



***JUSTIN
H. MCCARTHY***

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EAN 8596547047247

DigiCat, 2022

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CHAPTER I

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IN THE FIRCONA TAVERN

In the dark main room of the Fircone Tavern the warm June air seemed to have lost all its delicacy, like a degraded angel. It was sodden through and through, as with the lees of wine; it was stained and shamed with the smells of hams and cheeses; it was thick and heavy as if with the breaths of all the rogues and all the vagabonds that had haunted the hostelry from its evil dawn. Such guttering lights and glimmering flames as lit the place—for there was a small fire on the wide hearth in spite of the fine weather—peopled the gloom with fantastic quivering shadows as of lean fingers that unfolded themselves to filch, or clenched themselves to stab in the back. But its patrons seemed to like the place well enough in spite of its miasma, and Master Robin Turgis, the fat landlord, drowsy with his own wine and dripping from the heat, surveyed them complacently, and

wallowed as it were in the rattle and clink of mug and can, the full-throated laughter and the shrill chatter, crisply emphasized by oaths, which assured him of the Fircone's popularity with its intimates. Master Robin's intelligence was limited; his wit was simple; the processes of his mind moved easily along the lines of least resistance. The Burgundians might be hammering with mailed fists at the walls of Paris; the fire-new crown of Louis the Eleventh might be falling from the royal forehead: it mattered not a jot to dishonest Robin so long as the Fircone brimmed with company.

There was enough company in the room on this evening to content even his wish. It was not the kind of company that a wise man would desire to keep, but it delighted the innkeeper, for it drank deeply and spent freely, and in Robin's view it was of no more concern to him how the money that changed hands was come by than it was how the profound potations might affect the brains and stomachs of his clients. If any officer of the law had questioned him as to his association with a certain mysterious Brotherhood of the Cockleshells whose plunderings and pilferings were the pride of the Court of Miracles and the fear of citizens with strong boxes, he would have shrugged his fat shoulders and shaken his round head and disowned all knowledge of any such unlawful corporation. Yet his face wrinkled with smiles as his glance rested amiably upon the bodily presences of certain illustrious members of the brotherhood, wild men in withered frippery, wine-stained to the very bones.

They were five in number, and four of them were huddled round a table in the cosiest corner of the room, the corner

that was sheltered from the heat of the fire by the high-backed settle, the corner that was nearest to the main door if one desired—as one often did—to slip out in a hurry, and to the red-curtained windows, if one desired—as one seldom did—a mouthful of fresh air. Robin Turgis knew them all, admired them all, feared them all, and yet he held head against them because his Beaune wine was so adorable, and because he could keep his own counsel. Slender René de Montigny, in a jerkin of rubbed and faded purple velvet, with his malign, Italianate face and his delicate Italianate grace; rotund Guy Tabarie, bluff, red and bald; Casin Cholet, tall and bird-like, with the figure of a stork and the features of a bird of prey; Jehan le Loup, who looked as vulpine as his nickname; these Robin Turgis eyed and catalogued with a kind of pride. It was a fearsome privilege for the Fircone to boast such patronage. On the settle, with his face to the fire, Colin de Cayeulx sprawled in a drunken sleep, forgetting and forgotten, a harmless looking, good-natured looking knave who was neither harmless nor good-natured.

For every man of the gang there was a woman, and there was a woman over, who was easily the central star of the flaunting galaxy. The shabby bravery of the men was matched by the shabby bravery of five out of the six women. Gaudy, painted, assertive strumpets with young, fair, shameless faces—worthy Jills of the ill-favoured Jacks who cuddled them—Jehanneton, the fair helm-maker; Denise, Blanche, Isabeau, and Guillemette, the landlord's daughter, who consorted gaily enough with these brightly-plumaged birds of a rogue's paradise. But the sixth woman was a bird of quite another feather.

Over all the clatter this woman's voice rose suddenly as clear as the call of a thrush, and the hot space seemed to cool and the hot air to clean as she sang. She who sang was a girl of five and twenty, whom it had pleased to clothe her ripe womanhood in a boy's habit, that clasped her fine body as close as a second skin, and she might have passed for a man no otherwhere than in a madhouse. She looked very charming in the stained and faded daintiness of her male attire. She wore a green velvet doublet and green woollen hose, with a scarlet girdle and pouch about her waist, and a scarlet feather stuck defiantly in her green cap, beneath which her long fair hair tumbled in liberal confusion about her shoulders. She sat on the edge of a table swinging one shapely leg loose and strained upon its fellow while she nursed her lute as if it had been a baby, and carolled as if there were no other work in the world to do than to sing. The men and women who sat and sprawled around the table kept quiet, listening to her and staring at her; sleepy Colin pricked his ears; Robin Turgis was alert to hear, for he knew that it was worth while to listen when Huguette du Hamel chose to sing. Robin Turgis knew all about her. Her gentle blood was wild blood, and in spite of her birth and her name she had drifted on the stream of strange pleasure to be the idol of the Fircone's shrine. Her voice was sweet and the tune had a tender, appealing grace, with a little minor wail in it that brought tears into the singer's eyes, and she mouthed the words as if she found them sweet as honey. And this is what she sang:

"Daughters of pleasure, one and all,
Of form and feature delicate,

Of bodies slim, and bosoms small,
With feet and fingers white and straight,
Your eyes are bright, your grace is great
To hold your lovers' hearts in thrall;
Use your red lips before too late,
Love ere love flies beyond recall."

Her voice dropped and her fingers tinkled over the strings. René de Montigny turned his dark, well-featured face in a sweeping leer that seemed to taste the familiar graces with gusto. "Devilish good advice, Dollies," he shouted, and as he spoke he hugged the nearest girl close to him, and tilting up her chin with his free hand, kissed her noisily. The girl squealed a little at his roughness; the other pairs laughed and clasped after his example, only the singer, unheeding, lifted her sweet voice again, and this time there was a savour of gall in the sweetness of the honey:

"For soon the golden hair is grey,
And all the body's lovely line
In wrinkled meanness slipped astray;
The limbs so round and ripe and fine
Shrivelled and withered; quenched the shine
That made your eyes as bright as day:
So, ladies, hear these words of mine,
Love, ere love flutter far away."

The drift of the music seemed sadder than before, and there was a little silence when the last words floated away into the blackened rafters, a silence broken by one of the girls.

"Enne, that was a sad song, Abbess," Isabeau sighed, and her face seemed to have paled beneath its false colours and the lines about her mouth and eyes to have grown older in surrender to inevitable thoughts. She whom the girl called Abbess laughed, and her mirth sounded harshly after the dreamy sweetness of her song.

"Master François Villon made it for me t'other day," she answered. "' You will grow old, Idol,' he said, 'and I make you this song to teach you true things.'"

Guy Tabarie, whose red hair bunched out like little flames from the fiery sun of his countenance, clapped his hands to the girl's waist and thrust his face near to hers. "Kiss me and forget it," he hiccoughed. The girl gave importunacy a little push which sent him staggering back to his seat. "I have no kisses for any Jack of you all but François," she said, while the others roared at the man's discomfiture. "Ah, there is no one of you that can write songs like him, or make one sad as he can in the midst of gladness."

The girl whom purple-coated René had kissed so rudely shivered a little. "A strange reason for liking a man," she whispered, "that he make you sad." She glanced wistfully round at her companions: to the faces of the women the influence of the song had lent an unwonted softness, but had brought no touch of tenderness to those of the men. Jehan le Loup banged his fist heavily on the table in furious protestation till the cans and flagons rattled.

"Is this a Court of Love?" he grunted, baring his yellow tusks in a swinish rage. "There are other rooms for love-making," and he jerked his thumb towards the roof. "We are

here for drinking; we are here for dicing; to the devil with smocks and sonnets."

He jumbled the ivories lustily as he growled and the familiar jingle banished unfamiliar fancies. He slapped the spotted cubes on the table and as they rolled into equilibrium eager eyes counted them, and fingers eager or reluctant pinched or pushed at coins. The spell of the music was broken. The melodious Abbess, with eyes now glittering and tearless, swung her supple body from table to bench, thrust herself a place among the players, shouted to Robin Turgis to bring more wine, and spreading some silver on the dingy board surrendered to speculation. Nobody heeded the faint clink which told that a hand troubled the latch of the street door; nobody heeded the faint creaking which showed that it was being softly opened; nobody heeded the man who put his head gently through the opening and looked thoughtfully around him. The new-comer was a grim-visaged fellow, somewhere near the edge of middle age. He was dressed in the sober habit of a simple burgess, and he used the long fold that hung from his cloth cap very dexterously to hide his face. He peered into the obscurity of the room with a disquieting smile that deepened in its unpleasing expression as its owner surveyed the noisy fellowship in the corner, and nodded his head as he seemed to identify its members. Confident that nobody marked him he stealthily entered the room, and holding the door ajar, he motioned to one who still stood without to enter. The summons was answered by the entrance of another figure, capped and habited like the first, who slipped in swiftly and furtively, and made at once for the farthest and loneliest

angle of the room without looking to right or left, while his herald, after closing the door as noiselessly as possible, followed quickly in his footsteps. If Master Robin, dancing attendance upon his clamorous customers, could have divined the identity of the newcomers whose advent he regarded so indifferently, his purple face would have paled and his stomach failed him at the thought that the Fircone sheltered the baleful presence of the king and of his malign satellite, Tristan l'Hermite.

The two strangers seated themselves at a small table in the very pole of the room to the place where the Abbess and her friends were busy, and the second of the pair, drawing a little apart the dark-coloured fold of cloth that almost concealed his features, looked around him curiously.

"Is this the eyrie?" he whispered, and his companion answered him in the same low tone, "This is the Fircone Tavern, sire." The other's finger was lifted to his lip at once in warning. "Hush, gossip, hush," he muttered. "No title now, I beg of you. Here I am not Louis of France, but a simple sober citizen like yourself. I suppose we must take something for the good of the house?" His henchman promptly replied that such action was indispensable. But Louis still looked doubtful. "Will the liquor be very detestable," he asked, inserting two thin fingers in the black pouch at his belt. Tristan shook his head. "Nay, you can get good wine here if you know how to ask for it—and how to pay for it."

"No one knows better than I how to ask for anything," chuckled the king. "Or worse, how to for it," Tristan sneered. The king scowled at him. "Then, why do you keep my

service?" he snapped. Tristan shrugged his shoulders. "Some dregs of devotion, I suppose. Here stands Master Innkeeper." For by this time Robin Turgis was at their elbow, scanning them narrowly with his small, pig—like eyes that could make little, however, of the well-muffled faces. He waited on their order with a kind of ferocious submission, draining his rank forehead with a sweep of his dirty palm.

"Friend," said Louis, sniffing sardonically at the too odoriferous personality of the taverner, "you behold here two decent cits who have turned a penny, or twain in a bargain, and have a mind to wet their whistles in consequence. Have you aught to offer that is good alike for purse and palate?"

Robin Turgis nodded his round head and fondled his round stomach. "We have a white wine of Beaune," he said unctuously, as if he were tasting the wares he commended, "at two sols the flagon that is noble drinking."

The king's sense of economy shivered at the sum; as if it had been a wound.

"Pasques-Dieu!" he stammered. "So it should be at the price." Robin Turgis remained unmoved: Tristan clinched the business. "Bring it," he said decisively, and as the landlord shambled away towards his cellar, Tristan met the king's condemnatory frown squarely.

"I wear out my hands and feet in your service," lie said, "I want to save my throat and stomach."

Louis made no answer and was mournfully silent until the obese landlord returned with the much-vaunted vintage, which he set down on the table with a brace of goblets. Louis fumbled with reluctant fingers in his pouch, extracted

the exact amount necessary for payment and dropped it into the fat paw of Robin Turgis. But Robin lingered and Louis looking at him in surprise met the admonishing glare of Tristan. "Give him a penny for himself," Tristan whispered, and the king, with an unwillingness he was at no pains to conceal, added the demanded drink-money to the other coins, and eyed the departing back of the landlord with well-defined aversion. "You are generous with other people's pennies, friend," he snapped at his companion, but Tristan, paying no heed to his querulousness, filled the two cups with the clear golden liquid and thrust one of them under the nose of the sulky monarch. Its fine dry fragrance soothed Louis; he took a deep sip and was mollified; another and he had forgiven if not forgotten his generosity. He winked at Tristan amiably over the rim of the goblet. "This is seeing life, friend Tristan," he murmured, contentedly, stretching his thin legs in delicious ease. But Tristan was in no holiday humour.

"Let's hope it mayn't be seeing death, friend Louis" he snorted. "There are a couple of rogues in that covey who would spit you or split you or slit you for the price of a drink."

Louis laughed affably. "And no such cheap bargain," he commented, "seeing what wine costs here. But this is an interesting business."

Tristan would concede nothing to the king's good-humour. "Where's the interest?" he asked. "A few bullies, bawds and bonarobas boozing together. You can keep the same company at court—only a shade cleaner—and not be out of pocket for the privilege either."

The king's mouth puckered in appreciation of some memory. He leaned forward and touched Tristan's sleeve.

"Gossip Tristan, there is at my court a scholar who told me an Eastern tale."

"Pray God it be a gay one such as your majesty loves,"

"Hush, man; no 'Majesty' here. 'Tis of an Eastern King, one Haroun, surnamed, as I shall be surnamed, The Just."

Tristan grunted sceptically, but Louis, ignoring the ejaculation, went on.

"It was his pastime to go about Bagdad of nights in disguise, and mingling with his people learn much to the advantage of the realm. I am following his example, and I expect to learn much in my turn."

Tristan looked pityingly at the complacent king. "You are likely to learn how unpopular you are, which I could have told you without this trouble; and you will be lucky if you do not get your throat cut into the bargain."

Something almost like a smile disturbed the familiar composure of the king's wrinkles. He took another sip of the wine and his affability expanded. "You are always a bird of evil omen," he chirped. "Be bright, man; look at me. The Burgundian Leaguer is at my gates; my throne sways like a rocking-chair, yet I don't pull a sad face."

"It's a good thing that somebody is pleased," Tristan commented. "Yes," said Louis, opening out his thin hands and studying their palms attentively, "I am pleased—" Tristan interrupted him roughly. "Pleased that the Burgundians threaten you outside the walls of Paris; pleased that Thibaut d'Aussigny bullies you inside the walls of Paris;

pleased that your soldiers are mutinous; pleased that your citizens are sullen; by my faith, here are four royal reasons for a royal pleasure."

Louis shook his head playfully at his servant's grumbling. "Gossip Tristan," he asked, "do you know why I have come to this hovel to-night? I do not walk abroad like a king-errant in mere idleness of mind. I have come to learn what company my lord the Grand Constable keeps." Tristan's shaggy eyebrows arched in surprise as the king continued: "Our good Olivier assures us that our dear Thibaut d'Aussigny has taken it into his head of late to walk the streets by night and to haunt strange taverns such as this same Fircone. I am plagued with a womanish curiosity, Tristan, and I thought I would peep over Messire Thibaut's shoulder and have an eye on his cards."

Tristan chuckled. "The Grand Constable bears you a grudge since you chose to turn a kind eye on the girl of Vaucelles."

"She was a wise virgin to dislike Thibaut," mused the king. "Was she a foolish virgin to mistrust your majesty?" questioned Tristan. Louis shrugged his shoulders. "She is a proud piece, gossip. When I told her that she took my fancy she flamed into a red rage that chastened me. But if she's not for me she's not for Thibaut either." "The Grand Constable is a bad enemy," Tristan commented. The king replied at random.

"Tristan, I had a strange dream last night I dreamed that I was a swine rooting in the streets of Paris, and that I found a pearl of great price in the kennel. I picked it up and set it in my crown—"

"A crowned pig," Tristan interrupted. "'Tis like a tavern sign."

Louis did not seem to resent the interruption.

"My good gossip, in a dream nothing seems strange. Well, as I said, I set this pearl in my crown and the light of it seemed to fill all my good city of Paris with glory so that I could see every street and alley, every tower and pinnacle, more clearly than in a summer's noon. And then memought that the pearl weighed so heavy upon my forehead that I plucked it from its place and cast it to the ground, and would have trodden it under foot when a star shot swiftly from Heaven and stayed me."

The king looked eagerly at his companion, who seemed wholly uninterested in the narrative of the royal vision. "Dreams and stars, stars and dreams," he sneered. "Leave dreams to weaklings, sire." Louis frowned. "Don't sneer, gossip, but instruct, who are these people?" and the sharp, lean face of the king thrust itself forward a little, bird-like from the nest of its hood, in the direction of the gamblers. His companion shrugged his shoulders.

"Some of the worst cats and rats in all Paris," he answered. "The men belong to a fellowship that is called the Company of the Cockleshells, and babble a cant of their own that baffles the thief-takers. If your majesty—" but here a warning kick from Louis made him wince and change his words—"if you wished to savour rascality these are your blades. The women are trulls. Yonder she-thing in the man's habit is Huguette du Hamel, a wild wench, whom men call the Abbess for her nunnery of light o' loves. There be four of her minions with her now, Jehanneton la belle Heaulmiere as

they name her, Denise the slipper-maker, Blanche and Isabeau. Oh, they are delectable doxies!"

King Louis pursed his thin lips in austere censure. "They shall be reprov'd hereafter," he said. "Who are the men?"

"Worthy Adams of such pestilent Eves," Tristan answered. "That slender fellow in the purple jerkin is one René de Montigny, of gentle birth, and a great breaker of commandments. He with the red hair is Guy Tabarie; they are sworn brothers in bawdry and larceny. The ferret-faced knave who is tickling the girl's knee is Jehan le Loup. Bullies and bawds, pandars and parasites: to enumerate their offenses would be to say the Decalogue backward."

"You have a pithy humour, gossip," and Louis grinned. "Our gallows shall be busy anon."

Tristan was about to open his mouth in approval of a sentiment so pleasing to his ears when his words and his purpose were alike arrested by a sound of a voice singing outside the tavern door.

The voice was a man's voice, something rough and strained for fine music, and yet with a kind of full and florid sweetness that carried the words clearly through the red-curtained windows. They seemed to make a complaint of Fortune:

"Since I have left the prison gate
Where I came near to say good-bye
To this poor life that needs must fly
From the malignity of Fate,
Perchance she now will pass me by
Since I have left the prison gate."

If the king pricked his ear to listen, and even Tristan moved a little in his lethargy, the effect of the song upon the company of gamblers was instant and pronounced. The Abbess leaped to her feet, crying out: "It is the voice of François!" "It is indeed his own unutterable pipe," agreed René de Montigny, sweeping his winnings into his pouch. Robin Turgis raised his hands in a comical despair as he muttered: "Here is the devil out of hell again." All the men and women were looking eagerly at the door.

"Who is this?" asked Louis of Tristan, "whose coming seems so to flutter these night-birds?"

"The strangest knave in all Paris," Tristan answered. "One François Villon, scholar, poet, drinker, sworder, drabber, blabber, good at pen, point, and pitcher. In the Court of Miracles they call him the King of the Cockleshells. Judge him for yourself."

CHAPTER II

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MASTER FRANÇOIS VILLON

As Tristan spoke the tavern latch rattled, the tavern door was flung noisily open, and the king's gaze rested on a strange figure framed in the entry. The man was of middle height, spare and slight and lean; his thin, eager face was bronzed with the suns and winds of a generation, and lined with the stern ciphers of malign experiences. His dark, straight hair was long and unkempt; the finer lines of his cheeks and chin were blurred with the uncropped growth of a week-old beard; his eyes were bright and quick; his glance restless and comprehensive. A cunning reader of features would have found a home for high thoughts behind the fine forehead, the lines of infinite tenderness upon the mobile lips, the light of some noble conflagration in the wild eyes. He was dressed in faded finery of many colours, so ragged and patched and hostile that he had very much the air of a

gaudy scarecrow. His ruined cloak was tilted by a long sword; his disordered thatch was crowned by a battered cap grotesquely adorned with a cock's feather. In his leathern belt a small vellum bound book of verses kept company with a dagger. For all his whimsical appearance the king's keen eyes could note a something gallant in the carriage of the scamp, could spy out qualities of manhood beneath the battered bravery. He poised for a moment on the threshold in a fantastic attitude of salutation ere he slammed the door behind him and strode forward to meet his friends.

"Well, Hearts of Gold, how are ye?" he cried joyously as he advanced with head thrown back and open hands extended. "Did ye miss me, lads; did ye miss me, lasses?"

Abbess Huguette was at his side in an instant, with her arms about his neck fondling him and fawning upon him. "Surely I missed you," she whispered. "Where have you been, little monkey?"

Master François looked at her for a moment with a curious pity. Then gently extricating himself from her embrace he called out, "Give me a wash of wine for my throat's parched with piping."

Every man thrust his own mug towards Master François, beseeching him to drink of it, but he waved them all aside imperially. "Nay, I will have my own," he said. "Have we no landlord here? Master Robin, come hither."

Robin Turgis, who had kept apart up to now, surveying the new-comer with no excess of favour, moved slowly forward with his thumbs in his girdle and a sour smile on his fat cheeks. Master François addressed him sternly, twitching as he did so the landlord's greasy cap from his pate and