was true, yet she had been glad that he kept in the background. These princes were her guests. In some sense, at least, they did her honour in coming to Metz-burg to beg her hand in marriage. No matter what their individual motives might be, they had come, and were willing to risk her refusal without resentment. Rupert of Ausburg had put their position into words, with a graceful toast he had proclaimed them all members of a brotherhood, and there had been no dissentient voice. These were not men to be the butt of a jester's folly. It was not the danger she thought of, the diplomatic relations which might be strained to the breaking point by some careless gibe; she thought of the un-

seemliness there would be in such jesting. He would be unworthy of the name of a man who did not resent it; the dignity of her womanhood would be smirched if she allowed it. Perhaps Bergolet had thought of this, but whatever it was that had prompted him, he had remained in the background, a dull fool of whom little notice had been taken.

But there was another reason why the Duchess had so easily granted the fool's request. Ever since the morning when she had visited him after his arrest, she had viewed him from a different standpoint. She had before then realized that wisdom often lay behind his folly, she had seen the man of resource hidden in the fool when he had ridden by her side through the forest; but since that morning when she had bade him speak as a man, she had always seen the man behind the dress of scarlet and green. She might call him fool, she might treat him as a fool, yet it was always the man she saw, always the man of whom she was conscious. Sometimes she was aware of a curious satisfaction that it was so, and sometimes fiercely resented the fact that his personality had any power of appeal to her. Resentment had been uppermost when she had told him not to come near her until he was sent for, and it was the spirit of resentment which had prompted her to make him ride his ass beside her when she went to see the Elector safely out of the city. She had regretted her whim before they had passed out of the courtyard. Even so mounted, his bells jingling with the ambling movement of the ass, tricked out like its rider in scarlet and green, she could not see the fool. And now, now that these princes had come a-wooing, men of mark every one of them, men who must not be made a jest of, now she was almost as anxious that they should

not be contemptuous of Bergolet. In a warfare of words she doubted not who would be conqueror, but the thought that he should have success as a fool did not please her. As men they would laugh at him, seeing only a fool, but she would see only the man and such laughter would hurt her, even as Bergolet said it would hurt him. Yes, it was well he should remain in the background and not stand behind her chair until St. Winifried's Day was past and gone. Afterwards —

She crossed slowly to the window and looked down into the garden. Some of her guests were there, Rupert of Ausburg she saw, telling some breathless tale apparently to one of her ladies-in-waiting; and Konrad of Coburg, whose saintly face would have better fitted the habit of a monk than the rich dress he wore, was talking eagerly to Baron Kevenfelt as they walked slowly along the garden path. Afterwards. Yes, the afterwards must come, long years of life perhaps, a husband, a child perchance. Her people would be satisfied, and she — presently she must speak the word which the jester had said he would obey. In Metzburg there could be no place for Bergolet after the Feast of St. Winifried.

She turned back into the room as the door opened, and seeing Bertha, forced herself to smile.

"You look happy, child. Which of my suitors has been using you for practice?"

"None, Your Grace."

"Yet a strange light is in your eyes."

"I have been to pray for my uncle and — and for you."

"That the same light might find its way into my eyes?" she asked.

"Ah, if only I could see love there, Your Grace."

"So child, you let out your secret. Some happy swain waits contentedly for the feast, knowing the answer ready on those lips of yours. You shall tell me all about it presently, and for a space I shall play the confidant, and feel almost like a maid in love myself."

"If only —"

"Dream your own dreams, child; reality must needs dissipate mine. For you, love; for me, duty. Duty will bring a light into the eyes, too, even if its brightness is reflected from unshed tears."

The Duchess felt infinitely old just then, yet the mirror on the wall could reflect only the truth — two women, both young, one so full of fascination that even Captain Saxe was in love, the other so perfect that it was said there was no more beautiful woman in Europe.

Never had the Duchess seemed more desirable than she did that evening amongst her guests. There was a tenderness in her voice, a softness in her manner which was new to Baron Kevenfelt, and puzzled him. This might have been an hour in which to give advice had he any to give. He glanced from guest to guest, wondering in which direction her favour lay, and he remembered the jester's advice to let her alone, to trust to her wisdom and intuition. He could not discover a shade of difference in her treatment of the princes; each in turn seemed to share her confidence and find the way to her inmost thoughts. There was magic in the air to-night, the magic of a woman's personality. Rupert of Ausburg, who had probably never felt honest love for any woman in his life, touched for an instant that pure unselfishness which every true lover knows; the scholar, to whom love was an episode, gave not a passing thought to his books; the saint saw his vision in material shape and was ready to worship; love touched

them all to-night, and for a space, statecraft, diplomacy, and personal ambition were forgotten. Even Bertha forgot Captain Saxe for a little while as she watched her mistress.

They passed into the garden presently, but the Duchess was careful to keep a little crowd about her. Like another night she remembered, it was a night for love; many maids in Metzburg would dream of love before dawn, but she gave none of her lovers the opportunity of being alone with her even for a moment. She kept Kevenfelt beside her, and told Bertha to be near her. By a fountain she stopped, and looked round, hearing the jingle of bells. She saw the jester half hidden by those about her. He had not been behind her chair to-night, she had not seen him until now, and in the dim light of the garden he was almost unnoticed. She hesitated a moment, then called for a song.

Those near the jester fell aside to let him go to his mistress, but he did not move. The scarlet and green figure was standing by a tree and was in the shadows.

"Why, it is the jester fellow!" exclaimed Rupert of Ausburg. "Your Grace has no liking for fools, I suppose?"

"Indeed, it is an office I refused to do away with. There has always been a professional fool at my Court."

"I have hardly seen him, and certainly he has not made me laugh. What's the use of a fool unless he causes merriment?"

"Mine often does so," said the Duchess.

"But you hide him at present because his wit is under repair, is that it?" laughed Prince Rupert.

"Or perhaps because at times his wit is inclined to be too biting," she returned.

"I would easily find a way to curb that."

"And so you would strangle good counsel, Prince. I think wit is most biting when it hits nearest to the truth. Sing, Bergolet."

The jester leaned against the tree and silence fell as a cadence of notes from his lute preluded the song.

In my garden roses grow,
Scattering perfumes there,
Red and white their petals show
Blossom everywhere.
Yet beneath the leaves of green,
Hidden cunningly,
Many a tiny thorn is seen
Sharp with cruelty:
When of roses I'm bereft
Will those little thorns be left?

So my lady beauty shows,
Grace beyond compare;
Fragrant, sweet as is the rose
That is passing fair.
Do her smiling eyes conceal
Naught but cold disdain?
Shall love to her heart appeal
Constantly in vain?
Then, since love means life to me,
Take me, Death, from misery.

"It's a good enough song," laughed Rupert of Ausburg, breaking the pause which followed, "but a strange one on the lips of such a fellow. Why, Your Grace, the miserable fool is like the rest of us — in love."

"He is but a mummer," she answered slowly, "hiding himself behind his motley; an excellent mummer since he deceives you so easily. In love! Why, tomorrow he shall sing you a song of war and you will take him for nothing but a soldier."

"Why should we not have the other song now, Your Grace."

The Duchess did not answer at once. The scarlet

and green figure was no longer standing by the tree, but the faint jangle of the silver bells told her that Bergolet was somewhere in the shadows near her.

"Would you forget the sentiment of a love song so speedily, Prince?" she asked. "There may be some here who would wish to remember it a little while. I think I am myself among the number. By your leave, we will not have a war song until to-morrow."

The guests broke up into groups. Some wandered along the paths of the garden — a man ready to whisper a compliment, a woman, willing, perhaps eager to listen to it; others were merry with quick repartee and laughter. But gradually they grew tired of the garden, for there was amusement and entertainment awaiting them in the castle — music and dancing and revelry of many kinds. With a lavish hand Her Grace was making a special event of the feast this year. Though only one of her guests could win her favour, all of them should have cause to remember this visit.

They were all eager for amusement, when the Duchess moved to leave the garden. There came the sharp word of command and quick movement as the sentries were relieved on the terrace without. It seemed to mark the passing of the time for the Duchess. Had he had any advice to give, Kevenfelt would have asked to speak with her alone. He thought she was in the mood to listen. At the entrance she paused. Again came the jingle of the silver bells.

"Bergolet," she said, "I have orders to give you. Come with me."

"It is to scold you for your song," Bertha whispered in the jester's ear. "Did I not tell you once that when a fool fell in love with a Duchess it was poor sport for the fool?"

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Bergolet nodded, but did not speak.

"And Bertha, come to me presently, in an hour — yes, in an hour will do;" and then as if she were conscious of speaking too seriously, she added gaily, "Perhaps I shall be ready to be your confidant in an hour."

"And when may I hope that Your Grace will play the same sweet office to me?" asked Rupert of Ausburg with a profound bow.

"Indeed, I cannot say. I am a creature of impulse as Baron Kevenfelt will tell you."

She laughed and left them, followed by Bergolet.

"There is no need to tell me, Baron," said Rupert when the Duchess had gone, "but by all the saints in the calendar I like women that way. Your cold, calculating woman is the devil. I fancy I am a creature of impulse myself."

Kevenfelt received the statement stiffly and in silence. It did not please him to hear his mistress spoken of in this fashion. He might think such things himself, even speak them on occasion, but that was altogether another matter. He had carried the Duchess in his arms when she was a baby, and Rupert of Ausburg — well, if the Baron had any advice to give Her Grace it was that she should wed anyone rather than Rupert of Ausburg.

Probably in calling himself a creature of impulse, the Prince only did himself justice, for he watched Bertha von Lehmann as she went back into the garden. The Duchess had excused herself and would not be seen any more to-night; an hour spent with another pretty woman would pass the time pleasantly. Because a man hoped to marry one woman, he did not necessarily become blind to the charms of others. Sentimental lovers

might have such a maxim, but Prince Rupert thanked Fate that he had been given more catholicity of taste. This lady-in-waiting was worth some attention.

Bertha went slowly down the path. She had heard the changing of the sentries. Captain Saxe had said he should walk through the garden as soon afterwards as he could, and that if there were any love in her heart she would be there. He would certainly come, and she had an hour to spare. If he came soon, she would tell him everything perhaps, of her life in Berlin, of Prince Karl, of her coming to Metzburg and her mission. Her secret had suddenly become a burden, for this man had so strict a sense of honour he made her afraid. Would he hate her for what she had done, for what it had been in her mind to do? He, too, had his secret which he would tell her presently, but that did not trouble her. She had judged Captain Saxe and knew that he was incapable of meanness or treacherous deceit. There was some honest reason for his secret. Would he see honesty behind hers? She was afraid; perhaps she would not find the courage to tell him to-night.

He was long in coming, or else time was strangely leaden-footed to-night. She had been there a long time; the hour which the Duchess had given her must be nearly over. There was no one in the garden now, at least she could hear no one. Through the foliage the lights from the castle windows gleamed, but the alleys were dim and deserted. Some mystery might lie behind the gloom at the other end of them. Unless she were obliged to go, she would not walk alone by some of the garden paths at this hour. Strains of music floated out on to the night, and a throbbing that told of revelry was in the air. Yet Bertha was op-

pressed by the silence about her. She was suddenly nervous and glanced behind her for a moment.

Was it her fancy, or was there movement close to her? A bird in the bushes perhaps. It was a heavy sound for a bird to make. Surely that was the snapping of a twig—it came again. Was it her fancy that a face took shape in the darkness of the shrubbery near to her? No, it was not fancy, it was —

There was a quick footfall upon the path, it was rapidly approaching. With an effort she started forward and ran.

“Captain Saxe!” she cried, not loudly, she could not call loudly just then.

Certainly there was the sharp snap of a twig as she rushed forward.

“Why, mistress! What is it?”

It was not Captain Saxe but Rupert of Ausburg.

Bertha drew back in the very act of seizing his arm, and for a few moments was silent. It seemed to her that any man must be her enemy to-night except Captain Saxe, and she hardly knew what to say to the Prince. Instinctively she knew that he had followed her into the garden.

“Will Your Highness see me safely to the castle?” she said presently.

“I do assure you it is very hot within,” he answered. “Will you not stay with me a little while in the garden?”

“I think there is someone close at hand who wishes me harm,” she said.

He wondered whether this was her method of telling him that she knew why he had come. He was well versed in the many artifices that women employ so that they should not be thought to succumb too easily.

"Who could wish you harm?"

"I was not thinking of Prince Rupert," she answered.

"Then where is the villain? Shall we go and find him together?"

"Prince, if you will really do me a favour you will see that I leave the garden at once,—at once, and in safety."

"You rob me of a pleasant hour," he said, "but it must be as you desire. Perchance to-morrow evening the garden will hold no fear for you. I shall walk along this path to make sure, even if it is only to see you into safety again."

In the entrance hall she saw Saxe coming towards them, and with quick thanks she left the Prince and hurried forward to meet him. Rupert of Ausburg turned aside, with a muttered curse that such promising sport should be filched from him.

"I have waited for you in the garden," said Bertha, her hand on Saxe's arm. "There was someone hiding there. He was watching me, waiting to—"

"Prince or no prince, he shall answer to me," said Saxe with the intention of following Rupert of Ausburg.

"No, no; he came just in time," said Bertha. "I think I should not have got safely out of the garden had he not come. I saw a face grow out of the shadows. It was Prince Karl."

"Here! In the garden?"

"I am sure—quite sure."

For a moment Saxe did not move.

"Hasten, mistress," he said suddenly. "You will find Hans at the end of yonder corridor, tell him to call the men together here. Gustav is this way, I will

fetch him and others. Then get quickly to the Duchess and warn her. Where is she?"

"In her own rooms with the jester."

"With Bergolet!" Saxe exclaimed. "Go quickly, Bertha. There is work for the league to-night."

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CHAPTER XXV

WERE I A KING

FOLLOWED by the jester, the Duchess crossed the large outer room of her apartments with the intention of going to the inner room, her private sanctum to which few were admitted. Before she reached the door of communication she stopped. Bergolet had often passed into that inner room, the jester's privilege, admitted to amuse his mistress; and if the talk had sometimes taken a serious turn and he had given her counsel there, still he was always the jester, wise for a moment in the midst of his folly. But to-night it was different. She was a woman, not the Duchess. For an hour, until Bertha came, she would be only a woman, and her woman's eyes saw more than a jester in Bergolet. She could not take him to that inner room to-night.

Her hesitation had brought the colour to her cheeks, but the light was soft in the room and Bergolet did not notice the heightened colour as she seated herself in a high-backed carved chair. The chair, grown dark with age, seemed to emphasize her youth, and never surely had woman looked more beautiful.

She pointed to a stool near her.

"You may be seated, Bergolet."

He sat down and waited for her to speak, but for a little space she was silent, interested in the carving on the massive arms of the chair, it seemed. It was very

difficult to begin to enjoy this hour in which she would be only a woman.

"Have you lost your tongue, Bergolet? Prince Rupert said to-night that he had heard so little of your wit he supposed it was under repair. Is it so?"

"Mistress, I am waiting for the orders you have to give me."

"What orders?"

"I cannot tell, but it was for that purpose you told me to follow you."

"What orders should I have for you?"

"Perhaps to bid me leave Metzburg and not return. That is an order I must hear presently, no doubt."

"It was not that," she answered.

"Then perchance it was that you did not like my song to-night?"

"Yes, it was the song which made me bring you here, the song and—Bergolet, it was a very sad song."

"Yes, mistress. Even a jester cannot always be merry."

"Did you write the song, Bergolet?"

"I did, mistress."

"Now, or at some time in the past when you were not merry, when—when some woman perhaps had laughed at you?"

She was looking at him with half-closed eyes, thinking of herself, a little angry with herself that she should ask such questions and be so eager for the answers.

"It came to my mind only a few hours ago, a little rush of words holding a secret. I think I meant that none should hear them, but when you bade me sing they came. I hardly knew they had been uttered until the lute strings had ceased to tremble."

"The song seemed to come from your soul, Bergolet."

"Thoughts uttering themselves, mistress, yet veiling their secret in a quaint conceit set to a melody."

"I think they did not succeed in hiding their secret, Bergolet."

"You did not like the song, mistress, therefore do not remember it. Shall I try and sing you something merry? I have one concerning a fat friar of Nuremberg whose rotundity brought him to some strange adventures in that city."

"I did not dislike your song," she said with a little hesitation, "only I might be angry, for I fancy when you thought of it I must have been in your mind."

"I cannot deny it, mistress; I can only ask your pardon."

"Rupert of Ausburg said —"

"I care not what he said or thought. He is a dull fool when he is sober and a coarse one in his cups. Spare me the opinion, good or ill, of such a man as Rupert of Ausburg. It is such princes as he is that —" And then he stopped suddenly. "Forgive me, mistress, I forgot myself."

The bells on his cap jangled slightly as he turned to her. He had spoken angrily, in a sudden burst of passion, but a movement of the woman beside him had silenced him. There was colour in her face now. Bergolet noted it, and for a few moments his eyes looked into hers.

"I am not angry," she said. "So you hate Rupert of Ausburg?"

"Yes."

"More than the other princes in Metzburg?"

"Yes, a little more."

"Then you hate them all?"

"Yes, mistress."

"Why?"

Bergolet did not answer, and the Duchess turned from him as she asked the question. She wanted him to answer, yet was angry with herself for asking. No anger was in her face, only a heightened colour and such beauty that an anchorite might tremble for his vows; and the tenseness of the jester's figure, and the tightly closed hands, told of a man who restrained himself with difficulty.

"Your song is true," she said after a pause. "I am the woman of it, cold, disdainful, heartless, and so I must remain through all the years to come. There is no escape. Less fair than the woman of your song, I have all her villainy."

"It is not true," he whispered.

"It is, Bergolet, it is; yet I might have been so different. Perhaps you are able to see what I might have been."

She sat forward in her chair, leaning a little towards him. She was playing with fire and she knew it, yet could not resist the temptation. It was not her power she was conscious of, but her weakness.

"Is that what you see, Bergolet? Deep down in my eyes is that what you see?"

"Ah, mistress, if only I were a king!"

"What then, Bergolet, what then?"

"I dare not tell you."

It was yet within her power to be wise. She knew it. His reticence gave her the opportunity. She knew he would not speak unless she gave him leave. She had but to laugh, just one little laugh and call him fool — there would be an end. She had only to

hide the woman and be the Duchess to stay the words trembling for utterance on this man's lips. Wisdom prompted her to give that little laugh, but her whole being was in revolt. For all the years, after to-night, she must be the Duchess, a wife, but a woman who had never listened to love, to the burning words of a lover, to the rhapsody that other women knew. Her soul was hungry to hear such words, and beside her was a man yearning to utter them — a man who loved her. She was sure he loved her. Why should she not listen? To-night she would be a woman, just a woman, for one hour, for this one short hour until Bertha came.

“If you were a king, what then?”

It was a whispered question, spoken as a woman speaks when she loves. She did love. Just for this hour she would be natural, would forget the demands of her position, forget those princes who had come a-wooing because statecraft required it. No jester was before her, but a man, a worthy knight whose love was true, not to be bought with a price; her own true knight who could not lie or speak any word of falsehood. She was a woman — waiting, and of that afterwards which must come she would not think. This hour should be the golden hour to remember, for her and for him. With this hour for a memory she could face what must come afterwards, and she never doubted that her knight could face it just as bravely. She was unconscious of any selfishness.

“If you were a king, Bergolet, what then?”

“I should be a man, mistress, and as a man I remember that I did not please you.”

“You will please me now, for I am only a woman to-night, a woman looking into a man's eyes and asking

for the truth. You can say nothing that will make me angry to-night."

Bergolet had put his bauble on the floor beside him, now, as he stood up, he took off his cap and let it fall at his feet. The little crash of the silver bells seemed to put an end to the jester.

"So I am a king then, a man free to speak as he will; but with that freedom comes difficulty in finding words."

He spoke slowly and with many pauses. The quick wit and the ready tongue seemed to have forsaken him.

"Lady, like other princes I come a-wooing to Metz-burg, but I have no well sounding phrases to utter. I am only your lover, nothing more. I forget all that is past, and the future is empty until you put into my soul new hopes and fresh ambitions. I only know this moment, am only conscious of you and of my worship. What can I say? With a whisper, with a smile you can make me far more than any king. I love you. What does it matter who I am when I love you?"

He went a little nearer to her. She did not move. She was still leaning forward in her chair, but she was not looking at him now.

"I love you. What can it matter who I am? Has not all my life been leading me to this moment? Though it has been a life of changes and chances, some good in it, some evil, yet it has led me to this hour, and to you. Surely some high Providence has guided my course, marked it with sunshine and storm, and led me here to tell you that I love you. Surely it is no chance that finds you here waiting, not chance which has ordained that you shall listen to me?"

He dropped on his knee beside her, and his two hands were clasped over her hand which rested on the arm of the chair.

"And because we have come to this hour, mistress, each by our separate road, to this hour which must forever be sacred, no matter what the future holds for us, I dare to say I love you. All unworthy as I am, I dare to say it. Was there ever man yet wholly worthy to kneel at the feet of a good woman and ask her love?"

He bent and kissed the hand resting on the chair arm.

"In the castle to-night there are princes who have asked for this little hand. I would not say that love has not touched some of them, it would be strange indeed if they could only dream of ambition in your presence; but I think there has been no echo to any love of theirs in your heart. Is there no echo there now? Has my love no power to call from your soul an answering harmony? Lift your eyes and let me look into them. I shall know if I look into your eyes."

It was almost against her will that she raised her eyes to his.

"I see fear in them, but there is love behind the fear. Love is worth a thousand times all that any prince can give you of worldly state or security. It is the one strong, binding link we have with heaven, and to the man or woman who plays with love there follows certain retribution. To-night we come to the great test. Even a kingdom were well lost for love."

"Yes," she whispered, "but there is duty."

"Love, only love to-night," he answered. "Be true to that and nothing is lost. What is a kingdom, what is all your state but a passing show? Were I a king, I would barter crown and power and worldly ambition, all I had and hoped for, to win the richer crown of a woman's love, the crown of your love, to reign supreme in the kingdom of your heart. I am at your feet, mis-

truss, stripped of all I possess, poor in all save love; bend down to me, crown me, make me richer, happier than any man in all the world."

"Bergolet, who are you?"

The question came with trembling earnestness, for she knew that she loved this man, and it was impossible she could love her jester. It was the man who had ridden beside her through the forest she loved, the man who had spoken that morning when she had bid him cast the jester aside for a while, the man who knelt at her feet now. He was no jester, the scarlet and green dress counted for nothing; he was a man, a man who loved her. Therefore she asked: "Who are you?"

"You have made me a king for to-night," he answered, "and it profits me only in this, that I am free to tell my love. I think I can read your heart, mistress. Come St. Winifried's Day you must choose a husband, some princeling who shall be no danger to your State, nor embroil you with other rulers; but to-night you were tempted to be yourself, to let the woman sway the Duchess, to be guided by all that is highest in you."

"It is true," she whispered.

"I also have put off the jester to-night, and am myself, my best self, your lover."

"I know. I know."

"How will you answer me?" he said.

She was silent. She was leaning back in the chair now. He waited a little while, then pressed his lips to her hand again and rose to his feet.

"What is my answer, mistress?"

"Is there any possible answer?" she said with a little gesture of despair.

"Mistress, do you love me?"

For a moment she looked at him. Then she stood up.

"Yes, I love you. I care not who you are. I am a woman, and I love you. Now hate me."

"Hate you!"

"For what I have done," she said passionately. "I have let you tell me because I was hungering to hear it. I am utterly selfish, but not wantonly cruel. I love you, that is my excuse. Love has come to me only since you came to Metzburg. I have looked at the jester and despised myself; and then, in spite of your dress, I have only been able to see the man, and for a little while I have been a woman — just a woman who wanted love. If it helps you, you may know that I shall always love you, but —"

He caught her hands in his.

"But on St. Winifried's Day I choose a husband. I am bound to do it. I shall know no other love, only a husband. You may pity him and me."

He might have taken her in his arms, she would not have resisted him, but he only raised her hands to his lips.

"I understand, mistress, I shall —"

He stepped back quickly, for a frightened woman servant rushed into the room, flinging the door to behind her.

"Fly, Your Grace, quickly! They are coming!"

She had crossed and opened the door into the inner room.

"Who is coming?" demanded the Duchess.

"Enemies. I know not who they are. Quickly, Your Grace! This way!"

Bergolet had stooped and caught up his bauble from

the floor. It was a poor weapon, but it was something in his hand.

"Go quickly, mistress," he said.

"I will stay," she whispered. "Perhaps this is the real answer, the right road for both of us."

"No, no," said Bergolet.

"There is no time to spare," said the servant.

"I will stay," the Duchess whispered.

"You shall not, mistress," said Bergolet. "I am your king for to-night. Go quickly. I shall keep them back a little while, and help will come."

"Let me stay."

"Rather than that we will both go."

He went with her to the door leading into the inner room, and then as she passed through before him he hastily asked her pardon and closed the door after her, slipping the bolt on the outside. Villains might quickly break down this door. He must defend it as long as he could. What enemies were they against whom he must hold it with only his bauble for weapon?

Quickly the other door was flung open and men with drawn swords, eight or ten of them, Bergolet did not count how many, rushed in. Kurd was there, and Rahmer, and close behind them was Prince Karl. Desperate enemies these, with some vile scheme behind their naked blades, perhaps the vilest of all—murder. It seemed that they had not expected to find anyone in this room, and they came to a sudden standstill, seeing the jester standing before the inner door, his bauble lying across his arm.

"Pardon, gentlemen, but Her Grace does not receive to-night," said Bergolet.

"Stand aside, fool," Karl said with an oath.

"I assure Your Highness, I have most definite in-

structions. Her Grace will receive none of you to-night."

"This is no jest, nor it is a fencing lesson," said the Prince. "You haven't even a sword to be afraid of. Stand aside."

"No doubt Her Grace will receive you to-morrow. For some of you I believe she has looked rather anxiously."

"If he will have it, let him," cried Karl savagely, knowing that there was danger in delay.

Kurd rushed forward. He had no love for the jester, and no compunction in attacking an unarmed man. It may be that his foot slipped on the fool's cap lying on the floor, but however it was, when his sword was thrust viciously at the jester's heart the bauble met it with a dull blow, turned it aside, and twisted it from his grasp.

With an oath of astonishment and some fear in it perhaps, Kurd staggered back, while in an instant Ber-golet had caught up the weapon.

"Better odds, Prince Karl," he cried. "At least I have a sword, and he who would pass this door must needs give me a lesson in swordsmanship first. Which fool of you will take my staff of office? I have no further use for it," and with a laugh he flung the bauble into the midst of them.

CHAPTER XXVI

ONLY THE JESTER

THE bauble fell heavily to the floor. The sound of its falling was all that broke the silence for a moment. These men had expected to surprise a woman, with no more effectual defence than a maid of honour and a fool who could use no weapon but his tongue. They had come face to face with the unexpected, a fool standing resolutely before a closed door, a fool who, in spite of his defencelessness and utter lack of fighting skill, had courage enough to remain there confronting his enemies. The unexpected is ever disconcerting, and in the presence of courage the worst villainy is likely to halt. So villainy had halted, as it rushed into the room, but only for an instant; now it paused again as Kurd, bent on making quick despatch of all opposition, staggered back, leaving his sword to be caught up by the jester. Though he had no skill with the weapon, the mere fact that he had it in his hand, when a moment ago he held only his bauble, was amazing; and the taunting words as the bauble was flung amongst them were disconcerting. The odds were better. There was no denying it.

"You shall have your lesson, jester," cried Rahmer as the bauble fell, and the next moment steel sang on steel.

This time there was no slipping foot to give the jester advantage. Kurd would have played the butcher on a defenceless man; Rahmer would at least kill accord-

ing to rule. That his enemy had no skill was his misfortune, but at least he should come to his quietus as a man who had dared something; he should fall by a thrust that was honourable. And being a skilled swordsman, conscious that even a novice grown desperate may have undeserved good fortune, Rahmer was not careless. Nor was he contemptuous. It was not the time to give an exhibition of his skill, to play with his adversary, to delay the fatal thrust; the end must come at once, but it should be according to the rules of the game. Perchance Rahmer felt some pride in his condescension as the blades crossed.

"Your lesson, jester," he said quietly.

He had seen Bergolet handle a sword when Prince Karl played with him. Now desperation had given the jester a little firmer hold of his weapon, but Rahmer had no misgivings as, after a few passes, he sent his sword like lightning to its mark. The steel sang for a moment, a shrill, high-pitched note which came to a sudden end. The scarlet and green flashed in one quick movement, then came a cry, a sharp intake of the breath, and Rahmer, flinging up his arms, turned half round, and fell prone. The smile upon his lips was suddenly twisted into a strange contortion.

The jester's death would have meant nothing to these men, they were ready and waiting to pass to their prey over his still quivering body; but it was another matter when Rahmer lay there and Bergolet still stood before the closed door.

The jester did not look at the fallen man. He had one enemy the less, and his eyes were keenly watching the others; his ears were listening eagerly for the sounds of coming help. No sound came from the corridor without. These rooms were isolated, purposely

so in order that the Duchess's privacy should not be disturbed. The revelry going forward in the castle would drown the noise of this conflict, and these villains no doubt had taken full precaution to prevent all interruption. Where was Saxe to-night, Saxe and the men of the league? Bergolet watched his enemies, waiting for the sudden rush upon him from all sides, which could only end in one way. Surely behind this closed door the Duchess was finding her way to safety. There must be some other exit from her rooms, although he did not know of any. Perhaps the enemy held it. The Duchess might only be able to call for help from the windows, but even that way help must come presently. Could he hold this door until then? Almost he thought he could, even in the face of such overwhelming odds. Was he not a king for to-night? Was he not more than a king, even a lover conscious of being loved? There was a great joy in the thought that he stood between this woman and danger. Yet with such a desperate issue hanging upon his skill, he was quick to count the chances. A rush must inevitably beat him down; could he prevent it?

"Who is my next teacher?" he cried. "I am waiting. Have you lost all liking for the game, Prince Karl? Since you gave me my first lesson I have improved, I think. Have you no wish to teach me any more?"

It was not a spirit of bravado which prompted him to speak in this contemptuous manner, but the desire to confine the attack to one man. If the Prince took the challenge, the others would hardly interfere, Bergolet argued. They would trust to the Prince's swordsmanship, which was famous, and whatever the issue, time would be gained.

For a moment there was silence, then a man spoke. Whether it was the jester's attitude, or some expression in his watchful eyes, or a shadow which some movement threw across his face, there was sudden recognition.

"It's the devil, the devil with the bandaged head."

"Was it you?" Karl exclaimed sharply, and again steel sang on steel. The challenge had been accepted.

The Prince had lost none of his liking for the game, and was little troubled concerning the justice of his cause. He knew now that the jester must purposely have concealed his skill, counting that the deception might one day prove of service to him, that his supposed want of skill might place his mistress's enemies in his hands. He might almost have foreseen this very hour, so much had Karl counted on the jester being unable to offer any defence.

As he felt steel touch steel there flashed through Karl's mind all that had led up to this moment. In the excitement of the feast it had been easy to come from Festenhausen and slip into Metzburg. Hiding in that house by the east gate, and elsewhere in the city, were men whose danger almost forced them to a desperate enterprise. Little persuasion was needed. Indeed, was it so desperate a venture after all? Success meant everything to them. Once seize the person of the Duchess, and they could dictate terms, even make those demands for which purpose they had plotted so long. A crowd was notoriously fickle; especially might the fickleness be counted upon when so many strangers were within the walls. It was unlikely that all the men of the Guard had willingly returned to their allegiance, many would be ready to listen to fair promises. Even some of the princes assembled in the city,

given the opportunity, might easily take part against the Duchess — persuaded that she had brought them to her Court for her own glorification and to make laughing-stocks of them. The schemers had all to gain and little to lose, and the difficulties of the enterprise had seemed to grow less and less as it was argued in detail in the house by the east gate. To-night it had been easy to steal into the palace, singly and at intervals, as retainers of one or other of the princes; and at the time of changing guard they were together, ready to strike the blow. Fortune favoured them. The Duchess had gone to her rooms followed only by the jester. Bertha von Lehmann had gone back into the garden, and Karl would have seized her there to prevent any chance of her giving an alarm, had not fortune again favoured the plot. Captain Saxe had come to her in the garden, Karl had seen her run forward and heard her call him by name. It was evidently an appointment. They would remain in the garden for a while, and so two persons who might be dangerous and stand in the way of success were accounted for. The propitious moment for action had come. Karl did not know that Bertha had made a mistake, that the man who had come into the garden was Rupert of Ausburg; nor was he aware that she had caught sight of his own face for a moment in the gloom of the shrubbery. He slipped back to his companions. The way was clear. They had rushed into the Duchess's apartments to find only the unarmed jester barring their progress. A few moments and success would be theirs.

Only a few moments had passed, but much had happened in them. Now the jester was armed, and a dead man lay stretched upon the floor at his feet. This Bergolet was no other than the devil with the bandaged

head who had played so prominent a part in bringing their well-laid scheme against the Elector to ruin.

"Was it you!" Karl exclaimed, and in the thought of a settlement of accounts at the sword's point, he forgot all else. A slip had served to disarm Kurd; Rahmer was no great swordsman. Bergolet should have a second lesson and find death at the end of it.

So the steel sang, now high, now low, music in it, yet cruel determination as well. The jester knew he had a dangerous adversary to battle with, one who was famed for his swordsmanship, and since so much hung upon the issue, one who might be expected to use any trick of fencing which would give him victory. He watched his foe across the quivering blades, and saw the deadly purpose in his eyes. It was a fight of giants, both men knew it, and were wary of each other. The disadvantage lay with Bergolet. Other enemies were in the room; they might at any moment rush to Karl's assistance, or they might seize the opportunity to open the door if it were left for an instant undefended. The jester was not to be tempted from the door by any feint on the part of his adversary, but he could not forget those other enemies, and for one moment his eye left Prince Karl's. It might have been chance, but at that same moment the Prince's sword shot out in a thrust which had often left him victor in a fight. Bergolet parried it, but it came perilously near its mark. Immediately Karl was handling his weapon as though he had made no special effort; he showed no disappointment at his failure, but he marvelled at it. He had met a worthy foeman, and confident in his own skill, he warmed to his work, forgetting everything but the fierce encounter and the lust to kill his enemy. Ber-

golet was aware that it would not be safe to look away again.

The stroke came again, just sufficiently varied to deceive, but this time Karl had to defend himself desperately from a counter thrust. Had he been too confident the jester's point would have done its work, only carefulness had saved him, and for a space the blades quivered, waiting. The jester's grip seemed to have loosened. Karl's face set in a grimmer line. He had felt that relaxing on the part of an adversary before now, and knew the meaning of it. It was a tired sword that met his own. He tested it again. The iron had gone from his adversary's wrist. It was the moment when such a duel as this might easily end. Just a moment longer he waited, then with a quick feint he sent his sword straight at the jester's heart. It was the end of this fight, but a strange ending. With lightning-like rapidity the blade was deflected and pierced only the jester's sleeve, while Karl gave a sharp cry as steel ran like a flame of fire through his body. For an instant he stood there like a man confused by something unexpected, then his weapon rattled on the floor as his legs bent ludicrously, and he fell in a heap at Ber-golet's feet.

A man rushed forward with an oath, but he stopped short before coming within reach of the jester's sword; and as he stopped there was a rush of feet along the corridor, the door was thrown open, and half a dozen men, headed by Captain Saxe, entered the room.

There was no more fighting. The conspirators, robbed of their leader and seeing their greatest hope of safety in surrender, threw down their weapons and submitted quietly to arrest.

"There is no fighting against that devil," said one

man. "What was his head bandaged for the other day?"

Hans and Gustav turned quickly to look at the jester. Was it indeed Bergolet who had been their comrade in the fight through the streets and in the Rathaus the other day? Certainly, in spite of his dress, he did not look like a jester just now as he moved from the door he had defended and bent over the prostrate form of Prince Karl.

"He is grievously hurt, but not dead," said Saxe.

"Get help quickly, Saxe. I would not have him die. He is a villain, but he is Her Grace's cousin."

The sound of many feet was in the corridor as Saxe sent a trooper for help. The news of the attack had reached the guests.

"The Duchess! Where is the Duchess?"

Bertha, who had entered behind Saxe and his men, crossed the room.

"Is she there?" she asked, touching Bergolet's arm, and pointing to the closed door.

"Yes," he answered, and then with a low word to Saxe, he pushed his way quietly through the guests. No one took any notice of him. He was only the jester, and in their excitement they did not see that he carried a naked sword instead of his bauble, and had no cap of bells upon his head. Someone had bravely defended Her Grace, one villain had been killed and another wounded; these facts flew from lip to lip, but the jester was not associated with them. Even when someone said the hero was Bergolet, the only answer was a laugh. Such a statement could be no more than an ill-timed jest.

Rupert of Ausburg was lamenting that chance had not given him the opportunity of fighting against such

odds for the sake of Her Grace, when Bertha opened the inner door and the Duchess entered the room.

"Long life to Your Grace!" Saxe shouted, interrupting his examination of Prince Karl, and the room rang with a vociferous answer.

An inclination of the head was the Duchess's only thanks. The hour which had passed had been such a crowded one that it was difficult to adjust herself to this moment. A few minutes ago — it was no more — she had stood in this room alone with the jester, the man she loved, her king for an hour. When peril had come upon them, it had seemed to her a good ending, a death that would be better than long years of the life which circumstances forced upon her. When Bergolet had tricked her into a place of safety, staying to face the danger alone, she had been angry. For a moment she had turned meaning to beat upon the door and demand that it be opened again, but the next she had thought of the man's danger. As she had forgotten the jester in the man during these past days, she had unconsciously given him all the attributes of a brave man. She did not doubt he could use a sword. She was sure that for some purpose he had deceived her cousin when Karl had given him a lesson. Now, she knew he was unarmed, and without thinking of her own safety she had gone quickly to another exit from her rooms, a way only used by servants. A short corridor terminated in a door, but this door was locked from without. Her enemies knew of this retreat and had fastened it against her.

"I will call from the windows, Your Grace," said the frightened woman with her, and without waiting for permission she had done so. The windows looked upon the garden, and the garden was empty. The woman's

shouting was heard at last, but only when help was already on the way.

The Duchess had gone back to listen at the door. She could hear the singing of the steel, but little else. When Bergolet had shouted his challenge in answer to Karl's demand that he should stand from the door, she had been seeking escape that she might bring help. Few words had been spoken since then. She only heard the sharp song of the steel, and since no hand had yet been laid upon the door to fling it open, it must mean that Bergolet still defended it. How had he armed himself? How long could one man keep such odds at bay?

The end had come suddenly with a rush of feet and a babel of voices; then the door was opened and she stood facing her guests, who shouted their delight at her safety. It was difficult to adjust herself to this moment. So she bent her head in acknowledgment, and then she went forward quickly.

"Karl! Is it Karl?"

"Yes, Your Grace," Saxe answered, "but he is not dead."

"Quickly! Let him be seen to quickly."

"I have already sent for a surgeon, Your Grace," said Saxe, and in obedience to his orders the Prince was carefully lifted and carried from the room.

"A villainous conspiracy, Your Grace," said Rupert of Ausburg. "I would I had kept free of the revels to-night and been at hand to draw sword on your behalf. But, by the saints, you had a stalwart champion. One man dead, and another dying, and six or seven others so fearful that they were easy prisoners."

"One dead?" she exclaimed.

"Rahmer, Your Grace," said Saxe. The body had

been dragged from the room even as she had entered, and she had not seen it.

The Duchess looked slowly round the room.

"I thank you all," she said, "and by your leave I would be left alone. Bertha, you will stay with me to-night."

Bowing to her the guests departed.

"See that we are well guarded to-night," said Bertha to Saxe in a whisper; "this way and the way that leads to the servants' quarters."

"The league guards two dear women to-night," he answered.

The guests had gone, only Saxe remained.

"Captain, you will see to our safety," said the Duchess.

Saxe saluted, and as he crossed the room he stooped with the intention of picking up the bauble and the cap of bells which lay there.

"Leave them," said the Duchess quickly.

Saxe went out, closing the door, and for a little space the Duchess remained motionless. She had looked round the room for the scarlet and green figure; she had expected, when the crowd had gone, to see Bergolet standing there. She saw only the cap and bauble.

"Will you give them to me, Bertha?"

Bertha picked them up and put them into her mistress's outstretched hand.

"We must return them to the jester to-morrow," she said quickly.

To-morrow she must thank him, must thank the jester. He was a king only for an hour, one glorious hour. To-night she could have thanked him as a king, she could have been a woman with her lover, but to-morrow —

To-night he had not waited. Perhaps he had done right to go. To-morrow she must send him the cap and bauble and bid him come and receive her thanks. He would understand when he received the bauble and cap from her messenger that the dream was over, that as a jester he must receive her thanks — only as Bergolet, the jester.

CHAPTER XXVII

THE ELECTOR'S ADVICE

WITH early morning a rumour began to run through the city that the Duchess had been attacked during the night. That was all at first, just the bare fact, and men and women stopped each other, anxious for further news. It was not such a fickle crowd as Prince Karl had imagined, and perhaps even the Duchess herself was not aware how sure a place she held in the heart of her people. When it was known that the Duchess was safe, and that the attack had been led by Prince Karl, wild rejoicing and savage execration were mingled. There was not a street in Metzburg down which it would have been safe for the Prince to walk that day, and his companions were far safer in prison than they would have been in the market-place.

How had the Duchess escaped? For some time there was no answer to this question, and then someone said that Bergolet the jester had saved her. The man who started the story said he had heard it in the saddler's shop yonder. Why, it was Bergolet who had saved her from attack in the forest, they remembered; he must be a good man, this jester. They knew little of him in Metzburg. They had seen the scarlet and green figure riding beside the Duchess, and had laughed. He was a fine singer they had heard, and could tell a story that would bring laughter even to a morose man; so it was said, but they had no first hand knowledge of either his

songs or his wit. All they knew for certain was that a fool must naturally be despised by all honest workers, and some were inclined to criticise Her Grace for having such a fellow at Court. Now, it seemed, he had been really of some use. He had saved his mistress. How? It could hardly be true that he had somehow got hold of a sword and fought with a score of men, yet the rumour was persistent that he had killed Rahmer, that Prince Karl himself was grievously wounded, and that all the conspirators had been captured. All this could not be true, but at least he should have an ovation when next he passed through the city riding beside his mistress.

Would he come to-day? It was customary on this day for the Duchess to attend the service in St. Anne's, the ceremony marking the actual beginning of the festival; he might be with her.

"Nonsense," said one old dame; "fools are not taken to church."

"I don't see why they shouldn't be," was the answer. "Maybe they've more need of it than wise men."

This started an argument with some bitterness in it, for in Metzburg religious differences had ever been rife.

The Duchess had no intention of breaking through custom to-day. Before leaving the castle, however, she called a servant and gave him the bauble and the cap of bells.

"Take these to the west tower—to Bergolet. Tell him the Duchess has sent them, and that she bids him to be waiting for her in her rooms when she returns from church. Tell him that the Duchess will thank her—her jester for the service he rendered her last night."

"Yes, Your Grace."

"Let me be sure you understand. Repeat the message."

The man did so.

"Use those exact words," she said. "I want Bergolet fully to understand the meaning of my message."

It was an enthusiastic crowd which greeted the Duchess on her way to St. Anne's, a crowd rejoicing in her safety. On her return to the castle the welcome was just as enthusiastic, but there was an added note, a loud demand that the traitors should meet with their just reward. Was not death the only punishment for treachery?

"They have demanded my marriage, now they would demand that I have these men put to death. Thank God night and day, Bertha, that you are what you are and not a Duchess."

She paused a moment at the outer door of her apartments, bracing herself for the difficult meeting with the jester. She entered to find only her messenger waiting for her.

"Where is Bergolet?" she asked.

"I do not know, Your Grace. I think he has gone."

"Gone!"

"I went to his lodging. I knocked upon his door but got no answer. The door was not locked so I went in. The jester was not there, Your Grace."

"But you made enquiry?"

"Yes, I went to Captain Saxe, thinking that he would know. He could tell me nothing."

"Go back at once," she said. "You will find him there now probably. He is not always in his lodging when he is not on duty. Why should you suppose he has gone?"

"Please, Your Grace, the scarlet and green dress was there, folded up, lying upon a stool. It looked like a dress that was finished with. Somehow, it seemed to me that Bergolet would not come back to wear it again. I put the bauble and the cap of bells upon the top of it and left them there."

The Duchess crossed to the window. For a few moments she wanted to hide her face from the messenger and from Bertha.

"Shall I go back to the west tower, Your Grace?" asked the man presently.

"No. No. You left the things there, the cap and the bauble. That was right. My message — that does not matter since the jester has gone," and she dismissed the man.

Gone! Gone without her thanks, without seeing her again. She had meant her message to tell him that he must come to her as the jester, that last night's dream was over, that however precious a memory it might remain, it must be no more spoken of between them. Instinctively she had trusted in his strength and honour to help her, and his going was so unexpected that he seemed to have failed her in her need. Yet, had he really failed her? Had he not taken the wisest course, the only possible course? He had promised to obey her when she should bid him go, and in making confession of her love last night had she not made it impossible for him to stay? The scarlet and green dress had been found in his lodging just as he said it should be, and Bergolet had gone.

"Your Grace, shall I go to Captain Saxe? He may tell me more than he would tell your messenger."

The Duchess turned and looked at Bertha. It would have been easy to break down, to have let the woman

have her grief out unrestrainedly; but the Duchess laughed.

"Go to him if you will, child, but not to question him on my account. Nothing very strange has happened. The fool has grown tired of his office, that is all."

"Your Grace, I think —"

"What do you think, child?"

"There must have been some special reason for his going," said Bertha.

"Perhaps," was the careless answer. "He was a good fool, and his going puts me to the trouble of finding another."

"And you have not been able to thank him for what he did last night," Bertha said.

"No. Against my will I am left in his debt. Leave me, child. I am far too busy to talk about Bergolet."

But she was not too busy to think about him. Much of her work that day only served to bring him more forcibly to her mind, yet Baron Kevenfelt found her as keenly alive to all her duties as ever.

"These papers require your immediate attention," he said when he came to her. "I have others here but they can wait."

"Why should they wait?"

"I thought that after last night —"

"Last night may serve as a warning not to neglect work," she answered. "We can never tell how long we may be spared to do our duty."

"Your Grace —"

"I will see all the papers, Baron."

"I do not like to hear you talk with that note of — of despair in your voice."

"Note of truth, Baron, not of despair," she answered. "My good friend, for us all there is a price

to pay. For the honour of being my faithful minister you pay yours; for being born a Duchess I pay mine."

"You are very brave," said the old man as he placed more papers before her.

They were read and considered, her firm signature was put to those that needed it; then she leaned back in her chair.

"I was told, when I sent to enquire this morning, that my cousin's wound is not likely to prove fatal, Baron."

"So I have heard, Your Grace."

"Presently we shall be called upon to make a difficult decision," she went on. "What is to be done with Prince Karl when he is well again?"

"It is so difficult a question, Your Grace, that —"

"No, Baron, we will not wish the jester's sword had done its work more thoroughly," she said.

"I fear I did wish it, Your Grace, as I went to find Bergolet this morning."

"Why did you want to see Bergolet?" she asked.

"To thank him. I know he will receive public thanks for what he has done; praise of him is coupled with rejoicing at your safety throughout Metzburg to-day; but I wanted to thank him personally."

"You did not find him."

"No. A trooper saved me climbing the many stairs to the jester's lodging by telling me that Bergolet had gone out."

"He has gone altogether, Baron."

"Gone!"

"He has left Metzburg, I believe," said the Duchess quietly. "I sent for him to thank him, but he had gone. I think the fighting spirit took possession of him last night so that he could not remain a fool any longer. Perhaps he has gone to offer his sword to the Elector,

against the French. I think I do not blame him."

"I would he had stayed to use it for Your Grace," said Kevenfelt.

"He has chosen to leave me in his debt, Baron. We were talking of Prince Karl."

"We are in a difficulty, Your Grace, a great difficulty," was the answer. "I had the Burgomaster to see me this morning. The people demand that these traitors should be punished, and when men are traitors the people will see no distinction between prince and peasant. Is that remarkable? Indeed, the chief blame is thrown upon the Prince."

"And they demand his death?" she asked.

"It comes to that. The people, speaking by the mouth of their Burgomaster, declare there is no guarantee of your safety while he lives."

"And the other prisoners, Baron, are they inclined to repentance and confession?" the Duchess asked after a long pause.

"They would save themselves by implicating others, and speak of Prince Karl as their leader. The plot has been alive for long past, its purpose to force you into a marriage with Prince Karl on such terms as should make him virtual ruler in Podina. Failing this, you were to be set aside in his favour. By bribes and promises the Prince secured a certain following; his position enabled him to influence part of the Guard, and it is said that he had the moral support of Louis of France. Failure, thank God, has dogged the steps of these schemers. They failed to obtain possession of your person on the journey to Festenhausen because Bergolet was in time to save you. They failed to get the Elector killed on his way to the Rathaus, which would have served France in her struggle in Alsace,

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while embroiling you with the German States and Brandenburg, and causing your own people to rise against you in the belief that you were in league with the Elector to undermine the liberty of Podina. Such are the lies which have been whispered about you in Metzburg, lies which Von Lehmann, the late Burgomaster, put into circulation."

"By Karl's orders?"

"Yes, Your Grace. These men say that Von Lehmann was deep in the conspiracy, and that the other leaders were Straubel, who has fled from Metzburg, Rahmer who is dead, and Kurd who is one of the prisoners. Kurd does not deny it, but is the most ardent penitent of them all — which means that he will accuse anyone if by so doing he can save his own skin. Again their plans failed, greatly owing to Bergolet."

"What had he to do with it? Captain Saxe saved the Elector."

"It was Your Grace who really saved him," Kevenfelt answered, "but fighting for him in the streets was a trooper with a bandaged head, and —"

"I saw him in the Rathaus."

"The bandage seems to have disguised him well. That was Bergolet. The fact is known all over Metzburg."

The Duchess was silent. She remembered that the man had been quite near her when she stood by the Burgomaster's chair on the dais in the Rathaus; she had known then that he would have been the first to throw himself between her and the crowd had a rush come, but she had not known that it was Bergolet.

"Then came the desperate attempt last night," Kevenfelt went on. "These men declare that it was not your life they sought, but your person. They had

watched, knew you were with the jester. They believed you were absolutely undefended. You were to be seized, hurried out through the servants' quarters, which they had secured, and taken by byways through the city to a house near the east gate where these conspirators have been in hiding. The crowd was fickle, it was argued; it was only your personality which mastered it the other day. If these men were successful in getting you into their hands, they believed the rest would be easy. It was hoped that some of the princes, persuaded that they had been brought to Metzburg only for your amusement, would support them. Such is the tale these men tell. It is true, no doubt, although it may not be the whole truth. It was a desperate venture by men who had all to gain and little to lose. Again, Bergolet has brought their schemes to ruin."

She threw out her hands with a gesture half despairing, half pleading.

"Tell me, my friend, what have I done, or what have I left undone, that my people hate me so?"

"Hate you!"

"Would such schemes seem possible to these men unless it were so? Karl is right, the crowd is fickle."

"The people love you, Your Grace. Would there be such rejoicing in the streets to-day if they did not love you?"

"And would Karl have raised rebellion if he had not had reason to suppose they loved him?" she asked.

"He appealed only to the worst element in the city."

"And to-day it is with one voice that his death is shouted for. We are in a difficulty, Baron. I cannot condemn these others and not condemn Karl, and I cannot condemn my cousin to ignominious death—I will not. We must gain time, Baron. That is easy. I

will administer no punishment, even to traitors, during the time of the feast. St. Winifried's is a festival of love; it would be little less than sacrilege to take revenge until it is over."

"But when it is over?" said Kevenfelt.

"I seem to be living from hour to hour and cannot think too far into the future. Can a woman just betrothed put her hand to the death warrant of any man? That shall be my excuse, but say nothing of it yet. Only bid the Burgomaster tell the people that St. Winifried's Day must pass in peace."

"Your Grace, I would that love were coming into it for you."

"Love!" she answered. "Yours is a vain wish, Baron, but by taking a husband, I will gain something—I will gain the right to spare Karl's life. We will banish him from Metzburg, and if there is any real repentance in him, he may go south and wipe out the stain upon his honour by fighting against Louis of France."

Kevenfelt left her, his face troubled. He had not asked which of her suitors she would choose. There was not one of them worthy of his dear mistress, not one of them who was likely to bring that love into her life which he so ardently wished for her. It was well that the calls of state were heavy upon him, he argued, or he would be only a miserable old man. There was much to do. Despatches had arrived since he had gone to the Duchess, and he was told of a stranger waiting to see him.

"I have no time for strangers to-day. What is his business?"

"He speaks, sir, of urgent information concerning the welfare of Her Grace."

"Someone who looks for reward by telling us what

we know already," said the Baron testily. "Well, bid him wait. I will see him presently."

When Kevenfelt went to the Duchess later in the day he found her alone, pacing slowly up and down the room which had rung with the clash of steel last night. She felt less alone here than in that inner room where she usually spent her leisure and restful hours. Twice she had sent for Bertha, feeling in the mood to listen to confidences, but Bertha had gone out and had not yet returned. It was Bertha she was expecting when the Baron entered.

"Your Grace, this despatch has come from His Highness the Elector; it is marked private."

"Does the messenger wait for an answer?" she asked.

"No, Your Grace."

She took the sealed paper.

"I will read it presently. His Highness was not content with speaking his thanks, doubtless he has found time to write them. You have seen the Burgomaster?"

"Yes. No doubt he has already made a statement of your wishes to the Council, and a written proclamation has been fastened to the door of the Rathaus."

"So we gain time, Baron."

"True — quite true —"

"Is there some new difficulty?"

"No, not a difficulty, but a new suitor."

The Duchess looked at him quickly.

"Maurice of Savaria has come to Metzburg."

"I will not see him," said the Duchess with sudden anger. "His coming now is an insult. It has pleased him to delay his visit; it pleases us to give him no welcome."

"Your Grace —"

"Tell him that my choice is already made. I al-

loved you to have your way, Baron; I allowed him to be invited to Metzburg, but Maurice of Savaria is the one man I should not choose. That you must have known from the first. It was diplomatic to invite him perhaps, but since he has treated the invitation with such scant courtesy, he can look for no welcome, nor for any further consideration."

"Your Grace, His Highness has given me most excellent reasons for his delay; I believe you will find them sufficient. I beg that you will give him an audience."

"He is too late."

"Then I beg that you yourself will tell him so. Believe me, Your Grace, it would be wise. Most sincerely do I venture to remind you that you once gave me permission to go beyond my position as your minister, and advise as a father might do. I beg you to receive Maurice of Savaria."

"For what purpose?"

"Because it would be most unwise to refuse. We must be just. No date was fixed by our invitation, only that you would welcome your guests for the feast, and St. Winifried's is not until the day after to-morrow. He has explained his delay to me, but strictly speaking there was no need to explain. Show him your anger if you will, only see him."

"You would urge me to choose this man. I know that has always been in your mind."

"I urge nothing, Your Grace. I think, if I could ensure your happiness, I should be inclined to advise you to follow your own will in spite of the diplomatic complications which might arise; so far my love for you might blind my wisdom. Now, I only urge that you will see the Prince."

"I do not doubt your love, Baron, but I want to have

nothing to do with Maurice of Savaria. It would be unwise to see him, I could not help too plainly showing my contempt."

"To do so would be better than not to see him," said Kevenfelt. "For all the tales that have been told of him, he comes very humbly to you, and so far does you honour, I think. He will not trouble you, once he has your answer, and before the night falls will have ridden far from Metzburg."

"You persuade me against my will," she answered. "I will see him, and use as little ceremony as he does. I will see him here in an hour."

When Kevenfelt had gone, the Duchess resumed her slow pacing of the room, and the train of thoughts which his coming had interrupted. Maurice of Savaria had no part in them. Presently she remembered the private despatch from the Elector, and sat down to read it.

He had put his thanks into writing as she had conjectured, with many laboured compliments to season them. And then the letter became more natural as he spoke of the prospects of the war, and told her, rather humbly, what he hoped to accomplish before the cold came to drive both armies into winter quarters. This part of the letter pleased the Duchess. It was the Elector at his best. But at the end another note was struck.

"Your Grace has been much in my mind," he wrote. "Kings and rulers are a race apart. As it is a fashion not to judge some of their private actions as one judges men and women of commoner clay, so it is the fashion to demand of them that in their public acts they should conform to a code which all too often saps their true life, leaving them mere machines, cold and heartless. I have felt this most strongly since being brought

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into close touch with your warm, young life, all its long future yet before you, and I question whether diplomacy has a right to ruin such a life. May not the woman in you, by being only natural, make of you a greater Duchess? I believe it would, and as a man whose life lies mostly behind him I venture this private advice. Believing that the life with love in it is the life that grows to greater things, I say follow the dictates of your heart. If love has touched you, be guided by that love, and let diplomacy look to itself. This way, I think, lies happiness."

The Duchess read this part of the letter twice, first with resentment that he should presume to advise her, then with a gentler feeling and a wonder whether he was right.

It was a strange letter. Why had he written it? Was he being craftily diplomatic, while urging her to flaunt convention and let diplomacy take care of itself? Was this a special pleading for some puppet of his, for one of the princes now in Metzberg? Which one? She was deep in this speculation when the door opened, and a servant announced:

"His Highness, Prince Maurice of Savaria."

She was immediately absorbed in the letter, bent on according this man as cold a welcome as possible. When the door had closed again she looked up slowly, as though she were only suddenly conscious of not being alone. Then she stood up, the letter fluttered to the floor, and her hand felt for the arm of the chair as if she were in need of support.

"You!" she said in a whisper.

Dressed as she had first seen him when, as a spy, the troopers had dragged him before her at the tavern of the Three Shields, stood Bergolet.

CHAPTER XXVIII

ONE SUITOR IS ANSWERED

HE took a step towards her, then stopped, her attitude checking his impulsiveness, and for a few moments they stood facing each other in silence. He had known the Duchess in many moods; last night for a brief space he had seen the loving woman in her, now he was looking at one who seemed almost a stranger.

"I was told Your Grace would receive me in an hour," he said.

She stooped and picked up the Elector's letter. It had a new meaning for her; there was a craft in it which she had never suspected. Many things had suddenly a new significance for her, and her faith in the honesty of men and women was shaken as no rebellion had been able to disturb it. The sharp line she had drawn between her friends and her enemies was blurred. She felt quite alone, lacking any counsel she could trust, and with that imperious and independent spirit of her race she became defiant, even as a soldier when he places his back to the wall and, without thought of consequences, dares the whole world.

"So Prince Maurice of Savaria stole into Podina as a spy," she said with quiet contempt, as she seated herself.

"I cannot deny it, Your Grace."

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spies," she went on, "and for my part I hold that a prince forfeits all the advantage his position may give him when he stoops to such work."

"I ask no advantage from my position, Your Grace, but custom usually allows even a spy to say a word in his own defence, if he can. Have I your leave to speak?"

She bowed her consent.

"I understand Your Grace has never taken any interest in Maurice of Savaria except to despise him. I do not say you are wrong. I am the central figure of many tales, some of them true, some of them much altered by constant repetition."

"I am willing to listen to your defence, but a long recital would weary me," she said. "I am only concerned in you as a spy."

"I will tell nothing but what directly bears upon that part of my life, Your Grace, and be as brief as I can. You may judge by some of the tales you have heard that I have not been an exemplary prince; therefore when I heard whispers of a design to arrange a marriage for me with Her Grace of Podina, a lady I had never seen, I decided that she was the one woman in the world whose acquaintance I had no desire to make. And this was in spite of the fact that I also heard the turbulent Duchess — pardon, Your Grace, but it is the name which has been given you — was as beautiful as she was turbulent."

"Your lack of interest surprises me a little," she said carelessly. "I have heard of your journeying half across Europe to see a pretty woman, and to pay her a compliment which possibly she would sooner have been without."

"That is one of the tales which have been exagger-

ated by much telling," he answered, meeting the careless accusation with a touch of pride; "but even were it true, a man might commit a worse crime. As a fact, knowing how easily a princess is called beautiful, just because she happens to be a princess, I did not believe the story. I felt no interest whatever in Her Grace of Podina."

If he expected this statement to raise her resentment, to touch that vanity which a man seems to expect is the possession of every woman, he was mistaken; she made no comment, did not even look at him.

"No doubt I should have remained in this mind, had I not been told that you were determined to have me arrested should I set foot within your borders. This appealed to my love of adventure. I suddenly wanted to see the lady who could be as self-willed as I was myself, and the spice of danger in the enterprise only added zest to it. I determined to come to Podina, not as a prince but as an ordinary wayfarer, and chance whatever should happen to me."

He paused, but she remained silent.

"I decided that I must have a companion, one I could thoroughly trust, one who would not disclose my identity to get me out of a difficulty. After much trouble I succeeded in persuading Baron von Muden."

"General von Muden!" she exclaimed, for the name was familiar to her.

"The same, Your Grace. His mother's name was Saxe and he would consent to masquerade under no other when he became a trooper in your Guard. Let me do him justice; he tried to dissuade me from the enterprise, and in the end accompanied me unwillingly. It was only the thought that he would be at hand to stand by me if danger or trouble threatened which in-

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"For that I honour him," she said. "It is a pity you were not guided by his advice."

He was silent for a moment. It was the hardest thing he had ever heard her say, for he had done her some service.

"It was not the first time I had sunk my identity and taken to the road looking for adventure at every turn in it," he went on after a pause. "I have consorted with all sorts of odd fellows, and know more of human nature, and the joys and sorrows of men — yes, and of women,—than most princes do. I learned homely philosophy in their company, and having an ear for rhyme and song, I was well enough equipped to play the wandering minstrel in your country. I came to it in that character — a spy as you say, just to see what the famous turbulent Duchess was like. My first day's journey brought me to the tavern of the Three Shields. Since then I have been Bergolet."

"Since then you have been able to spy upon me at your leisure."

"I think I have been chiefly occupied in spying upon Your Grace's enemies," he said quietly. "This thing began as an escapade, an adventure I might possibly boast of in the days to come; but from the moment I saw you, it became the most serious enterprise of my life, and the turning point in it. When I became your jester I became a new man. I would not have you think too hardly of the man I was. Carelessness of conventions, a longing to be free from the duties and restrictions of my position, a determination not to marry merely because diplomacy demanded it, these were my chief crimes. A lenient judge would only laugh and

call me a fool, the severest of judges would hardly call me a villain. Indeed, I think no one would judge me more harshly than Bergolet has done."

"A woman judges differently perhaps," she answered; "but with the past I have nothing to do. What I know is this. Since you came to Podina you have lived a lie, mocking me—"

"Your Grace—"

"Mocking me, deceiving me. There is no denying it. Is it very wonderful that I should disbelieve your story now?"

"You doubt my word?"

"Is it such great audacity?" she asked sharply.

"You force me to remind Your Grace that you are speaking to Maurice of Savaria, not to your jester."

"I see only the man who is my jester, and I am not aware that I have yet dismissed him from my service. Who has the right to question how I shall speak to him?"

She was splendidly imperious as she said it, the Duchess whose will was law. He did not answer; she did not seem to expect him to do so.

"How long has Baron Kevenfelt known of this?" she asked after a moment's pause.

"To-day only. He came at once to tell you I was in Metzburg."

"But how long ago did he guess who you were?"

"He had not guessed it."

"And how long has Bertha von Lehmann known it?"

"I cannot tell whether she does know yet. If she has been with General von Muden to-day he may have told her."

"Who else in Metzburg knows?"

"By this time, perhaps, five men of the Guard."

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"Then is the news all over the city?" she said.

"No, Your Grace. If General von Muden has told them, they would be bound to secrecy."

"Secrecy! Guardsmen! With such a story to tell! Why, the secret would run like water from a sieve," she said angrily.

"These men are of a different sort, Your Grace. They are five good, honest fellows who for some time have been bound by an oath into a special league to defend their Duchess. They fought for the Elector in the streets, they held the dais in the Rathaus, they have stood sentries, often on double duty, and have been ready to act together at the first sign of danger threatening you. Such men do not betray secrets, Your Grace."

"And when was the Elector of Brandenburg let into the secret?" she asked after a few moments' silence. "Only to-day there comes a despatch from him most unwarrantably offering me advice, a letter I could not understand until you entered the room. It is perfectly clear now. You are evidently a puppet in his far-reaching schemes. He would most certainly never have written such a letter had he not guessed who you were."

"He was not admitted into the secret, but I have wondered whether he guessed it. If he suggests that I am a puppet in his hands he suggests what is not true."

"I have read his letter," she answered, "and I know something of his diplomacy."

"Your Grace, if he has guessed my secret, it was not by my will. I have been most careful to preserve it. When these princes came to Metzburg I asked your leave to keep in the background. I gave you a reason, a true one, but I was also anxious that none of them

should recognize me. What else there is to say, I have said already. I told you last night."

Slowly she stood up; this time her hand did not seek the arm of her chair for support. She was calm, deliberate, very sure of herself.

"I have forgotten last night," she said.

It was hardly possible that the statement was quite true. Only a few hours ago she had stood facing this man, in this selfsame room, and had confessed that she loved him. He had worn the scarlet and green of the jester then, but it was to the man she had spoken; now it was to Maurice of Savaria she made this deliberate statement, to the man who had deceived her. She had forgotten last night so far as it could influence her action in the present crisis. She had to answer this Prince who had come a-wooing, and she answered him in the way he would most readily understand. She could have given him many reasons for her decision, but this firm declaration of forgetfulness would most surely convince him of her determination, of the uselessness of any appeal to her. She was not mistaken. For a moment he looked steadily at her, trying to see the woman behind the Duchess, then he bowed low to her.

"Your Grace, I understand your dismissal. It is fortunate that few know my identity, and they may be trusted not to speak. No one need be aware that Maurice of Savaria ever came to Metzburg. I cannot forget it, but I shall not speak of it. In my own country they will think their Prince has returned from some mad escapade, and I shall not undeceive them. For me, the mad enterprise will ever mark a sacred period in my life. If you should ever think of the sins and the follies of Maurice of Savaria, know also this, he learnt

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to deeply regret many things while he was near you, and when you sent him away, you sent him back to his own country a more honest and a better man. Your Grace, I humbly take my leave."

Most certainly did he understand, even more surely than she had expected. Some word of justification she had anticipated, perhaps a few words of pleading. She was ready to answer both. She was not quite prepared for so sudden an acceptance of her dismissal. There was yet something she must do.

"I would not have you go leaving me your debtor," she said. "I do not so far forget last night as not to remember that you saved me from my enemies; I do not forget the forest that lies towards Festenhausen; I do not forget that you did much to protect the Elector in the streets of Metzburg the other day, and in so doing saved this State's honour and mine; for all these things I thank you."

"Your Grace, they were only the duties of one who was in your service. For them you are not in debt. It is I who am your debtor, and I have no means of repaying. I leave you most fully conscious of my obligation."

He bowed to her once again, not as the jester might have done, but with all the dignity that became a prince, and was gone.

As she stood there looking at the closed door, in fancy she heard the musical clash of silver bells. She had talked with Maurice of Savaria; it was strange how clearly those bells to which she had become accustomed should ring in her ears. She turned with an impatient gesture at her own weakness and passed into the inner room.

CHAPTER XXIX

IN WHICH BERTHA MAKES A CONFESSION

INTO the inner room Bertha von Lehmann came presently. The Duchess welcomed her with a smile, but it was not the welcome Bertha had looked for.

"I have sent for you twice, child, and you were nowhere to be found."

"Pardon, Your Grace, I was —"

"I am not angry, Bertha. You have timed your coming very well. I am alone and in the mood for your companionship."

Bertha looked at her, trying to understand her mood, but the Duchess's face told little, and her eyes seemed to hold no secret.

"Has Your Grace been long alone?"

"I doubt not the time has seemed longer with me than with you," the Duchess answered with a smile. "Give me your confidence if you will. I can guess a great deal, but not all perhaps. Those about me seem anxious to keep things from my knowledge. We shall have to alter this in future."

"I wonder how much Your Grace has guessed."

"Nearly everything concerning you, I fancy."

"That is impossible," Bertha answered. "Has Your Grace ever taken me for a spy?"

"A spy!" And the Duchess turned quickly.

"It is true."

"No, I have never suspected you of spying upon me,"

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said the Duchess. "Is it the whole truth you would tell me now, or some half tale to suit your own or your employer's purpose?"

"The whole truth."

"Only swear to that, Bertha, and you are forgiven before you confess. I am so heartsick of hypocrisy and lies."

Bertha told of her father, of the incidents which had led up to his death in Berlin, of the whispers which had become current afterwards concerning herself.

"I was perfectly innocent, Your Grace. I had other things to think of besides the quarrels between State and State, between one Ruler and another, to me more important things. I was a girl looking forward to happiness, but looking forward with a little fear just then. While journeying with my father I had met Prince Karl, and he — he loved me."

"Loved you!"

"I believed in him, in his honesty. It may have been presumption since he was a prince, but I trusted him."

"At least it was foolish," said the Duchess. "You are more simple than I imagined, Bertha."

"Your Grace, Prince Karl asked me to be his wife."

"His wife! Impossible!"

"Nothing seemed impossible then," said Bertha. "Love made us equal. That was his answer when I bade him remember he was a prince. I think he would deny it now, but I am telling you the truth. I expected to be his wife. I thought he would come to me or send for me, when he heard of my position in Berlin; instead, there were rumours that he was going to marry Your Grace, and I determined to come to Metzburg, to my uncle. I had often been here before, had stayed here for long periods when I was a child."

"Did you tell your uncle why you were coming?"

"No. I hardly knew myself why I was coming, whether it was in hope or with the idea of revenge. I know now that my uncle welcomed me because he thought he could make use of me. Just before I left Berlin, His Highness the Elector took special notice of me. There are times when he can be sympathetic, and I told him about Prince Karl. He did not laugh at me as I expected. He said he would help me, and told me that I could be of service to him. I was to watch events in Podina. He was most anxious that you should not marry Prince Karl, and he believed you would not do so when you had heard my story."

"And why did you not tell me your story, Bertha?"

"I found that Metzburg was full of intrigue; there was no certainty that you were willing to marry the Prince. I waited. Perhaps I still believed in Prince Karl. He might be deceiving you, not me, and if so I would shield him from danger. I could only think of Your Grace as my rival."

"Did you go to Prince Karl?"

"No. He did not know I was in Metzburg."

"But you knew he was scheming against me."

"Not until after Your Grace had taken me into your service," Bertha answered. "I had still my own ends to serve, but I began to watch on your behalf. I was a spy, but I quickly learnt to love you. I was soon able to be of real help to you. I had always treasured as a great secret what had been told me by an old servant when I was a child; that part of the saddler's house had at one time been a part of the Burgomaster's, and that a hidden communication still existed. The old servant died long ago, but I found the movable panels, found that they worked now as easily as they

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had ever done. I was the only one who knew the secret, I think; even the saddler was ignorant of it until the night I took him that way to save him from ill-usage at the hands of the Guard. I do not believe my uncle had any knowledge even of the shutter, made by some plotters of the past, by which everything spoken in that room at the Rising Sun could be heard. On two occasions my knowledge has proved useful to Your Grace. I was able to show Bergolet how he could save you from the ambush at Festenhausen; with the saddler's help I was able to escape the other day and warn you of the Elector's danger. By that secret way you were able to enter my uncle's house unseen, and so, through the Burgomaster's private passage, you reached the Rathaus in time."

"You need not remind me of your services, Bertha; I do not forget them, and I know I have much for which to thank you."

"Your Grace, I am not asking for thanks, I am asking forgiveness."

The Duchess did not speak immediately. She seemed to be considering how best to frame the questions she wanted answered.

"Tell me," she said after a pause, "why did you choose the jester for your confidence?"

"I thought he was also a spy, a spy for Louis of France. This gave me a hold over him, I argued. Besides, I was convinced that he was — that he was ready to serve you, even at the risk of his life if necessary."

"What made you think he was a spy?"

"I had seen him before I came to Metzberg, and he was not a jester then."

"Speak plainly, Bertha. You knew who he really was?"

"No, Your Grace. I have only known that to-day — Captain Saxe told me."

"Baron von Muden you mean," said the Duchess.

"I still think of him as Captain Saxe," Bertha answered.

"Prince Karl is forgotten then?"

"A man may easily kill a woman's love," was the answer; "most easily when he speaks of marrying one woman to serve his ambition, and of loving another. Could he show his own worthlessness in a more lurid light, or express his contempt more clearly for that other woman by supposing she would accept such a position complacently?"

"I fear France is trying to teach us that such a position is honourable when a Prince offers it," said the Duchess. "And who was it the Elector hoped I should marry, Bertha?"

"Prince Maurice of Savaria, Your Grace."

The Duchess laughed a little hardly.

"I have been well fooled," she said, "and although I am the chief person concerned, I am the last to hear of this masquerade. I find it difficult to disentangle truth from falsehood, but if His Highness of Brandenburg were innocent of the fraud practised upon me, he saw through the jester's disguise. I have a most subtle letter from him, an attempt to play on my sentiment. It amuses me. I suppose all men are convinced that there is one sure way to make a fool of a woman — an appeal to her heart. Statesmen, philosophers, fools, reprobates and sinners, they all try it."

"Your Grace —" Then Bertha stopped.

"If you think you have some wise thing to say, don't check it, child," said the Duchess.

"Your Grace, I was thinking, since men are as they

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are, is it not well there should be this one way of appeal? It seems to me to lift the woman above the philosophers, the sinners and the rest of them."

"Has General von Muden had to use that way with you, Bertha? Has he been a very great sinner?"

"Your Grace, I think it was I who confessed. I have been a spy, and he hates spies."

"Being also Captain Saxe of my Guard such hatred seems rather impudent," said the Duchess. "Still, you believe him; he has easily found the way to your heart, and nothing else matters. I do not happen to possess a heart of that kind."

"Your Grace —"

"Is it another wise thought? Let me hear it, Bertha."

"I was thinking of happiness."

"Are you still afraid it will elude your grasp?" the Duchess asked.

"I was thinking of Your Grace."

"I may find contentment, Bertha. For such as I am there is a well-marked road which must be followed. Happiness, what other women mean by happiness, is not often found upon it, I fancy, but duty is there and — and contentment I hope."

"It seems a poor substitute for happiness," Bertha answered.

"Perhaps. I do not know."

Bertha was silent for a moment.

"Your Grace has seen Prince Maurice?" she asked.

"Yes."

Bertha waited, her eyes full of questions, but she could not, dared not put them into words.

"They have made you a conspirator," said the Duchess.

"No, no; it is only that I love you. For the moment I can only think of you as a woman."

"You must not do that, Bertha. You must not presume too far. Yes, I have seen Prince Maurice. He is a little different from the man I had imagined him to be, in some respects better, in some worse. That is all my calm judgment can say of him. He has had my answer, and I understand will not remain for the feast."

Bertha tried to answer but the Duchess stopped her.

"All is said that must be said about him. You will soon be leaving me, Bertha."

"But your Grace —"

"I am not dismissing you, child. I forgive you for playing the spy, and indeed, you have rendered your employer far less service than you have given me. I am in your debt. I do not imagine General von Mudén will remain a Captain in my Guard. He will return with his Prince to Savaria, and then come back to claim you."

"I do not want to leave you."

"The General will soon alter that," said the Duchess with a smile. "And we shall make him very welcome when he comes to claim you. He has chosen a very charming woman, but the General is a great man in Savaria. Have you thought of that?"

"Yes, Your Grace."

"It will be said that he might have chosen in a higher rank. A Burgomaster's niece, even when she has aspired to a prince, is a small prize for General von Mudén."

"I know, Your Grace, but love —"

"Love makes all things equal. Yes, so it is said, but it isn't true, and there will be spiteful tongues to

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tell you so unless they can be silenced. Perhaps I can do something to silence them. I must think what dower I can best give you. I shall find some title for my lady-in-waiting which shall set her above such spitefulness."

"Your Grace —"

"Be happy, child. When the General comes to Metzburg for you, he shall have welcome, and find someone of more importance than the Burgomaster's niece awaiting him."

"Oh, Your Grace, if only — I wish — I wish —"

"You must not make me angry with your foolish wishes, Bertha," said the Duchess, as stern now as a moment ago she had been gentle, and Bertha was silent. She was not given even the opportunity to thank her mistress, for a servant entered to say that Baron Kev-enfelt was asking to see Her Grace.

"Leave me, Bertha. The Baron has also been drawn into this conspiracy, and may have come to confess."

The lined face of the old man was troubled, he could not hide his years to-day; yet he came in a fatherly mood rather than as the trusted minister. The Duchess realized his attitude at once.

"Baron, I have done as you desired," she said; "I have seen Prince Maurice. He has told you perhaps what has passed between us."

"He told me that he was returning to Savaria, Your Grace."

"There is no more to be said."

"Pardon, Duchess, I think there is. I believe your people would rejoice if —"

"Baron, I will be advised no further in this matter," she answered.

"Has Your Grace considered —"

"I have considered everything. You need not fear that I shall break faith with my people. In due time they shall shout themselves hoarse in the market-place, wishing me long life and happiness. I think I desire the one as little as I expect the other; but my people shall not be disappointed. They shall do their shouting."

"I had hoped to shout such wishes with them," said the Baron.

"I have no command to give you on that point," the Duchess answered.

Kevenfelt moved restlessly about the room for a moment. He was trying to find some argument which would appeal to her, and could find none.

"To which of the princes am I to convey congratulations?" he asked presently, and his endeavour to conceal his irritation was not altogether successful.

"To none of them at present," she answered. "To-morrow is only St. Winifried's Eve. I can still call to-morrow my own. It is a precious day to me, and except what business must be done, I will spend it alone. To-night I will give to my guests, but to-morrow shall be for myself. You will not grudge me this consolation."

"No, Your Grace, but I think your choice —"

"It shall be made known to you early on the morning of the feast day. I am a free woman until that day. You shall then go to the man I have chosen. Should he be inclined, at the last moment to withdraw from the honour of marrying the — the turbulent Duchess; well, there are other princes waiting in the palace, and no doubt one of them will accept the honour. You see,

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Baron, how determined I am that my people should not be disappointed."

"Your Grace, there is one of these princes —"

"Who will have ridden far from Metzburg before St. Winifried's Day," she answered quickly. "That is well, I think. And after the feast, Baron, we will answer this letter from the Elector. He presumes too far, but our letter shall surprise him a little. Now, I would rest, Baron, before I present myself to my guests to-night."

Kevenfelt turned to the door, even more troubled than when he had entered the room. She stopped him before he reached it.

"Baron, I do not wish the princes to know there has been another suitor. You will not mention that Maurice of Savaria has been to Metzburg."

And that night the Duchess took her place among her guests. Perhaps Bertha alone guessed that there were tears behind her laughter, and even Bertha could not hear the musical clash of silver bells which rang from time to time in the ears of her mistress. Once, the Duchess half turned round before she realized that the sound was only her fancy, before she remembered that the jester was not there. It was strange to know that Bergolet would never again stand behind her chair.

CHAPTER XXX

THE EVE OF ST. WINIFRIED

TO-MORROW. In the market-place they spoke of to-morrow, some with the fervour of religious enthusiasm, setting great store upon the feast; others because St. Winifried's Day was the climax of the festival and the very fullest enjoyment might be looked for then, the very height of the fun and frolic. The mummers declared they were keeping their best spectacle for the feast day, the tumblers were reserving their most wonderful tricks, and the Egyptian fortune-teller prophesied that it would be a most fortunate day for seeing a propitious future in the fall of the cards and the patterns made by the scattered sand.

To-morrow would be the climax of the festival, and really the end of it, for the following day the market-place would begin to wear its normal aspect, and the shops would take down their shutters again. The saddler was not the only one who rejoiced thereat, for until the feast was over there was no work to be got out of any apprentice. Masters grew tired of idleness if those who worked for them did not.

To-morrow. It was the great day to many a stalwart lad and maid. Shy lips had whispered, perhaps months ago, "Wait until St. Winifried's Day," and now the waiting was nearly over. Shy lips must give a more definite answer directly the service in St. Anne's

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was over, and the people had been blessed, and the great bell had rung out noon from the belfry. Then was the hour when maiden hearts must be honest and when young men would laugh for the very joy that was in them. This was youth's feast, and those who were old must grow young again for a space and remember a feast day, long ago perchance, when their answer had been eagerly waited for. Was not the Duchess herself to plight her troth to-morrow at one with the simplest maiden in her State? It was to be a great day this year, greater than it had ever been, said the ancients of the city, and fathers and mothers acquiesced, and even the lads and maidens nodded approval, though it was chiefly their own affairs they thought of, which was only natural and proper.

To-morrow. The thought of the feast brought no thrill of anticipation to the Duchess. It was to-day which was precious to her, to-day which was all her own, wherein she might dream as she listed. There was not much for her to do. Baron Kevenfelt visited her early, but left her in less than half an hour, and she would not let Bertha remain with her. She wanted to be alone.

Had she acted for the best? Had she chosen well? Had she made the first step along the road it was right for her to take? The questions would come, but she had answers ready — good answers which none could deny. Could she allow herself to be laughed at throughout Europe by marrying a man who had fooled her so outrageously, the very man she had declared she would never marry? A woman perhaps could afford to acknowledge a mistake, and find much to admire in a man who could win her in spite of herself; but not the Duchess. To laugh at Podina's Duchess, to make her the

heroine of a ribald tale which would set mirth holding its sides in camp and tavern, would be to lower the dignity of Podina itself. She must not do this. Duty stood as plain as a beacon on a hill top. Yet she was a woman as well as a Duchess. Not for the first time did the woman in her point along the flowery by-path which led from the road she had elected to follow. It was pleasant to look along that path, and dream of all the beauties that must be upon it as it ran its long journey through life; but she had refused to be tempted. To-day, now that she had put herself beyond temptation, the longing to tread that flowery way came with renewed force; and then she remembered the Elector's letter. She read it again, understanding it clearly now, seeing all the subtle craft in it. The Elector knew the truth, and with feigned frankness and good-will advised her to take the road he had always schemed that she should take. He knew more of Savaria than she did, more of Savaria's Prince probably. He was counting on love to make her subservient to her husband, knowing that Prince Maurice would be a tool in his hands. It was his subtle plan to absorb both Podina and Savaria presently. The thought strengthened her. He should have the Duchess to deal with, not a weak woman. And then came another question. Was Prince Maurice so weak a man as this arch schemer imagined? She did not answer the question, she could not, but she lost herself in memories. She saw the scarlet and green figure which had ridden beside her through the forest; she saw the trooper with the bandaged head watchful on the edge of the dais; in fancy she saw the jester guarding her door that no one might pass it to do her harm. Memory seemed to halt here. She did not think of her interview with

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Maurice of Savaria. And as her memory halted she seemed to hear the jingle of bells.

Over and over again that day the same thoughts, the same questions and doubts swung monotonously through her mind, and always the sound of the bells was in her ears.

To-morrow. It was coming fast. This day that was hers was dying. Sunset had flung gorgeous colours across the western sky. They had faded and the moon was up, a crescent moon hanging over the garden. There would be many maids dreaming of love in Metzburg to-night. To-morrow —

Then Bertha came to interrupt her thoughts.

"Your Grace will not join the guests to-night?"

"No."

"Will you let me stay with you?"

"No, child, I —"

"I should like to stay," Bertha said.

"You would interrupt my dreams," the Duchess answered. "I cannot afford to let you do that. After to-night I must dream no more."

She went to the window.

"The garden is empty now," she said after a pause.

"I will go and dream there for a little while, to my favourite seat. No one will disturb me there."

Bertha went with her. No one met them. They saw no one except the sentry who stood by the door which opened on to the garden.

"You would not have me stay?" Bertha asked again.

"No. You may come to my room presently. I shall have finished my dreaming then."

The garden was very still to-night, and once again the thoughts and doubts, the questions and answers, re-

peated themselves; once again she thought of the jester in his scarlet and green, remembered what he had done, remembered many things he had said, many things —

She noted that the fountain was not playing to-night. She wondered why it was still. Sometimes, even in the moonlight, the surface of the water in its wide basin was like a mirror, and you could see — What had Bergolet said?

She got up and stood upon the steps and looked into the water. It was smooth and still, like glass. There was a star reflected in it. What had the jester said? An oval face, and two stars that are a woman's eyes. She could see her reflection. An ideal. A jester's ideal. It was great presumption in a jester to say it.

She went slowly back to the seat and sat down again — dreaming still. To-morrow! No more dreams. Was it possible she could live through to-morrow, through all the to-morrows that would be her life? And again came the sound of the silver bells as if to mock her. How clear they were in her ears for a moment. Then they ceased, but quickly came again. Would they ring in her ears for ever? She started, so loud they seemed, and then —

"Mistress, I think you are sad; shall I sing to you?"

"Bergolet!"

She had spoken his name to the night — dreaming still.

"Yes, mistress. Shall I sing?"

It was no dream. The jester stood there, close to the fountain, the scarlet and green clear in the moonlight, and a moon ray touched the silver head of the bauble lying across his arm.

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"I thought you were leagues from Metzburg," the Duchess said in a whisper.

"Leagues from Metzburg, mistress! No. You did not send me on a journey. Are you thinking, dreaming that you had dismissed me?"

"I have dismissed you."

"You still dream, mistress. I know you have sent away a worthless fellow. Maurice of Savaria is gone, but Bergolet is here — just your fool, Bergolet."

She tried to tell him to go, but the words would not come.

"You have taught that same Maurice a lesson, mistress. I warrant he is thinking of it to-night. He came adventuring from Savaria, a wandering, romantic fellow, not thinking great evil of himself, yet careless, thoughtless, a fool. You have sent him back a different man. I think there was a time when his indifference would have allowed His Highness of Brandenburg to make a tool of him, but I am very sure that can never happen now. He was not very evil, mistress, you have my word for that; but he has learnt much in Metzburg. You have made a man of him. You may take my word for that too."

"I will not talk of him, nor to him."

"Mistress, let us forget him. Shall I sing to you, or will you deign to talk about a poor jester?"

"What of him?" she said, and her voice was very low.

"Let him stay with you always, mistress. I think you will never really love the man you must choose to-morrow, and when you are sad and the world is grey, you may call for Bergolet who will sing to you, or make you merry with a jest. I think, mistress, there will always be a place in your heart for

the fool. Let me keep it, for indeed, there will never again be song or jest for me if you send me away."

She was silent. She could not say what was in her mind for her heart spoke so loudly.

"I shall be only your fool, if you will have it so, but I shall be happy being near you."

"You have been watching me," she said. "How long have you been watching me?"

"I have not been watching."

"You saw me standing by the fountain."

"You were standing there when I saw you."

"Do you know why I was looking into the fountain?" she asked.

"How can I know, mistress?"

"I was looking at a fool's ideal," she whispered, "and to-morrow —"

"There is a sob in your voice, mistress."

"Maurice."

In a moment he was kneeling at her feet, and he raised the hem of her gown to his lips.

"So I knelt when you made me a fool, now mistress do with me what you will."

"Maurice, to-morrow I must choose a husband. I thought to be unhappy all my life after to-morrow. Will you help me to be happy?"

She stood up, tall, stately, beautiful in the moonlight. Her hand rested on his bowed head for a moment. Then he stood before her, her hands in his.

"All my life I will strive to give you happiness," he said.

"Must I confess as I confessed to Bergolet? Maurice, we must go quickly. They must know at once that you have come, that to-morrow —"

He held her hands.

"I love you," he said. "Will you not confess to me as you confessed to Bergolet?"

"Maurice, I —"

Through the silence of the night came a sharp word of command, the relief of the Guard on the terrace without. It startled them, so suddenly did it break into the little world which was all their own. Marching feet receded, and then came a voice, singing, a trooper off duty, going down the steep road which led from the castle; not a loud song, but the words came clearly on the still air:

"Maids will deceive, 'tis their fashion we know,
We're not the men to believe them I trow;
Maid's kiss for fool, but for man who is wise
That kiss is best which in the wine cup lies:
Then drink, deeply drink
If your heart —"

The song trailed away into silence as the trooper went further along the road.

"Maurice! It isn't true, is it?"

For one moment she was looking into his eyes, holding herself away from him; then she was just a woman in the arms of the man she loved.

"It isn't true, that song," she said, "it isn't true."

THE END