

THE KNAVE OF HEARTS

BY

LOUISE SAUNDERS

CHARACTERS

(in order of appearance)

The MANAGER

BLUE HOSE

YELLOW HOSE

1ST HERALD

2ND HERALD

POMPDEBILE the Eighth, King of Hearts
(pronounced Pomp-dibiley)

The CHANCELLOR

The KNAVE of Hearts

URSULA

The LADY VIOLETTA

Six Little PAGES

THE KNAVE OF HEARTS

The MANAGER appears before the curtain in doublet and hose. He carries a cap with a long, red feather.

THE MANAGER

(bowing deeply)

Ladies and gentlemen, you are about to hear the truth of an old legend that has persisted wrongly through the ages, the truth that, until now, has been hid behind the embroidered curtain of a rhyme, about the Knave of Hearts, who was no knave but a very hero indeed. The truth, you will agree with me, gentlemen and most honored ladies, is rare! It is only the quiet, unimpassioned things of nature that seem what they are. Clouds rolled in massy radiance against the blue, pines shadowed deep and darkly green, mirrored in still waters, the contemplative mystery of the hills -- these things which exist, absorbed but in their own existence -- these are the perfect chalices of truth. But we, gentlemen and thrice-honored ladies, flounder about in a tangled net of prejudice, of intrigue. We are blinded by conventions, we are crushed by misunderstanding, we are distracted by violence, we are deceived by hypocrisy, until only too often villains receive the rewards of nobility and the truly great-hearted are suspected, distrusted, and maligned. And so, ladies and gentlemen, for the sake of justice and also, I dare to hope, for your approval, I have taken my puppets down from their dusty shelves. I have polished their faces, brushed their clothes, and strung them on wires, so that they may enact for you this history.

(He parts the curtains, revealing two PASTRY COOKS in flaring white caps and spotless aprons leaning over in stiff profile, their wooden spoons, three feet long, pointing rigidly to the ceiling. They are in one of the kitchens of Pompdebile the Eighth, King of Hearts. It is a pleasant kitchen, with a row of little dormer windows and a huge stove, adorned with the crest of Pompdebile -- a heart rampant, on a gold shield)

(MORE)

THE MANAGER (cont'd)

You see here, ladies and gentlemen, two pastry cooks belonging to the royal household of Pompdebile the Eighth -- Blue Hose and Yellow Hose, by name. At a signal from me they will spring to action, and as they have been made with astonishing cleverness, they will bear every semblance of life. Happily, however, you need have no fear that, should they please you, the exulting wine of your appreciation may go to their heads -- their heads being but things of wire and wood; and happily, too, as they are but wood and wire, they will be spared the shame and humiliation that would otherwise be theirs should they fail to meet with your approval. The play, most honored ladies and gentlemen, will now begin.

He claps his hands. Instantly the two PASTRY COOKS come to life. The MANAGER bows himself off the stage.

BLUE HOSE

Is everything ready for this great event?

YELLOW HOSE

Everything. The fire blazing in the stove, the Pages, dressed in their best, waiting in the pantry with their various jars full of the finest butter, the sweetest sugar, the hottest pepper, the richest milk, the --

BLUE HOSE

Yes, yes, no doubt.

(Thoughtfully)

It is a great responsibility, this that they have put on our shoulders.

YELLOW HOSE

Ah, yes. I have never felt more important.

BLUE HOSE

Nor I more uncomfortable.

YELLOW HOSE

Even on the day, or rather the night, when I awoke and found myself famous -- I refer to the time when I laid before an astonished world my creation, "Humming birds' hearts soufflé, au vin blanc" -- I did not feel more important. It is a pleasing sensation!

BLUE HOSE

I like it not at all. It makes me dizzy, this eminence on which they have placed us. The Lady Violetta is slim and fair. She does not, in my opinion, look like the kind of person who is capable of making good pastry. I have discovered through long experience that it is the heaviest women who make the lightest pastry, and vice versa. Well, then, suppose that she does not pass this examination --

(MORE)

BLUE HOSE (cont'd)

suppose that her pastry is lumpy, white like the skin of a boiled fowl.

YELLOW HOSE

Then, according to the law of the Kingdom of Hearts, we must condemn it, and the Lady Violetta cannot become the bride of Pompdebile. Back to her native land she will be sent, riding a mule.

BLUE HOSE

And she is so pretty, so exquisite! What a law! What an outrageous law!

YELLOW HOSE

Outrageous law! How dare you! There is nothing so necessary to the welfare of the nation as our art. Good cooks make good tempers, don't they? Must not the queen set an example for the other women to follow? Did not our fathers and our grandfathers before us judge the dishes of the previous queens of hearts?

BLUE HOSE

I wish I were mixing the rolls for tomorrow's breakfast.

YELLOW HOSE

Bah! You are fit for nothing else. The affairs of state are beyond you.

Distant sound of trumpets.

BLUE HOSE

(nervously)
What's that? --

YELLOW HOSE

The King is approaching! The ceremonies are about to commence!

BLUE HOSE

Is everything ready?

YELLOW HOSE

I told you that everything was ready. Stand still; you are as white as a stalk of celery.

BLUE HOSE

(counting on his fingers)
Apples, lemons, peaches, jam -- Jam! Did you forget jam?

YELLOW HOSE

Zounds, I did!

BLUE HOSE

(wailing)
We are lost!

YELLOW HOSE

She may not call for it.

Both stand very erect and make a desperate effort to appear calm.

BLUE HOSE

(very nervous)
Which door? Which door?

YELLOW HOSE

The big one, idiot. Be still!

The sound of trumpets increases, and cries of "Make way for the King." Two HERALDS come in and stand on either side of the door. The KING of Hearts, followed by ladies and gentlemen of the court. POMPDEBILE is in full regalia, and very imposing indeed with his red robe bordered with ermine, his crown and sceptre. After him comes the CHANCELLOR, an old man with a short, white beard. The KING strides in a particularly kingly fashion, pointing his toes in the air at every step, toward his throne, and sits down. The KNAVE walks behind him slowly. He has a sharp, pale face.

POMPDEBILE

(impressively)
Lords and ladies of the court, this is an important moment in the history of our reign. The Lady Violetta, whom you love and respect -- that is, I mean to say, whom the ladies love and the lords -- er -- respect, is about to prove whether or not she be fitted to hold the exalted position of Queen of Hearts, according to the law, made a thousand years ago by Pompdebile the Great, and steadily followed ever since. She will prepare with her own delicate, white hands a dish of pastry. This will be judged by the two finest pastry cooks in the land.

(BLUE HOSE and YELLOW HOSE bow deeply)

If their verdict be favorable, she shall ride through the streets of the city on a white palfrey, garlanded with flowers. She will be crowned, the populace will cheer her, and she will reign by our side, attending to the domestic affairs of the realm, while we give our time to weightier matters. This of course you all understand is a time of great anxiety for the Lady Violetta. She will appear worried --

(To CHANCELLOR)

The palfrey is in readiness, we suppose.

CHANCELLOR

It is, Your Majesty.

POMPDEBILE

Garlanded with flowers?

CHANCELLOR

With roses, Your Majesty.

KNAVE

(bowing)

The Lady Violetta prefers violets, Your Majesty.

POMPDEBILE

Let there be a few violets put in with the roses -- er -- We are ready for the ceremony to commence. We confess to a slight nervousness unbecoming to one of our station. The Lady Violetta, though trying at times, we have found -- er -- shall we say -- er -- satisfying?

KNAVE

(bowing)

Intoxicating, Your Majesty?

CHANCELLOR

(shortly)

His Majesty means nothing of the sort.

POMPDEBILE

No, of course not -- er -- The mule -- Is that -- did you -- ?

CHANCELLOR

(in a grieved tone)

This is hardly necessary. Have I ever neglected or forgotten any of your commands, Your Majesty?

POMPDEBILE

You have, often. However, don't be insulted. It takes a great deal of our time and it is most uninteresting.

CHANCELLOR

(indignantly)

I resign, Your Majesty.

POMPDEBILE

Your thirty-seventh resignation will be accepted tomorrow. Just now it is our wish to begin at once. The anxiety that no doubt gathered in the breast of each of the seven successive Pompdebiles before us seems to have concentrated in ours. Already the people are clamoring at the gates of the palace to know the decision. Begin. Let the Pages be summoned.

KNAVE

(bowing)

Beg pardon, Your Majesty; before summoning the Pages, should not the Lady Violetta be here?

POMPDEBILE

She should, and is, we presume, on the other side of that door -- waiting breathlessly.

The KNAVE quietly opens the door and closes it.

KNAVE

(bowing)

She is not, Your Majesty, on the other side of that door waiting breathlessly. In fact, to speak plainly, she is not on the other side of that door at all.

POMPDEBILE

Can that be true? Where are her ladies?

KNAVE

They are all there, Your Majesty.

POMPDEBILE

Summon one of them.

(The KNAVE goes out, shutting the door. He returns, following URSULA, who, very much frightened, throws herself at the King's feet)

Where is your mistress?

URSULA

She has gone, Your Majesty.

POMPDEBILE

Gone! Where has she gone?

URSULA

I do not know, Your Majesty. She was with us a while ago, waiting there, as you commanded.

POMPDEBILE

Yes, and then -- speak.

URSULA

Then she started out and forbade us to go with her.

POMPDEBILE

The thought of possible divorce from us was more than she could bear. Did she say anything before she left?

URSULA

(trembling)

Yes, Your Majesty.

POMPDEBILE

What was it? She may have gone to self-destruction. What was it?

URSULA

She said --

POMPDEBILE

Speak, woman, speak.

URSULA

She said that Your Majesty --

POMPDEBILE

A farewell message! Go on.

URSULA

(gasping)

That Your Majesty was "pokey" and that she didn't intend to stay there any longer.

POMPDEBILE

(roaring)

Pokey!!

URSULA

Yes, Your Majesty, and she bade me call her when you came, but we can't find her, Your Majesty.

The PASTRY COOKS whisper. URSULA is in tears.

CHANCELLOR

This should not be countenanced, Your Majesty. The word "pokey" cannot be found in the dictionary. It is the most flagrant disrespect to use a word that is not in the dictionary in connection with a king.

POMPDEBILE

We are quite aware of that, Chancellor, and although we may appear calm on the surface, inwardly we are swelling, swelling, with rage and indignation.

KNAVE

(looking out the window)

I see the Lady Violetta in the garden.

(He goes to the door and holds it open, bowing)

The Lady Violetta is at the door, Your Majesty.

Enter the LADY VIOLETTA, her purple train over her arm. She has been running.

VIOLETTA

Am I late? I just remembered and came as fast as I could. I bumped into a sentry and he fell down. I didn't. That's strange, isn't it? I suppose it's because he stands in one position so long he -- Why, Pompy dear, what's the matter? Oh, oh!

(Walking closer)

Your feelings are hurt!

POMPDEBILE

Don't call us Pompy. It doesn't seem to matter to you whether you are divorced or not.

VIOLETTA

(anxiously)

Is that why your feelings are hurt?

POMPDEBILE

Our feelings are not hurt, not at all.

VIOLETTA

Oh, yes, they are, Pompdebile dear. I know, because they are connected with your eyebrows. When your feelings go down, up go your eyebrows, and when your feelings go up, they go down -- always.

POMPDEBILE

(severely)

Where have you been?

VIOLETTA

I, just now?

POMPDEBILE

Just now, when you should have been outside that door waiting *breathlessly*.

VIOLETTA

I was in the garden. Really, Pompy, you couldn't expect me to stay all day in that ridiculous pantry; and as for being breathless, it's quite impossible to be it unless one has been jumping or something.

POMPDEBILE

What were you doing in the garden?

VIOLETTA

(laughing)

Oh, it was too funny. I must tell you. I found a goat there who had a beard just like the Chancellor's -- really it was quite remarkable, the resemblance -- in other ways too. I took him by the horns and I looked deep into his eyes, and I said, "Chancellor, if you try to influence Pompy -- "

POMPDEBILE

(shouting)
Don't call us Pompy.

VIOLETTA

Excuse me, Pomp --
(Checking herself)

KNAVE

And yet I think I remember hearing of an emperor, a great emperor, named Pompey.

POMPDEBILE

We know him not. Begin at once; the people are clamoring at the gates. Bring the ingredients.

The PASTRY COOKS open the door, and, single file, six little BOYS march in, bearing large jars labeled butter, salt, flour, pepper, cinnamon, and milk. The COOKS place a table and a large bowl and a pan in front of the LADY VIOLETTA and give her a spoon. The six little BOYS stand three on each side.

VIOLETTA

Oh, what darling little ingredients. May I have an apron, please?

URSULA puts a silk apron, embroidered with red hearts, on the LADY VIOLETTA.

BLUE HOSE

We were unable to find a little boy to carry the pepper, My Lady. They all would sneeze in such a disturbing way.

VIOLETTA

This is a perfectly controlled little boy. He hasn't sneezed once.

YELLOW HOSE

That, if it please Your Ladyship, is not a little boy.

VIOLETTA

Oh! How nice! Perhaps she will help me.

CHANCELLOR

(severely)
You are allowed no help, Lady Violetta.

VIOLETTA

Oh, Chancellor, how cruel of you.
(She takes up the spoon, bowing)
Your Majesty, Lords and Ladies of the court, I propose to
(MORE)

VIOLETTA (cont'd)

make --
 (impressively)
-- raspberry tarts.

BLUE HOSE

Heaven be kind to us!

YELLOW HOSE

(suddenly agitated)
Your Majesty, I implore your forgiveness. There is no
raspberry jam in the palace.

POMPDEBILE

What! Who is responsible for this carelessness?

BLUE HOSE

I gave the order to the grocer, but it didn't come.
 (Aside)
I knew something like this would happen. I knew it.

VIOLETTA

(untying her apron)
Then, Pompdebile, I'm very sorry -- we shall have to postpone
it.

CHANCELLOR

If I may be allowed to suggest, Lady Violetta can prepare
something else.

KNAVE

The law distinctly says that the Queen-elect has the
privilege of choosing the dish which she prefers to prepare.

VIOLETTA

Dear Pompdebile, let's give it up. It's such a silly law! Why
should a great splendid ruler like you follow it just because
one of your ancestors, who wasn't half as nice as you are, or
one bit wiser, said to do it? Dearest Pompdebile, please.

POMPDEBILE

We are inclined to think that there maybe something in what
the Lady Violetta says.

CHANCELLOR

I can no longer remain silent. It is due to that brilliant
law of Pompdebile the First, justly called the Great, that
all members of our male sex are well fed, and, as a natural
consequence, happy.

KNAVE

The happiness of a set of moles who never knew the sunlight.

POMPDEBILE

If we made an effort, we could think of a new law -- just as wise. It only requires effort.

CHANCELLOR

But the constitution. We can't touch the constitution.

POMPDEBILE

(starting up)

We shall destroy the constitution!

CHANCELLOR

The people are clamoring at the gates!

POMPDEBILE

Oh, I forgot them. No, it has been carried too far. We shall have to go on. Proceed.

VIOLETTA

Without the raspberry jam?

POMPDEBILE

(to KNAVE)

Go you, and procure some. I will give a hundred golden guineas for it.

The little BOY who holds the cinnamon pot comes forward.

BOY

Please, Your Majesty, I have some.

POMPDEBILE

You! Where?

BOY

In my pocket. If someone would please hold my cinnamon jar -- I could get it.

(URSULA takes it. The BOY struggles with his pocket and finally, triumphantly, pulls out a small jar)

There!

VIOLETTA

How clever of you! Do you always do that?

BOY

What -- eat raspberry jam?

VIOLETTA

No, supply the exact article needed from your pocket.

BOY

I eat it for my lunch. Please give me the hundred guineas.

VIOLETTA

Oh, yes -- Chancellor -- if I may trouble you.
(Holding out her hand)

CHANCELLOR

Your Majesty, this is an outrage! Are you going to allow this?

POMPDEBILE

(sadly)
Yes, Chancellor. We have such an impulsive nature!

The LADY VIOLETTA receives the money.

VIOLETTA

Thank you.
(She gives it to the BOY)
Now we are ready to begin. Milk, please.
(The BOY who holds the milk jar comes forward and kneels)
I take some of this milk and beat it well.

YELLOW HOSE

(in a whisper)
Beat it -- milk!

VIOLETTA

Then I put in two tablespoonfuls of salt; taking great care that it falls exactly in the middle of the bowl.
(To the little BOY)
Thank you, dear. Now the flour, no, the pepper, and then -- one pound of butter. I hope that it is good butter, or the whole thing will be quite spoiled.

BLUE HOSE

This is the most astonishing thing I have ever witnessed.

YELLOW HOSE

I don't understand it.

VIOLETTA

(stirring)
I find that the butter is *not* very good. It makes a great difference. I shall have to use more pepper to counteract it. That's better.

(She pours in pepper. The BOY with the pepper pot sneezes violently)
Oh, oh, dear! Lend him your handkerchief, Chancellor. Knave, will you?

(YELLOW HOSE silences the boy's sneezes with the Knave's handkerchief)

I think that they are going to turn out very well. Aren't you glad, Chancellor? You shall have one if you will be glad and
(MORE)

VIOLETTA (cont'd)
smile nicely -- a little brown tart with raspberry jam in the middle. Now for a dash of vinegar.

COOKS

(*in horror*)
Vinegar! Great Goslings! Vinegar!

VIOLETTA

(*stops stirring*)
Vinegar will make them crumbly. Do you like them crumbly, Pompdebile, darling? They are really for you, you know, since I am trying, by this example, to show all the wives how to please all the husbands.

POMPDEBILE

Remember that they are to go in the museum with the tests of the previous Queens.

VIOLETTA

(*thoughtfully*)
Oh, yes, I had forgotten that. Under the circumstances, I shall omit the vinegar. We don't want them too crumbly. They would fall about and catch the dust so frightfully. The museum-keeper would never forgive me in years to come. Now I dip them by the spoonful on this pan; fill them with the nice little boy's raspberry jam -- I'm sorry I have to use it all, but you may lick the spoon -- put them in the oven, slam the door. Now, my Lord Pompy, the fire will do the rest.

She curtsies before the KING.

POMPDEBILE

It gave us great pleasure to see the ease with which you performed your task. You must have been practising for weeks. This relieves, somewhat, the anxiety under which we have been suffering and makes us think that we would enjoy a game of checkers once more. How long a time will it take for your creation to be thoroughly done, so that it may be tested?

VIOLETTA

(*considering*)
About twenty minutes, Pompy.

POMPDEBILE

(*to HERALD*)
Inform the people. Come, we will retire.
(*To KNAVE*)
Let no one enter until the Lady Violetta commands.

All exit, left, except the KNAVE. He stands in deep thought, his chin in hand -- then exits slowly, right. The room is empty. The cuckoo clock strikes. Presently both right and left doors open stealthily. Enter LADY VIOLETTA at one door, the

KNAVE at the other, backward, looking down the passage. They turn suddenly and see each other.

VIOLETTA

(tearfully)
O Knave, I can't cook! Anything -- anything at all, not even a baked potato.

KNAVE

So I rather concluded, My Lady, a few minutes ago.

VIOLETTA

(pleadingly)
Don't you think it might just happen that they turned out all right?

(Whispering)
Take them out of the oven. Let's look.

KNAVE

That's what I intended to do before you came in. It's possible that a miracle has occurred.

He tries the door of the oven.

VIOLETTA

Look out; it's hot. Here, take my handkerchief.

KNAVE

The gods forbid, My Lady.

He takes his hat, and, folding it, opens the door and brings out the pan, which he puts on the table softly.

VIOLETTA

(with a look of horror)
How queer! They've melted or something. See, they are quite soft and runny. Do you think that they will be good for anything, Knave?

KNAVE

For paste, My Lady, perhaps.

VIOLETTA

Oh, dear. Isn't it dreadful!

KNAVE

It is.

VIOLETTA

(beginning to cry)
I don't want to be banished, especially on a mule --

KNAVE

Don't cry, My Lady. It's very -- upsetting.

VIOLETTA

I would make a delightful queen. The fêtes that I would give -- under the starlight, with soft music stealing from the shadows, fêtes all perfume and deep mystery, where the young -- like you and me, Knave -- would find the glowing flowers of youth ready to be gathered in all their dewy freshness!

KNAVE

Ah!

VIOLETTA

Those stupid tarts! And wouldn't I make a pretty picture riding on the white palfrey, garlanded with flowers, followed by the cheers of the populace -- Long live Queen Violetta, long live Queen Violetta! Those abominable tarts!

KNAVE

I'm afraid that Her Ladyship is vain.

VIOLETTA

I am indeed. Isn't it fortunate?

KNAVE

Fortunate?

VIOLETTA

Well, I mean it would be fortunate if I were going to be queen. They get so much flattery. The queens who don't adore it as I do must be bored to death. Poor things! I'm never so happy as when I am being flattered. It makes me feel all warm and purry. That is another reason why I feel sure I was *made* to be a queen.

KNAVE

(looking ruefully at the pan)

You will never be queen, My Lady, unless we can think of something quickly, some plan --

VIOLETTA

Oh, yes, dear Knave, please think of a plan at once. Banished people, I suppose, have to comb their own hair, put on their shoes, and button themselves up the back. I have never performed these estimable and worthy tasks, Knave. I don't know how; I don't even know how to scent my bath. I haven't the least idea what makes it smell deliciously of violets. I only know that it always does smell deliciously of violets because I wish it that way. I should be miserable; save me, Knave, please.

KNAVE

My mind is unhappily a blank, Your Majesty.

VIOLETTA

It's very unjust. Indeed, it's unjust! No other queen in the world has to understand cooking; even the Queen of Spades doesn't. Why should the Queen of Hearts, of all people!

KNAVE

Perhaps it is because -- I have heard a proverb: "The way to the heart is through the -- "

VIOLETTA

(angrily, stamping her foot)

Don't repeat that hateful proverb! Nothing can make me more angry. I feel like crying when I hear it, too. Now see, I'm crying. You made me.

KNAVE

Why does that proverb make you cry, My Lady?

VIOLETTA

Oh, because it is such a stupid proverb and so silly, because it's true in most cases, and because -- I don't know why.

KNAVE

We are a set of moles here. One might also say that we are a set of mules. How can moles or mules either be expected to understand the point of view of a Bird of Paradise when she --

VIOLETTA

Bird of Paradise! Do you mean me?

KNAVE

(bowing)

I do, My Lady, figuratively speaking.

VIOLETTA

(drying her eyes)

How very pretty of you! Do you know, I think that you would make a splendid chancellor.

KNAVE

Her Ladyship is vain, as I remarked before.

VIOLETTA

(coldly)

As I remarked before, how fortunate. Have you anything to suggest -- a plan?

KNAVE

If only there were time my wife could teach you. Her figure is squat, round, her nose is clumsy, and her eyes stumble over it; but her cooking, ah --

(He blows a kiss)

-- it is a thing to dream about. She cooks as naturally as the angels sing. The delicate flavors of her concoctions float over the palate like the perfumes of a thousand flowers. True, her temper, it is anything but sweet -- However, I am conceded by many to be the most happily married man in the kingdom.

VIOLETTA

(sadly)

Yes. That's all they care about here. One may be, oh, so cheerful and kind and nice in every other way, but if one can't cook nobody loves one at all.

KNAVE

Beasts! My higher nature cries out at them for holding such views. Fools! Swine! But my lower nature whispers that perhaps after all they are not far from right, and as my lower nature is the only one that ever gets any encouragement --

VIOLETTA

Then you think that there is nothing to be done -- I shall have to be banished?

KNAVE

I'm afraid -- Wait, I have an idea!

(Excitedly)

Dulcinea, my wife -- her name is Dulcinea -- made known to me this morning, very forcibly -- Yes, I remember, I'm sure -- Yes, she was going to bake this very morning some raspberry tarts -- a dish in which she particularly excels -- If I could only procure some of them and bring them here!

VIOLETTA

Oh, Knave, dearest, sweetest Knave, could you, I mean, would you? Is there time? The court will return.

They tiptoe to the door and listen stealthily.

KNAVE

I shall run as fast as I can. Don't let anyone come in until I get back, if you can help it.

He jumps on the table, ready to go out the window.

VIOLETTA

Oh, Knave, how clever of you to think of it. It is the custom for the King to grant a boon to the Queen at her coronation. I shall ask that you be made Chancellor.

KNAVE

(turning back)

Oh, please don't, My Lady, I implore you.

VIOLETTA

Why not?

KNAVE

It would give me social position, My Lady, and that I would rather die than possess. Oh, how we argue about that, my wife and I! Dulcinea wishes to climb, and the higher she climbs, the less she cooks. Should you have me made Chancellor, she would never wield a spoon again.

VIOLETTA

(pursing her lips)

But it doesn't seem fair, exactly. Think of how much I shall be indebted to her. If she enjoys social position, I might as well give her some. We have lots and lots of it lying around.

KNAVE

She wouldn't, My Lady, she wouldn't enjoy it. Dulcinea is a true genius, you understand, and the happiness of a genius lies solely in using his gift. If she didn't cook she would be miserable, although she might not be aware of it, I'm perfectly sure.

VIOLETTA

Then I shall take all social position away from you. You shall rank below the scullery maids. Do you like that better? Hurry, please.

KNAVE

Thank you, My Lady; it will suit me perfectly.

He goes out with the tarts. VIOLETTA listens anxiously for a minute; then she takes her skirt between the tips of her fingers and practises in pantomime her anticipated ride on the palfrey. She bows, smiles, kisses her hand, until suddenly she remembers the mule standing outside the gates of the palace. That thought saddens her, so she curls up in Pompdebile's throne and cries softly, wiping away her tears with a lace handkerchief. There is a knock. She flies to the door and holds it shut.

VIOLETTA

(breathlessly)
Who is there?

CHANCELLOR

It is I, Lady Violetta. The King wishes to return.

VIOLETTA

(alarmed)
Return! Does he? But the tarts are not done. They are not done at all!

CHANCELLOR

You said they would be ready in twenty minutes. His Majesty is impatient.

VIOLETTA

Did you play a game of checkers with him, Chancellor?

CHANCELLOR

Yes.

VIOLETTA

And did you beat him?

CHANCELLOR

(shortly)
I did not.

VIOLETTA

(laughing)
How sweet of you! Would you mind doing it again just for me? Or would it be too great a strain on you to keep from beating him twice in succession?

CHANCELLOR

I shall tell the King that you refuse admission.

VIOLETTA runs to the window to see if the KNAVE is in sight. The CHANCELLOR returns and knocks.

CHANCELLOR

The King wishes to come in.

VIOLETTA

But the checkers!

CHANCELLOR

The Knights of the Checker Board have taken them away.

VIOLETTA

But the tarts aren't done, really.

CHANCELLOR

You said twenty minutes.

VIOLETTA

No, I didn't -- at least, I said twenty minutes for them to get good and warm and another twenty minutes for them to become brown. That makes forty -- don't you remember?

CHANCELLOR

I shall carry your message to His Majesty.

VIOLETTA again runs to the window and peers anxiously up the road.

CHANCELLOR

(knocking loudly)

The King commands you to open the door.

VIOLETTA

Commands! Tell him -- Is he there -- with you?

CHANCELLOR

His Majesty is at the door.

VIOLETTA

Pompy, I think you are rude, very rude indeed. I don't see how you can be so rude -- to command me, your own Violetta who loves you so.

(She again looks in vain for the KNAVE)

Oh, dear!

(Wringing her hands)

Where can he be!

POMPDEBILE

(outside)

This is nonsense. Don't you see how worried we are? It is a compliment to you --

VIOLETTA

Well, come in; I don't care -- only I'm sure they are not finished.

She opens the door for the KING, the CHANCELLOR, and the two PASTRY COOKS. The KING walks to his throne. He finds Lady Violetta's lace handkerchief on it.

POMPDEBILE

(holding up handkerchief)

What is this?

VIOLETTA

Oh, that's my handkerchief.

POMPDEBILE

It is very damp. Can it be that you are anxious, that you are afraid?

VIOLETTA

How Silly, Pompy. I washed my hands, as one always does after cooking; --

(to the PASTRY COOKS)

-- doesn't one? But there was no towel, so I used my handkerchief instead of my petticoat, which is made of chiffon and is very perishable.

CHANCELLOR

Is the Lady Violetta ready to produce her work?

VIOLETTA

I don't understand what you mean by work, Chancellor. Oh, the tarts!

(Nervously)

They were quite simple -- quite simple to make -- no work at all -- A little imagination is all one needs for such things, just imagination. You agree with me, don't you, Pompy, that imagination will work wonders -- will do almost anything, in fact? I remember --

POMPDEBILE

The Pastry Cooks will remove the tarts from the oven.

VIOLETTA

Oh, no, Pompy! They are not finished or cooked, or whatever one calls it. They are not. The last five minutes is of the greatest importance. Please don't let them touch them! Please --

POMPDEBILE

There, there, my dear Violetta, calm yourself. If you wish, they will put them back again. There can be no harm in looking at them. Come, I will hold your hand.

VIOLETTA

That will help a great deal, Pompy, your holding my hand.

She scrambles up on the throne beside the KING.

CHANCELLOR

(in horror)

On the throne, Your Majesty?

POMPDEBILE

Of course not, Chancellor. We regret that you are not yet entitled to sit on the throne, my dear. In a little while --

VIOLETTA

(coming down)

Oh, I see. May I sit here, Chancellor, in this seemingly humble position at his feet? Of course, I can't really be humble when he is holding my hand and enjoying it so much.

POMPDEBILE

Violetta!

(To the PASTRY COOKS)

Sample the tarts. This suspense is unbearable!

The KING'S voice is husky with excitement. The two PASTRY COOKS, after bowing with great ceremony to the KING, to each other, to the CHANCELLOR -- for this is the most important moment of their lives by far, -- walk to the oven door and open it, impressively. They fall back in astonishment so great that they lose their balance, but they quickly scramble to their feet again.

YELLOW HOSE

Your Majesty, there are no tarts there!

BLUE HOSE

Your Majesty, the tarts have gone!

VIOLETTA

(clasping her hands)

Gone! Oh, where could they have gone?

POMPDEBILE

(coming down from throne)

That is impossible.

PASTRY COOKS

(greatly excited)

You see, you see, the oven is empty as a drum.

POMPDEBILE

(to VIOLETTA)

Did you go out of this room?

VIOLETTA

(wailing)

Only for a few minutes, Pompy, to powder my nose before the mirror in the pantry.

(To PASTRY COOKS)

When one cooks one becomes so disheveled, doesn't one? But if I had thought for one little minute --

POMPDEBILE

(interrupting)

The tarts have been stolen!

VIOLETTA

(with a shriek, throwing herself on a chair)
Stolen! Oh, I shall faint; help me. Oh, oh, to think that any one would take my delicious little, my dear little tarts. My salts. Oh! Oh!

PASTRY COOKS run to the door and call.

YELLOW HOSE

Salts! Bring the Lady Violetta's salts.

BLUE HOSE

The Lady Violetta has fainted!

URSULA enters hurriedly bearing a smelling-bottle.

URSULA

Here, here -- What has happened? Oh, My Lady, my sweet mistress!

POMPDEBILE

Some wretch has stolen the tarts.

LADY VIOLETTA moans.

URSULA

Bring some water. I will take off her headdress and bathe her forehead.

VIOLETTA

(sitting up)
I feel better now. Where am I? What is the matter? I remember. Oh, my poor tarts!

She buries her face in her hands.

CHANCELLOR

(suspiciously)
Your Majesty, this is very strange.

URSULA

(excitedly)
I know, Your Majesty. It was the Knave. One of the Queen's women, who was walking in the garden, saw the Knave jump out of this window with a tray in his hand. It was the Knave.

VIOLETTA

Oh, I don't think it was he. I don't, really.

POMPDEBILE

The scoundrel. Of course it was he. We shall banish him for this or have him beheaded.

CHANCELLOR

It should have been done long ago, Your Majesty.

POMPDEBILE

You are right.

CHANCELLOR

Your Majesty will never listen to me.

POMPDEBILE

We do listen to you. Be quiet.

VIOLETTA

What are you going to do, Pompy, dear?

POMPDEBILE

Herald, issue a proclamation at once. Let it be known all over the Kingdom that I desire that the Knave be brought here dead or alive. Send the royal detectives and policemen in every direction.

CHANCELLOR

Excellent; just what I should have advised had Your Majesty listened to me.

POMPDEBILE

(in a rage)

Be quiet.

(Exit HERALD)

I never have a brilliant thought but you claim it. It is insufferable!

The HERALDS can be heard in the distance.

CHANCELLOR

I resign.

POMPDEBILE

Good. We accept your thirty-eighth resignation at once.

CHANCELLOR

You did me the honor to appoint me as your Chancellor, Your Majesty, yet never, never do you give me an opportunity to chancel. That is my only grievance. You must admit, Your Majesty, that as your advisers advise you, as your dressers dress you, as your hunters hunt, as your bakers bake, your Chancellor should be allowed to chancel. However, I will be just -- as I have been with you so long; before I leave you, I will give you a month's notice.

POMPDEBILE

That isn't necessary.

CHANCELLOR

(referring to the constitution hanging at his belt)
It's in the constitution.

POMPDEBILE

Be quiet.

VIOLETTA

Well, I think as things have turned out so -- so unfortunately, I shall change my gown.

(To URSULA)

Put out my cloth of silver with the moonstones. It is always a relief to change one's gown. May I have my handkerchief, Pompy? Rather a pretty one, isn't it, Pompy? Of course you don't object to my calling you Pompy now. When I'm in trouble it's a comfort, like holding your hand.

POMPDEBILE

(magnanimously)

You may hold our hand too, Violetta.

VIOLETTA

(fervently)

Oh, how good you are, how sympathetic! But you see it's impossible just now, as I have to change my gown -- unless you will come with me while I change.

CHANCELLOR

(in a voice charged with inexpressible horror)
Your Majesty!

POMPDEBILE

Be quiet! You have been discharged!

He starts to descend, when a HERALD bursts through the door in a state of great excitement. He kneels before POMPDEBILE.

HERALD

We have found him; we have found him, Your Majesty. In fact, I found him all by myself! He was sitting under the shrubbery eating a tart. I stumbled over one of his legs and fell. "How easy it is to send man and all his pride into the dust," he said, and then -- I saw him!

POMPDEBILE

Eating a tart! Eating a tart, did you say? The scoundrel! Bring him here immediately.

The HERALD rushes out and returns with the KNAVE, followed by the six little PAGES. The KNAVE carries a tray of tarts in his hand.

POMPDEBILE

(almost speechless with rage)
How dare you -- you -- you --

KNAVE

(bowing)
Knave, Your Majesty.

POMPDEBILE

You Knave, you shall be punished for this.

CHANCELLOR

Behead him, Your Majesty.

POMPDEBILE

Yes, behead him at once.

VIOLETTA

Oh, no, Pompy, not that! It is not severe enough.

POMPDEBILE

Not severe enough, to cut off a man's head! Really, Violetta
--

VIOLETTA

No, because, you see, when one has been beheaded, one's consciousness that one has been beheaded comes off too. It is inevitable. And then, what does it matter, when one doesn't know? Let us think of something really cruel -- really fiendish. I have it -- deprive him of social position for the rest of his life -- force him to remain a mere knave, forever.

POMPDEBILE

You are right.

KNAVE

Terrible as this punishment is, I admit that I deserve it, Your Majesty.

POMPDEBILE

What prompted you to commit this dastardly crime?

KNAVE

All my life I have had a craving for tarts of any kind. There is something in my nature that demands tarts -- something in my constitution that cries out for them -- and I obey my constitution as rigidly as does the Chancellor seek to obey his. I was in the garden reading, as is my habit, when a delicate odor floated to my nostrils, a persuasive odor, a seductive, light brown, flaky odor, an odor so enticing, so suggestive of tarts fit for the gods that I could stand it no longer. It was stronger than I. With one gesture I threw

(MORE)

KNAVE (cont'd)

reputation, my chances for future happiness, to the winds, and leaped through the window. The odor led me to the oven; I seized a tart, and, eating it, experienced the one perfect moment of my existence. After having eaten that one tart, my craving for other tarts has disappeared. I shall live with the memory of that first tart before me forever, or die content, having tasted true perfection.

POMPDEBILE

M-m-m, how extraordinary! Let him be beaten fifteen strokes on the back. Now, Pastry Cooks to the Royal Household, we await your decision!

The COOKS bow as before, then each selects a tart from the tray on the table, lifts it high, then puts it in his mouth. An expression of absolute ecstasy and beatitude comes over their faces. They clasp hands, then fall on each other's necks, weeping.

POMPDEBILE

(impatiently)

What on earth is the matter?

YELLOW HOSE

Excuse our emotion. It is because we have at last encountered a true genius, a great master, or rather mistress, of our art.

They bow to VIOLETTA.

POMPDEBILE

They are good, then?

BLUE HOSE

(his eyes to heaven)

Good! They are angelic!

POMPDEBILE

Give one of the tarts to us. We would sample it.

The PASTRY COOKS hand the tray to the KING, who selects a tart and eats it.

POMPDEBILE

(to VIOLETTA)

My dear, they are marvels! marvels!

(He comes down from the throne and leads VIOLETTA up to the dais)

Your throne, my dear.

VIOLETTA

(sitting down, with a sigh)

I'm glad it's such a comfortable one.

POMPDEBILE

Knave, we forgive your offense. The temptation was very great. There are things that mere human nature cannot be expected to resist. Another tart, Cooks, and yet another!

CHANCELLOR

But, Your Majesty, don't eat them all. They must go to the museum with the dishes of the previous Queens of Hearts.

YELLOW HOSE

A museum -- those tarts! As well lock a rose in a money-box!

CHANCELLOR

But the constitution commands it. How else can we commemorate, for future generations, this event?

KNAVE

An Your Majesty, please, I will commemorate it in a rhyme.

POMPDEBILE

How can a mere rhyme serve to keep this affair in the minds of the people?

KNAVE

It is the only way to keep it in the minds of the people. No event is truly deathless unless its monument be built in rhyme. Consider that fall which, though insignificant in itself, became the most famous of all history, because someone happened to put it into rhyme. The crash of it sounded through centuries and will vibrate for generations to come.

VIOLETTA

You mean the fall of the Holy Roman Empire?

KNAVE

No, Madam, I refer to the fall of Humpty Dumpty.

POMPDEBILE

Well, make your rhyme. In the meantime let us celebrate. You may all have one tart.

(The PASTRY COOKS pass the tarts. To VIOLETTA)

Are you willing, dear, to ride the white palfrey garlanded with flowers through the streets of the city?

VIOLETTA

Willing! I have been practising for days!

POMPDEBILE

The people, I suppose, are still clamoring at the gates.

VIOLETTA

Oh, yes, they must clamor. I want them to. Herald, tell them that to every man I shall toss a flower, to every woman a shining gold piece, but to the babies I shall throw only kisses, thousands of them, like little winged birds. Kisses and gold and roses! They will surely love me then!

CHANCELLOR

Your Majesty, I protest. Of what possible use to the people -- ?

POMPDEBILE

Be quiet. The Queen may scatter what she pleases.

KNAVE

My rhyme is ready, Your Majesty.

POMPDEBILE

Repeat it.

KNAVE

The Queen of Hearts
She made some tarts
All on a summer's day.
The Knave of Hearts
He stole those tarts
And took them quite away.

The King of Hearts
Called for those tarts
And beat the Knave full sore.
The Knave of Hearts
Brought back the tarts
And vowed he'd sin no more.

VIOLETTA

(earnestly)

My dear Knave, how wonderful of you! You shall be Poet Laureate. A Poet Laureate has no social position, has he?

KNAVE

It depends, Your Majesty, upon whether or not he chooses to be more laureate than poet.

VIOLETTA

(rising, her eyes closed in ecstasy)

Your Majesty! Those words go to my head -- like wine!

KNAVE

Long live Pompdebile the Eighth, and Queen Violetta!

The trumpets sound.

HERALDS

Make way for Pompdebile the Eighth, and Queen Vi-oletta!

VIOLETTA

(excitedly)

Vee-oletta, please!

HERALDS

Make way for Pompdebile the Eighth, and Queen Vee-oletta --

*The KING and QUEEN show themselves at the door and
the people can be heard clamoring outside.*

CURTAIN