



Last Laughter

A Short Story by Carolyn Kephart

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He was a troublesome fool, whose unbridled tongue and vicious tricks went unchecked because they amused the King. Whenever his behavior became simply too appalling, the jester took care to re-ingratiate himself with all manner of silly japes and tumblings and blandishments, but was well known that he wore a mail shirt under his motley to ward off vengeful stabs, and amulets to avert curses.

Keeping on the jester's good side was a prudent measure in a court full of idlers constantly seeking to work mischief on one another out of simple ennui, forming little cells and circles of self-interest that continually jerked apart in loathing or merged in cooing accord, isolating and ostracizing. Amid these inimical orbs the jester bounced and skipped, prodding and tickling and puncturing as the whim took him. Although his magic was of the lowest kind, it was effective enough to be exceedingly troublesome and embarrassing, and the wiser spheres took care to roll well aside at his approach. Only the Thaumaturge Royal, who made it a point to be in a class by himself, looked upon the fool with icy indifference, and stood his ground immovably.

The Countess had always avoided the fool whenever possible, but that was becoming ever more difficult since her growing friendship with the King. She had been of the Queen's retinue, chosen for her pleasant voice and tranquil manner to read aloud to Her Majesty during that lady's last illness, and the two women had grown close thanks to their shared love of books and the harmony of their tastes. After the Queen's untimely death, the Countess had only wished to retire to her lands and grieve, but the King persuaded her, or rather all but commanded her, to remain at court. He was a young man, good to look upon, active in all the sports befitting a gentleman, and of sound intelligence; but he was also wild and given to bad company, which had caused the Queen great chagrin. The King for all his faults had loved his mother dearly, and his sorrow and remorse were solaced by the Countess's gentle conversation, which naturally soon turned to books.

The Countess was as reclusive as the King was riotous, but she genuinely admired him for many reasons, and knew that her esteem was reciprocated. Nevertheless, she was even more aware of the fool's resentment, which inspired her with an emotion she was too proud to call

fear. The fool enjoyed flaunting his power, and often hinted that he was the baseborn son of a great lord he chose not to name, which caused understandable uneasiness among some of the court. Others, the Countess among them, preferred to believe that the King had plucked him from the gutter. True, the fool had some polish, but it was a very thin gloss like the sheen on a fly; and like a fly he seemed to delight in annoying her.

“Sweet lady, in truth his majesty seems to like you perhaps too well,” he said to her one day as she sat reading in the park. She had heard him at her back, the combined jingling of bells and chain mail; had seen his cap’s spiky shadow fall over her book, darkening the sweet spring afternoon. He leapt uninvited on her quiet bench, squatting apishly, grinning witlessly; but his eyes sparkled more than was safe. “The court’s marked the way you and he constantly wander off alone to the library, where no one else ever goes and where I hear there’s a very large and comfortable couch.” As he said the last words, he suggestively dangled his bauble.

Although the implication disgusted her, the Countess kept her wonted calm, her face its habitual, unreadable mask save perhaps for a hint of flush. The jester’s position on the bench brought his exaggerated codpiece directly into her line of sight, and she had been keeping her eyes well averted. “You know as well as I, fool, that His Majesty’s wedding to the Princess is only two months away.”

She put a sharp contemptuous emphasis on his title, but he only shrugged, sending his bells bobbing. “True, true, but in the meantime people will talk, won’t they? They’re already talking, you know.”

“Let them say whatever they please,” the Countess replied, candidly and coolly meeting the jester’s glittering stare. “His Majesty and I converse about books, nothing more.”

The jester goggled, waggling his eyebrows luridly. “Books! Why, books are full of bad things, naughty things. That’s why I never read ‘em. Neither should you.” And with a swat of his bauble he knocked the volume from the Countess’ lap, sending it into the nearby pond.

Although the book had been valuable, it was not priceless, and keeping one’s temper was of far more worth at such a time as this. “His Majesty and I discuss literature,” the Countess said, very clearly enunciating the last word. “Literature, and history, and philosophy now and then.”

The fool gave a doltish gasp, eyes wide with terror transparently feigned. “Oh, but that’s far worse! He’ll think thoughts too big for his head, and they’ll crack his skull. Regicide’s a bad thing, sweet lady. Have a care.”

The Countess looked him straight in the eye, unblinking. “You’re not very amusing just now, fool.”

He grinned ear to ear, batting his lashes. “And you’re not very pretty, but you never are. The King likes my antics far more than he likes your books, sweet lady...your books or your looks.”

Stung by the insult, the Countess recoiled. “His Majesty’s taste in reading is far more choice than your jests,” she said through set lips.

The fool’s eyes narrowed. They were an odd toad-color, greenish gray. “He never liked reading until you caught his eye. How did you manage it, I wonder?” His gaze slitted as his head tilted. “Were you using magic, Countess? I’d never have dreamt it of you.”

Almost everyone in the court studied magic, but very few had any proficiency, and what little they knew was confined to practical jokes more or less tasteless. Serious Art was the province of the Thaumaturge Royal, who deeply resented any infringement on his expertise. Besides, using magic to influence the mind of the King was a capital offense, and the very idea made the Countess feel cold despite the day’s warmth. Could this trifling, spiteful creature actually imagine...actually intend...

The fool could read masks as well as faces, and gave a silly little simper as he shrugged disarmingly. "Oh, now, now. No harm meant. I'm only an idiot, after all. Right?" During the silence that followed, he sat properly on the bench and removed his cap, flicking at the bells, watching them jiggle.

The Countess studied him more closely than she had ever wished to before. This was the first time she had ever seen him in a sober mood, let alone without his fool's cap. Far from being laughably malformed, he was slender and well-shaped, of lithe middle height that made his frequent acrobatics effortless. Nor was he comically hideous, as was the general rule for his kind; indeed, one might be disposed to call his sharp mobile features good-looking, save for the indelible marks of constant debauchery and the unrelenting strain of having to always amuse. His tousled sandy hair made him seem boyish; in truth, he was barely thirty, the same age as the King.

She had to resist the urge to reach out and smooth his weedy hair. "Perhaps you're not quite as bad as you seem."

He nodded with a child's righteous solemnity. "I can assure you I'm not." But suddenly his eyes glittered again, and he winked. "Then again, I wouldn't be too sure." Pointing his bauble, he flicked at her skirt. "I do believe that's a bug, your ladyship."

She looked down, and gasped. Not only had he ripped a ruffle's delicate lace, but red ants and cockroaches were crawling all over her gown. As the Countess leapt up and began frantically shaking them off, the fool jammed his cap back on his head and cartwheeled away, hooting and gibbering.

The next day when she went to the palace library at the appointed hour, the Countess was astonished to find the jester there, addressing the King in tones so low she could not make out a word. When they finally noticed her, the jester winked, smirked and gave a far too elaborate bow, while the King stared at her in a way that first confused her, then chilled her clear to the heart.

Ignoring the jester, she addressed his master. "Sire, is something amiss?"

To her question the King only motioned to the door. "Go. And let this be the last I see of you."

She stared from he that she'd considered a friend to his grinning favorite, and lifted her chin, calm with rage. "Sire, what did this...this poisonous buffoon say to turn you against me? I demand to know."

The King's eyes were those of a complete, coldly furious stranger. "Demand? I'm not surprised you presume to issue orders. You've been using enchantment to gain my favor, and who knows how far you might have taken your trickery. Consider yourself under arrest. I've given order to the Thaumaturge to put you to the question—go to your apartments quietly, or I'll have my guards drag you to the dungeons."

Stunned with confused horror, the Countess remembered the many times they had conversed, she and the King, and how pleasant it had always been; how inquiring and engaging he had never failed to be. It had been one of the great joys of her life, the only thing that had made the court bearable. She clasped her hands, hard enough to bruise her fingers. "Sire, I have no skill in magic, none. I swear it! I..."

The King gave a disgusted shrug and turned his back on her, and the fool brayed with laughter. The Countess felt all her body go blank clear to the eyes, and when she could see once more she found she had fled the room and was leaning against the wall of the corridor, sliding downward, strengthless. But a sudden stalwart arm raised her upright, and she heard a calm, very distinct voice close to her ear, deep and steady.

"There, there. You have nothing to fear from me, Countess. I give you my word."

She knew the voice, but it came as a shock almost as great as the one she'd just endured. Lifting her gaze from the speaker's dashing black and silver garb that blended knight with mage, she stared into the cool dark eyes of the Thaumaturge Royal. She had always been on civil terms with this man, whose powers of the Art were the kingdom's safeguard, but he moved in military circles and they seldom met. He was said to join wry humor with absolute ruthlessness. Putting her hopes on the former, she fought to answer. "Then you aren't going to torture me?"

The question seemed to faintly shock him. "Countess, please. The very idea." He motioned her to silence, and led her further down the corridor to a little windowed recess, offering her a chair that she sank into gratefully. He remained standing, and momentarily lifted a hand in an arcane warding gesture, ensuring private conversation before bending to continue. "The King and his fool were utterly unaware that I was present and heard everything." He gave a discreet cough. "I was disguised as the gargoyle paperweight. Security reasons prohibit me from further disclosure, but the fool's slanders were beyond preposterous." The mage paused again, eyeing her keenly. "You're too pale, Countess. Drink this."

With a trembling hand she accepted the silver goblet that he materialized and offered, drank the delicious elixir it held, and felt blessed calm well outward from her newly-soothed spirit. "Then you don't believe I used magic against His Majesty."

The Thaumaturge barely disguised a snort. "Of course not. You're incapable. That wasn't meant as an insult, your ladyship; it's just that you're as clear as glass. I can read right into you, and I have to say it's very entertaining."

"Then you know I did nothing wrong," she whispered. "We only talked of books."

The mage again coughed discreetly. "I'm well aware of that, your ladyship, for often in the guise of the dragon inkwell I used to listen to your conversations." At her shocked expression he again held up his hand. "Security reasons only, I assure you. I must say I was in constant suspense lest His Majesty dip a pen into me, but otherwise the experience was always delightful. I've never heard such good talk anywhere in this detestable place, and no one could possibly reproach either of you in any way regarding the subject matter."

The Countess felt herself coloring hot at this admission despite her relief. "Perhaps your wondrous powers might have been better employed than by eavesdropping, my lord mage."

The Thaumaturge was quite unmoved by the reproach. "I'd been biding my time, watching to see just how far the zany would go." He took the silver cup from her hand, noting with satisfaction that it was empty before vanishing it. "He's gone very far indeed, and has no intention of stopping. His ambitions are beyond his capacity, and they'll be thwarted. I'll make sure of it."

With a helpless sigh the Countess turned to the window. Spring was in every bud, but all her heart was winter. "His Majesty wouldn't listen to me. He didn't care. Suddenly I was... nothing."

At the Countess's slow, numb phrases, the court mage hesitated a long moment. "I would do you any service possible, your ladyship. Believe that. But the jester, for all his cheap trickery and low sleights, possesses a greater power than any magic—the power to make the King believe that white is black. None of all my strength of Art can change that." His lips quirked with rancor. "It's rather trying, really."

The Countess blinked at the tears stinging her eyes. "Then there is no help."

The Thaumaturge lifted a steel-pauldroned shoulder, noiselessly. "As long as the jester holds sway, His Majesty will never again trust you. I strongly advise departing the court before you're banished...or worse." He hesitated as the Countess turned to him in shocked amazement, then spoke very quietly, his gaze steadily meeting hers. "You know you never really belonged here, your ladyship. Trust me, you'll be far better off away. You and I have

seldom conversed at any length, but I'll take this opportunity to inform you that I enjoy books very much, and that my taste is quite probably better than His Majesty's. Farewell."

He clasped her cold hands for an instant, warming them with his Art; bent over them in soldierly respect, and then took his leave in a silent billowing of black. Only much later did the Countess observe that on one of her fingers was a splendid jeweled ring where none had been before.

She was no longer permitted access to the King after that, and the fool bounded away giggling whenever she approached him. Heeding the Thaumaturge's advice, the Countess quietly retired to her peaceful manse deep in the country. Now and again she would receive messages from some of her acquaintance, recounting the jester's ever more outrageous antics. When she learned that the King's marriage to the princess had been broken off, the Countess did not need to ask who had instigated the rupture; and she gave the court little or no thought thereafter. She had learned to cherish her new life, there amid the quiet. Now and again she felt lonely, for she had no one now with whom to talk of books; but the King no longer figured in her feelings, save for the occasional random pang. She kept the Thaumaturge's gift on her finger, and gazed upon it often.

One afternoon as she was taking a rest from her latest reading, leaning at her library window to admire her flourishing summer garden, her ring suddenly sparkled, and in another moment a letter materialized on the broad stone of the casement-sill—a square missive of rich black paper and pure silver ink, boldly and elegantly penned, and addressed to her. Astonished, she reached for it cautiously, examined it awhile, and then broke the seal with greatest care. The message, to her surprise and pleasure, was from the court mage.

"Most well remembered and much regretted ladyship:

"Forgive this intrusion upon your retreat, but I thought you might be diverted by an amusing occurrence yesternight involving the King's fool. His Majesty's favored companions were assembled at the drinking bout which ends every evening nowadays, whereat the jester, in that sportive fashion which endears him to so many, indecently mimicked several of the most notable ladies of the court, to shouts of merriment and approbation. Needless to say, the ladies in question were not present, but I joined the company in the guise of a tankard. I regret to divulge that the fool did not spare you in his mirth, and at one point remarked that the look on your face when the King scorned you in the library made him almost die laughing. I quivered with indignation, my emotion perhaps unsteadied by the strong ale that filled me to the brim; but I managed to control myself, and my outburst went unnoticed.

"Midnight sounded, the revels broke up, and the jester staggered back to his rooms, where he cast off his motley and his mail and went to bed, no sooner there than snoring. A little before dawn, however, he was awakened by a strange sensation, a scurrying underneath him like that of snakes, or rats. Startled, he attempted to rise, but the bed held him fast; and then the entire mattress came alive, all its feathers rustling with mischievous energy until they broke free and burst through the sheets, tickling the poor zany's naked skin without mercy in every place imaginable and unmentionable.

"The bed continues to confine the fool, whose incessant laughter, now quite mirthless, gives him no chance to eat or drink or perform any other necessary action. At present he can barely speak, which some consider a blessing; but you can well imagine that matters are becoming urgent, not to mention by now somewhat noisome.

"The King is sifting the court for the perpetrator, and I have been called upon to put many to the question, which is certainly diverting in its way; but whoever conceived the spell seems disinclined to end it, and I am oddly unable to discover the wrongdoer. His Majesty asked me if you might be involved, and I rather curtly assured him to the contrary.

“Still...it could it be, Countess, that you have more magic within you than you’ve any idea, and that a simple word of yours might deliver the jester from his torment. I will be glad to discuss this possibility with you as soon as you wish—preferably in your manse’s library, which I hear is a very fine one.

“I hope you have kept well, Countess, and have now and again remembered kindly
“Your constant friend,

Cyril Dagleish Dacier,
Thaumaturge in Ordinary.

P.S.: You might at this time consider turning around and addressing a few words to the vase on your desk, which has taken the liberty of replacing its fading roses with fresh orchids.”



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