

THE QUEEN'S FRIEND.

One evening the young Queen, Marie Antoinette of France, was feeling even more utterly wearied than usual with the royal conventionalities and unmeaning solemnities of the court. Trianon had been presented to her by the King, "as a bouquet," he gallantly said, "because she was so fond of flowers;" but notwithstanding the "bouquet," the sparkling fountains, the mythological temples and the smooth velvet lawns, the young Queen became too frequently the prey of a melancholy which no court amusements will banish. Etiquette and ceremonial were to her a bondage of the worst description, and if the people suffered from heavy taxation, poverty and intolerable exactions, she, in the very height of her power and influence, was equally the slave of circumstances, for she could claim no right to even an hour of solitude, retirement or liberty. At eight o'clock the Mistress of the Robes invaded her chamber. Then came the bath, audiences in the bed-chamber, the toilette for the mid-day presentation, and attendance at mass, dinner in the presence of sycophants and courtiers, and so on till the rising of the evening star.

Absolute innocence is, I believe, one of the rarest qualities of the human soul, and this Marie Antoinette possessed in a remarkable degree. Had she been given her full liberty she would have remained ever virtuous and happy. But contact with a tyrannical court, which allowed her no freedom, but cramped and caged her whole being, naturally resulted in the development of a strong and dangerous tendency to revolt. The captive bird beat its white wings against those gilded prison bars, escape from which even if possible could only for her mean ignominy and ruin.

Among her chamber maids at this time was a young girl of Brittany, named Martha, who appeared to understand the secret sorrows of her queen-mistress. Etiquette forbade conversation between them, but her pitying eyes were often raised to the Queen's, betraying a sympathizing and compassionate soul. Marie Antoinette felt she could trust this girl better than any of her courtly associates, and nature, stronger than conventionality, drew these young souls together. Notwithstanding the social gulf which outwardly divided them, a silent friendship sprang up between the Queen of France and the humble maid of Brittany.

One winter evening, after a dull and ceremonious supper, the Queen called Martha into her chamber, and said with great animation: "This evening, at 10 o'clock, you must secretly procure a carriage and accompany me to Paris."

Martha raised no objection, bowed her head in sign of assent, and retired.

Two hours afterward, while the winds whistled among the trees of Trianon, and all was quiet in the palace, the Queen and Martha left the park by one of the small gates, and quickly entered the attending carriage. The coachman imagined them to be two servants of the royal household on some expedition of business or pleasure. The night was dark and stormy, and the rain dashed wildly against the shaking windows of the carriage, which rolled rapidly onward in the darkness. "You know where we are going?" said the Queen. "I am entirely ignorant, your Majesty."

"I have here two dominoes," explained the Queen, "which we will don before entering Paris. We are going to the Opera ball."

Martha uttered an exclamation of surprise.

"You are shocked," said the Queen, "but you must know that I sometimes need another life than that of Trianon. A queen is a woman after all, and I feel it hard to be denied that liberty which the meanest of my subjects enjoys. I know you are faithful and discreet, and that is why I take you with me."

"Your Majesty may rely on me. But what if the King should visit you to-night and discover your absence?"

"Oh!" said the Queen, with a sadness tinged with irony, "he is not likely to think of me at such an hour."

Marie Antoinette, who afterwards carried out the curious idea of changing Trianon into a rustic village, with dairy, parsonage and farm, naturally sought in this escapade but an innocent amusement, a temporary respite from the tiresome solemnities of the court, in the wild disorder and rollicking fun of the Opera ball. Martha trembled for her mistress.

"Are the masks thick enough?" she ventured to ask, timidly.

"Oh, yes," was the reply, "and the dominoes big enough, also. They will take us for a couple of flower girls."

"Let us hope it," replied Martha, anxiously.

They soon arrived at the barriers, and shortly after, amid a pelting rain, at a certain part of the Palais Royale, then used for theatrical representations and balls connected with the opera. Well masked and wrapped in their dominoes, the two women made their entrance into the ball-room, already full of harlequins, columbines, but-tons and clowns. The orchestra had struck up a lively quadrille, and all the motley crowd surged and swayed in response to the music in one tumultuous throng, while in the outside circle the most grotesque pictures presented themselves; here a Turk paying exaggerated compliments to a columbine, there a clown whispering tender vows to a mocking fair one, while a harlequin, girl with his wooden sword, leaned over a false marchioness, humbly soliciting her to join the dance with him, while she hesitated, coquetted, and put on all the airs of a fine lady, the harlequin ending by seizing her round the waist, with a "Come along; hop, skip and away! I'm carrying you off, my queen!"

He spoke the words ironically, but Marie Antoinette shuddered in the midst of her amusement, for she was laughing and enjoying the buffoonery around her with all the glee and "abandon" of a child.

But this tumultuous crowd, these wild dances and familiarities of speech and manner, these rude imitations of the cries of various animals served but to intoxicate the senses of the Queen, and she roved wherever her fancy led, laughing heartily, and mingling with the jocular and exulting multitude. Freed from the galling fetters of court etiquette and ceremonial, she experienced the delightful sensations of a joyous and ignorant child, or of a prisoner who has at last obtained his liberty.

The violins now sounded for their "gavotte," when, at the foot of a column, the two women were accosted by a man wearing a false nose and horsehair mus-

tache. Adopting a nasal Neapolitan accent, he said:

"I invite one of these ladies to the gavotte."

A short "Thank you" from each was the only response.

"If these sweet ladies, whom I believe to be persons of rank, prefer the quadrille, I shall be equally pleased with their companionship in that dance," he continued.

"Seek elsewhere," replied Martha, curtly.

"And you, my beauty," said he, addressing the queen, and barring her exit. He leaned toward, and she discovered that he had been drinking. The mere contact horrified her.

"Leave us alone!" cried she, authoritatively; and as he attempted to seize her by the waist, she quickly repulsed him with a sounding box on the ear which caused the fall of his false nose and moustache.

"Good heavens!" he exclaimed, to strike and unmask me publicly. This insolent woman shall pay for her insult."

They were quickly surrounded, and two of the guards were called, who evidently recognizing him of high rank, immediately saluted.

"Take these women into custody at once," he commanded, but before doing so, unmask them," and he was about to remove their masks, when the dancers sternly interposed, saying:

"Whoever you are, you have no right to proceed to such an extremity with women in a public ball-room."

"One of them struck me. I have a right to arrest them."

"Very well, arrest them," said the Turk, a man of middle size, "but respect the fair sex and the incognito." And, addressing the crowd, "By my faith, gentlemen, surely he forgets that France is the country of gallantry and good taste. Down with the Neapolitan."

"Down with them," shouted the dancers. While the utmost tumult was at its height, the guards removed the almost fainting Queen and her attendant.

"Where are you taking us?" said the former.

"To the nearest police station."

"Three hundred francs if you will set us at liberty."

"Impossible, ladies," murmured one of the guards, "we are responsible to the superior officer."

"And he is very severe," replied the other.

Thus escorted, they arrived at the Rue St. Honore, where in a miserable station, the police were engaged in playing at cards on empty barrels by the light of a tallow candle. In the absence of the superior officer, who probably was amusing himself at the ball, the two guards made their report to the sergeant, who took charge of the prisoners, and the guards returned to their duty.

"Remove your masks," commanded the sergeant.

"Impossible," replied the Queen.

"Your names?"

"Martha and Mary only."

"Scriptural names. Oh, this is charming. Why did you strike the gentleman?"

"He insulted us. Besides, he was intoxicated."

"I am obliged to detain you here."

"You will be obliged to release us."

"Do you think so?"

"I am sure of it. All I ask is a short private interview with you."

"Ah! ah, alone," said the watchman, laughing maliciously.

"Very well," said the sergeant, already moved by the determined young voice. Then, pointing to Martha, he ordered the watch to guard her carefully, and ushering the Queen into his office, closed the door.

It was a dark room, with deep, narrow windows, dimly lighted by candles, and furnished only with wooden tables and chairs, polished by long usage, while an immense open register lay beside a leaden inkstand, beside which were several well worn quill pens. The sergeant offered the Queen a chair opposite to himself, and took his place at the table.

"A hundred ecus (an old coin worth about half a dollar) if you set us at liberty."

"You are very rich, then?"

"Perhaps."

"Who are you?"

"What does that matter?"

The sergeant was piqued. "I ought to know your name and I will," he replied. He was a handsome man, with dark penetrating eyes, fine features, and refined manners.

"Why do you insist on my revealing my name? I have compromised myself by attending the ball. Should it be known that I have done so, I am ruined."

"And if I swear to keep silence?"

"Then the desire to know our names is but a vain and unworthy curiosity."

The young man's eyes were fixed on the Queen's hand, where a signet ring glittered.

"Your hand betrays you," he said. "You are a great lady, and, suddenly seizing her arm, he dexterously raised her velvet mask. On recognizing the features, he staggered back, sinking into his chair, exclaiming: "The Queen." Then in a supplicating tone, he implored her pardon, Marie Antoinette, pale and trembling, replied: "I pardon you, but swear to me to keep silence."

"I swear," replied the sergeant.

"Always?"

"Till death," added he solemnly, adding in a strange and mysterious tone. "Besides I love you too well to injure you."

"You love me!" murmured the Queen, in a tone of the deepest feeling.

"I worship you." Then in a hurried and breathless manner, he added, "Yes, I am to you a stranger, a madman. But listen to me, I saw you for the first time when as the Dauphiness you made your solemn entry into Paris with your husband by the Porte de la Conference. I was one of the mounted guard. The crowd joyously greeted your entry, you went in procession to Notre Dame, St. Genevieve, then to the Tuilleries. Your beauty overcame me. I have said a thousand times to myself that I was a man, a fool, or worse, but your image has ever remained engraved on my heart and memory, and will continue so for ever, for no earthly power can change me. Yes, I, a poor soldier of the guard, have lived a whole life in the few years that have passed since I saw you. You are for me the whole world, and now I see you before me in your chaste beauty! Ah! how I love you! how more than miserable I am!" He hid his face in his hands and wept.

The queen was silent. Never before had such deep impassioned devotion been offered her and her heart was deeply touched. He resumed, "Yes, you are the

Queen of France. The sovereign of all, and I'm but one of your most obscure and humble servants, yet no one has the power to forbid my adoring you, for I know you are loving and kind. I see you are beautiful and pure. Ah! had I been a prince (and perhaps I have the heart of one) how I should have cherished you! Oh, pardon me, I blaspheme! I am mad." He fell on his knees. "Queen, overwhelm me not with your contempt; the heart knows nothing of rank, hierarchies or aught else, and my love is only equalled by my sufferings."

"Rise," said the trembling Queen, giving him her hand which he passionately kissed, "your name?"

"Rosnoen."

"When you desire any favor for yourself or relatives, you have only to appeal to me."

"I ask nothing, your Majesty, but to watch over your happiness, and to pray heaven to protect you. Who knows the future? Evil days are coming. I tremble for your safety, your happiness, your life. He paused. Then the Queen suddenly remembered the sinister omens which had attended her marriage, the fearful thunder which broke over Versailles, the awful thunder which shook the chateau when she entered it as a bride, and the unfortunate victims who were crushed to death in the crowd which assembled in the Place Louis Quinze to witness the illuminations in honor of her marriage. "God help me!" she murmured. Then resuming her mask, she said to the sergeant, "Order a carriage. Adieu, monsieur, I thank you."

He left her for a moment and then returned saying, "All is ready." She again passed the police, the trembling Martha following, and precipitately entered the carriage.

Rosnoen, pale as death, followed with them with his eyes. Then, affecting a smile, he returned to his office. His subordinates looked on with curiosity, but scarcely liked to question him. One, however, ventured the remark, "Then the affair is settled?"

"Yes," replied he carelessly, "they are old acquaintances of mine."

"What will the officer say who received the *bouquet a cinque feuilles* (an expression signifying a box on the ear)?"

"Fool, fool, we shall see."

At break of day the officer, still intoxicated, entered noisily.

"Where are my prisoners?"

"Escaped!"

"How escaped with so many here on guard?"

"I allowed them to escape."

"But why?"

"I have nothing to hide; I will not compromise these men. The ladies were friends of mine, and I preferred sacrificing myself to your anger to leaving them to their fate."

"You shall pay for this—first by imprisonment, then by dismissal."

"I am quite prepared."

The noble Breton accepted imprisonment and degradation almost joyfully in the service of his beloved Queen, sustained by the thought that he had suffered for her sake.

Marie Antoinette never forgot that strange night. When alone with Martha in the carriage, she remained for a long time silent, feeling for the first time in her life that there was one who, hidden in an obscure and separated from her by an impassable abyss, loved her with a devotion of which she had hitherto been a stranger; loved her purely, passionately, and to the death, and her heart was deeply moved.

The Queen's musings were interrupted by the stopping of the carriage as they reached an obscure faubourg of Versailles, when Martha considered it wise to proceed on foot, fearing lest the sound of carriage wheels might awaken the sleepers of Trianon.

The two women entered the little gate on foot and gained their chambers without observation, as the whole household was wrapped in slumber, the King amongst the soundest of the unsuspecting sleepers.

A few years rolled by, and on a calm October morning Marie Antoinette, her robes of state exchanged for a black gown, muslin fichu and lawn cap, was seated beside the priest Girard in the cart which conveyed her to the scaffold, amidst an innumerable and hostile crowd which filled the streets from the Conciergerie to the Place de la Revolution. Her beautiful fair hair had become white as snow, and she cast a traquill and almost disdainful glance on the howling and vociferating mob, the National Guard, and the spectators filling the windows beneath the floating banners of the triumphant Republic.

At the corner of the Church of St. Koch, an insulting crowd assailed the fallen Queen, and at the same moment a cry of "to arms!" arose in the narrow streets which opened into the Rue St. Honore. She looked and saw some armed citizens led by a mounted guard, who turned his head toward them. There was a momentary silence around the cart. Then a cry rose in the narrow street, "Rescue the Queen!" The horseman turned toward Marie Antoinette. It was Rosnoen. She became pale as death as her eyes met his, who, for so long a time had been lost to her, but who loved her so devotedly that he had come to meet her in the valley of the shadow of death. In a silent exchange of thought, they said to one another, she, "I know you well, adieu!" he, "I will save or die with her whom I adore." All this in a lightning flash.

Rosnoen and his little armed band strove in vain to penetrate the crowd and approach the Queen. Cries of "Death to the traitor!" were raised, and in a moment he was surrounded by the infuriated mob, dragged from his horse, and murdered by the enraged people and the National Guard.

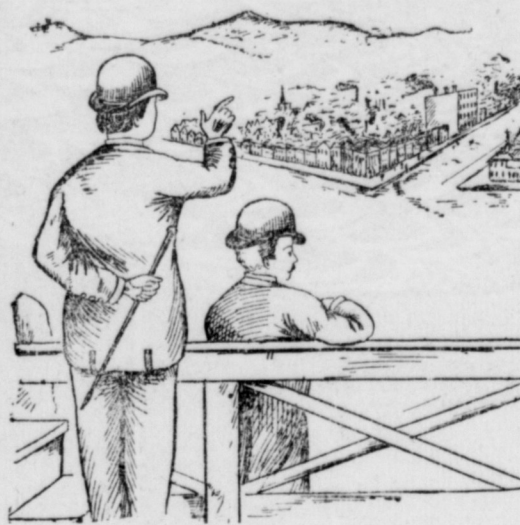
The cart had continued its course. The Queen turned, and, although she saw nothing, she knew that the brave Rosnoen had offered his life a willing sacrifice for her, and two tears of tenderness, despair, and perhaps love, rolled softly down her cheeks. She heard no longer the vociferous shouts of the excited mob. A longing for death took possession of her soul, which was already with her God. At a quarter past twelve all was over. But even the triumphant revolutionists could not but be moved to admiration by the noble bearing of the woman whom the judges simply designated "La Veuve Capet."—Trans. from French by Eliza L. Boucher.

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