

## A FEW WORDS ON COURT FOOLS.

"This fellow's wise enough to play the fool,  
And to do that well craves a kind of wit;  
He must observe their mood on whom he jests,  
The quality of persons, and the time,  
And like the haggard cheek at every feather  
That comes before his eye. This is a practice  
As full of labour as the wise man's art."—*Shakspeare.*

"FOR O, for O, the hobby-horse is forgot." Shakspeare banished the hobby-horse, and the Lions have well nigh banished Shakspeare. The Fool (confessed) has shared the fate of the hobby-horse; his bells no longer jingle, noisy and senseless as his wit; his Marotto is no longer flourished in mockery and disdain; gone are his gibes and his gambols, his songs, and his flashes of merriment; and, save in the magic pages of Wild Will of Warwickshire, and of his potent rival, the Magician of the North, (honoured be his memory!) all traces of this motley race have faded from our view.

To give some idea of the important parts which have been played by this now extinct race of actors, is the object of the present communication, which, if it exhibit no pretensions to the learning with which Mr. Douce and Professor Fogel have treated the subject, or to the wit displayed upon it by Mr. ———, in the *Liberal*, may perhaps be written in a more appropriate style, to wit, after the manner of fools—foolishly.

"Les Foux sont aux Echecs les plus proches des Rois," and in by-gone days, the court jester enjoyed the same proximity to royalty, in the presence-chamber, which his namesake still retains upon the chess-board. To trace the origin of this strange office would be to inquire too curiously, and would lead to the bestowing of a larger proportion of tediousness upon the reader, than he might be inclined to receive. Let us, therefore, pin our faith upon the assertion of the learned Divine, who preached the funeral sermon of one of the greatest fools of his day, Hans Miesko, the court jester of Philip II., Duke of Stettin.

Hans Miesko was born about the year 1540, at Schwibus, in Silesia, and having, at an early age, betrayed symptoms of idiocy, was placed by his parents in the hospital of that town. Fool as he was, however, Miesko not being satisfied with this arrangement, soon fled from the hospital, and led a wandering life till he came to Stettin, where the reigning duke, Philip, took him into his service as court jester. Though his tricks and his jests so pleased his first master, that he retained his office until the duke's death, and would appear to have been equally grateful to Philip's successor, Duke Francis, not one of them has been handed down to us, and Miesko would probably never have been remembered, but for his death, which was rendered remarkable by a *funeral sermon*. This strange effusion was not only preached, but printed; not only printed, but that more than once; the first edition appearing in 1619, immediately after the death of the individual whom it celebrated.

Philip Cradelius, the learned pastor of St. Peter's church, was the preacher selected for the performance of the unprecedented task of pronouncing a funeral oration in praise of a fool; and in the remarkable discourse which he delivered upon the occasion, he deduced the origin of these motley followers of royalty, from the time of David; who, when "afraid of Achish King of Gath, changed his behaviour, and feigned himself mad in their hands, and scabbled on the doors of the gate, and let his spittle fall down upon his beard. Then said Achish unto his servants, 'Lo, ye

see the man is mad: wherefore, then, have ye brought him to me? Have I need of madmen, that ye have brought this fellow to play the madman in my presence? Shall this fellow come into my house?'"

There, gentle reader, is an origin for you: one, I'faith, almost as ancient as that of the pure blooded Welshman, whose pedigree commenced a few centuries before the creation. Of a verity, Goerpius Becanus, whose learning and patriotism were enlisted to prove that the connubial dialogues of Adam and Eve were carried on in high Dutch, must have assisted our friend Cradelius in tracing out this somewhat far-fetched derivation. And now, as great writers are allowed to quote themselves, for a few remarks which we have made elsewhere upon this point:—"Although this derivation is somewhat far-fetched, it will probably be the means of enabling us to form a correct opinion upon the subject; by the supposition which it gives rise to, that the origin of court jesters is to be found in the protection afforded by the powerful, in times of semi-barbarism, to the idiot and the natural, with whose antics unenlightened minds have, at all times, been amused—a conjecture borne out by the fact of such persons having, in more recent times, been frequently selected for the purpose."

Among the many recorded examples which we have, of half-witted knaves being summoned to exhibit their pranks for the entertainment of royalty, Miesko himself appears. Another instance occurs in the history of Silesia, where Boleslaus, the son of Boleslaus I. is stated to have been slain by the court jester, whose anger he had provoked. The readers of the curious and inordinately high-priced Romance of Tuerdank, must also recollect the narrow escape which the hero, (Maximilian I.) had in the castle of the Tyrol, from being blown up by gunpowder, through the carelessness and ignorance of one of this class of jesters. This same witless wearer of motley, it would appear, though thus brayed in a mortar, got never the wiser; for some time afterwards, he and Maximilian being engaged in a battle with snow balls, he struck the emperor so severe a blow in the eye with *one of them*, that it nearly blinded him. In spite, however, of these accidents and offences, Maximilian took great delight in the company of these professed merry-makers; and if his associating with them was at times attended with unpleasant results, the fidelity which was exhibited by one of them, the celebrated Kunz von der Rosen, was enough to justify the imperial patronage.

Kunz von der Rosen was indeed the favourite and confidant of the emperor, and so great was Maximilian's delight in the fidelity and the good humour of the jester, that he kept him constantly about his person. Many of the historians of the time have indeed refused to recognise Kunz as a court fool. Manlius designated him "a wit; I will not call him a jester," says he, "for gems are rarely found among pebbles."

Such gems as Kunz are indeed rare; we will pass over his merry sayings and jovial tricks, that we may record one act of his life, which may well be looked upon as a vindication of Maximilian's extraordinary

partiality for him. The similarity which it bears in its incidents to those admirably told scenes in Ivanhoe, where Wamba rescues his master, cannot fail to strike the reader. Kunz's persevering endeavours may possibly have suggested to the gifted author of that spirit-stirring romance, the part which his prototype there plays so effectively.

When Maximilian, who was then but King of the Romans, convoked a meeting of the states in 1488, in order to bring his restless subjects into submission, Kunz advised him not to venture into Bruges, lest evil should befall him; but Maximilian proceeded there, regardless of this advice. When the king arrived at the gate of St. Catherine, Kunz rode up to him, and said in the presence of all the attendants, "I see your majesty will not listen to the advice given to you by myself and your faithful counsellors, but will needs be made prisoner. I give you warning, that in such case I will not bear you company. I will go with you as far as the castle, but I shall then retire by the Ghent gate. When you see the villages and pleasure houses burning on all sides of the city, bethink you of what your foolish Kunz forewarned you." "Ah, Kunz," said the king, "I see well that you put no faith in the good promises which my children of Bruges have made to me." Kunz acknowledged that he would as soon trust the devil himself; and the result proved that he had good ground for his opinion. He entered the city with the king, and then rode out at the other gate to Duke Christopher of Bavaria, at Middelburg. Soon after this, a tumult arose in the city, and Maximilian having proceeded to the marketplace to subdue it, was dragged from his horse by the insurgents, and imprisoned in the house of a grocer, where he passed the night miserably enough in the company of some of his courtiers. There was he, with nothing but a bench to lie upon, confined in a small chamber whose windows were guarded by iron bars, and every moment expecting to be put to death.

During the king's imprisonment, Kunz von der Rosen was not idle, but displayed his unparalleled fidelity in two plans, which he matured for the liberation of his master. In the first place he constructed two swimming girdles, one for himself and the other for the king's use, to enable him to cross the moat of the castle to which he had been removed, and escape from the city by means which he had provided for the purpose. The scheme was, however, frustrated; for some swans, which were there kept, attacked Kunz as soon as he let himself down into the water, making a terrible outcry, and beating him so severely with their wings, that it was with the greatest difficulty, that he escaped from them. Had they chanced to bite through his swimming girdle, he must certainly have perished. As an old chronicler quaintly observes, "the swans thus proved themselves faithful adherents of the French party."

After this mishap, Kunz bethought him of another contrivance. He got a barber to teach him how to cut hair and shave; and as soon as he was master of the art, stole into Bruges and disclosed to the prior of the Franciscan convent, whom he knew to be well disposed to Maximilian, this new project for the release of the king. He requested the prior's permission to adopt the tonsure, and that he would bestow on him the dress of the order, and allow one of the brotherhood to accompany him, so that, being thus disguised, he might gain admittance to the king in the character of his confessor; then having shaved his head, and attired him in the guise of a Franciscan, the prisoner might return with the monk to the convent, and from thence escape to Middelburg in a small barge, which, with four men and three horses, was to be in readiness at the St. Catherine's gate. "But Kunz," inquired the prior, "what are you going to do when the king has escaped?" "Why," replied he, "I shall put

on the king's clothes, so that when the men of Bruges seek the king, they will find a fool in his place, with whom they may do whatsoever they list. I am content to die the death of a martyr, so that my lord and master escape, and these rebels be betrayed by a fool." The prior delighted at his fidelity, granted all his requests, and bade the monk who accompanied him, say that Kunz was the king's confessor.

When they came to the place where the king was confined, and those who had the custody of his person demanded what they wanted, Kunz threw back his hood, and displaying his tonsure, said he was the royal confessor, sent by the prior of the Franciscan convent to hear the king's confession, and give him spiritual consolation under his afflictions. The monk having confirmed this statement, Kunz was allowed to pass. No sooner had he got into the king's presence, than he began to lecture him pretty roundly: "See now, my noble king, I have found you here; God's martyrs shame you, why did you not follow the advice I gave you. But I have risked my life for you, and by God's help I will deliver you out of the hands of your enemies. This time, however, you must do as I bid you."

The king did not know what to make of him; he knew by his voice that it was his favourite Kunz, but wondered how, in spite of his disguise, he had contrived to pass the sentinels. When the jester saw the king thus troubled, he said to him, "Dear Max, be not surprised; do you not know your faithful fool Kunz? I have brought my barber's implements with me, so let me shave your head; for your sake I have learned how to do so. I will then change dresses with you, and remain here in your place; but as soon as you are shaved, you must pass the sentinels in my clothes. When you get out, you will see a Franciscan, who will conduct you to the convent. The prior, with whom I have arranged every thing, has got a barge and horses in readiness; and by this time tomorrow you will be with your friends at Middelburg. I have passed myself off for your confessor, but if we are not quick, my story will be doubted, and your deliverance will be prevented."—"But my dear Kunz," asked the king, "what is to become of you?" "Never mind that," said Kunz, "I will give you my cloak, and lie down in your straw, and behave just as if I were King Max himself. So when the men of Bruges seek you, and find me, they will find the fool, and the king will have vanished."

Maximilian, either because he was aware that help was at hand, or because he considered it beneath his dignity to escape from prison in such a fashion, answered, that he saw plainly Kunz was not aware how the case stood. "He could not, on account of the promise he had given, depart from Bruges without the knowledge and consent of the citizens. Moreover, he had been faithfully promised by them that his person should be respected." Kunz got very angry at this answer, and replied, "My dear Max, I find you are still as foolish as ever, and will not follow my advice, so that I have taken my perilous journey to no purpose. God help thee, thou foolish king; thou art too pious for these Flemings." He then bade the king farewell, and went weeping out of the apartment. As he passed the guard, the officer asked him how he found the king. "Piously disposed," replied Kunz. "What are his designs?" continued the officer. "God knows," said the jester; and so saying, he departed, and retreated to Middelburg instead of the king.

Although in the present instance, this feeling of gratitude and fidelity was carried to an extent unprecedented in the history of court jesters, the feeling itself appears frequently to have existed among the wearers of motley. Our own history furnishes us with a proof of this, in the preservation of the life of William the Conqueror, when he was only Duke of Nor-

mandy, by his fool Goles.\* What might have been the consequence of Goles' not interfering in this instance, it were difficult to decide; but the fidelity and strong arm of a fool, as contributing, by saving the life of the Conqueror, to the subjugation of this country, and to the consequences of that event, must certainly be regarded as one of those trifling causes which so often lead in the end to mighty results.

Many similar proofs of attachment on the part of this strange race of beings, are no doubt to be found. We can add another which occupies a page in the history of Thuringia. After Albert the Boorish had had a family by his wife Margaret, the daughter of the Emperor Frederick II., he became enamoured of one of her ladies in waiting, Cunigunda of Eisenberg, and had a son by her. This Cunigunda sought the life of Margaret, and bribed the court fool, who used to come daily with two asses laden with wood and water, to the castle of Wartburg, to twist the neck of the Margravine in the night, so that people might suppose she had been strangled by the devil. The fool agreed to do so, and was accordingly concealed in the bed-room of his victim; to whom, however, he disclosed the whole plot, entreating her forgiveness. This was readily granted, and her chamberlain being consulted, advised her as the only means of safety, to leave the castle instantly, which she accordingly did, by letting herself down from the window of her apartment. Before her departure, she took leave of her children, kissed them, and in her anguish so bit her eldest son in the back, that he was ever afterwards called Frederick the Bitten. She then fled, accompanied by one female attendant, and the faithful jester, to Hirschfield, and was conveyed from thence, by the contrivance of the abbot, to Frankfort on the Main, where she died broken hearted in 1270.

Such instances of attachment on the part of these retainers are far more valuable in our eyes, than all the jests and quips which history and tradition have recorded of them, and yet these are neither few nor insignificant.

We have already shown, that Kunz von der Rosen was neither knave nor fool. The faithful German was not however the only fool *en titre d'office*, who could say with the clown in Twelfth Night, "Cucullus non facit Monachum, that is to say, I wear not motley in my brain." The worthy who mingled with his motley, the livery of Charles, Duke of Burgundy, might well claim companionship with him. The duke was eternally talking of Hannibal. His fool, who no doubt had been thoroughly bored by this never ending theme, revenged himself, by calling out to the duke, as they fled from the victorious Swiss at Granson—"Monseigneur, nous voila bien Annibales." The name of this satirist of the bells and bauble was worth recording, although, like the celebrated Hamilton, he should have been of "single speech" notoriety. But many a good thing is afloat in the world, without a father to own it; while, on the other hand, the wit of the day, whosoever he be, is generally converted into a founding hospital for stray jokes, which are by common consent fathered upon his well-known reputation. It is not half a century since, that every new book of old jests was named after some celebrated wag, and all the jokes in it, though as gray-headed as my granddad, were ascribed to some well-known contemporary wit—Garrick's Jest, Quin's Jest, and Mrs. Pinkerton's Jest, we have ourselves seen.

But, to cease from this digression, Triboulet, the Jester of Francis I., is another instance of the happy combination of wag and wit, a reputation which his observation on the subject of the French monarch's expedi-

tion into Italy, is alone sufficient to justify. Triboulet was present at the preliminary council of war, at which the best means of invading Italy were discussed. When the council was about to break up, Triboulet exclaimed, "You all think, no doubt, that you have given his majesty a great deal of good advice, and yet you have forgotten the most important part of the business." "What is that?" was the general inquiry. "Why," said Triboulet, "you have never considered how we are to get back again. Do we mean to stop in Italy?" The fatal result of the campaign proved that the jester's counsel was well-timed. Nor is this the only instance with which history presents us, where the opinion of a fool has proved worthy of the attention of the learned members of a council, as the following anecdote will show:—

The Duke of Mantua was once called upon to decide a question of precedence, between the Doctors of Law and the Doctors of Medicine, at Pavia. He accordingly summoned a council learned in such matters, who, after deliberating for a considerable time, left the point still unsettled. At length the duke's jester, who was present, said that he could easily decide the case. "Let us hear your wise decision?" said the duke. "Why," said the fool, "you may decide by precedent. When a rogue is to be hanged, he always goes before the executioner."

From these anecdotes, and another which is preserved, of a fool being present at the controversy between Luther and Eccius, at the castle at Leipsic, the importance attached by royalty to this class of retainers, and the high degree of favour which they enjoyed is rendered apparent. Had all who donned the motley been alike witty, this fondness for their society, in times when the resources of literature were open to few, would not be matter of surprise; and we could readily imagine cities contending for the honour of supplying their monarchs with nimble-witted fools. But when we see the stuff of which the majority of these "perverters of words" were made, we think the privilege which was accorded to the good city of Troyes, of furnishing the French king with his fools, a compliment of a very doubtful nature. That such a strange privilege existed, is, however, a fact. In the archives of that city, there is still preserved a letter from Charles V. to the burgomaster and magistrates, announcing the death of his fool, and desiring that, according to old established custom, they should supply him with another. Nor is this the only public document in existence, connected with the curious subject of the present paper. In Rushworth's Historical Collections, the reader may treat himself to the perusal of the instrument, by which the king in council banished Archee from the court, and deprived him of his office of royal jester.

Archee's successor, Muckle John, appears to have been the last individual who was duly invested with the dignity of court fool in this country. It is true that Killigrew has been recognised by many as filling that character at the court of Charles II.; but it is clear, that although he performed the duties of that situation, and plied his wits for the entertainment of the merry monarch, he did so merely, as George Selwyn, attended executions, "en amateur."

In fact, the monarch and his courtiers vied with each other in playing the fool; had they stopped there, and not combined knavery with their folly, it had been well for the country and for themselves. But let that pass; the new fashion of playing the fool, banished the old one of keeping a fool; and what the taste of the licentious court of Charles commenced, the march of intellect (pardon the novelty of the phrase) has since confirmed, and but for the labours of the antiquary, all memory of these privileged buffoons would have passed away.

\* This fact is recorded by Wace, in his "Roman des Ducs de Normandie." MS. Reg. 4, cxi. Vide Douce's Illustrations of Shakspeare, vol. ii.