

The Knave Of Hearts

By Louise Saunders

CHARACTERS

THE MANAGER

BLUE HOSE

YELLOW HOSE

1ST HERALD

2D HERALD

POMPDEBILE (pronounced Pomp-*dibiley*) THE EIGHTH, KING
OF HEARTS

THE CHANCELLOR

THE KNAVE OF HEARTS

URSULA THE LADY

VIOLETTA

SIX LITTLE PAGES

(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.)

THE MANAGER. 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--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 to-morrow'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 enters, 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 to-
morrow. 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.*)

POMPDEBILE. 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 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 may be 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.

(UBSULA 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. Knaves, 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 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?

POMPDEBILB (*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*). Knaves, 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 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 Violetta!

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]