

The King's Page A Tale of France

“Oh Love! oh happiness! is not your home
Far from the crowded street, the lighted hall?
Are ye not dwellers in the valley's green,
In the white cottage?”—L. E. L.

“The lily bloom'd in her lowly cot, and her guardian sire was there.”—WORDSWORTH

CHIVALROUS and brave were the heroes that comprised the Court of Henri Quatre; in the battlefield the lance was struck with the fiercest impulse, and the avenging sword made fire upon every helmet and breast-plate on which it fell; glory was the soldier's mistress, and to her alone his devotions seemed to be paid; but it was not really so, for with the return of peace a new life was taken up, and the heroes of the tented field became the slaves of their ladies' boudoir; the burnished arms and glittering casques were superseded by the soft silken robes that befitted hours of dalliance, and the sword and the spear became exchanged for the light guitar, whose dulcet melody was heard in every fair one's chamber, and its notes resounded from grove and bower, when “the mid-day sun was burning high,” or in the softer hours of twilight, when all things seemed to mingle in harmony and repose, whispering peace and comfort to the breaking heart, and rapture to the happy. The leader of the gallants, the chief minister of pleasure, from whom the rest derived their inspiration, was Henri himself. Intrepid and fearless in the hour of battle, he was as eminent for his gallantry in the halcyon days of peace, and the example of the monarch was eagerly adopted by his followers. Sully, the good, the virtuous Sully, alone, dared to represent to his master the folly into which his impetuous passion often carried him; but the remonstrances of the minister, although allowed and respected, became speedily drowned in the riotous gallantry of his more esteemed associates. Among these, the Mareschal de Turenne held the highest place in his affections; he had fought and bled by Henri's side, his valour was acknowledged by the people, and Henri loved him; but the disposition of Turenne was altogether different to that of the monarch; the latter guiding his every action by the rule of honour; the other, hot, rash, and unthinking, often glossing over dishonourable deeds in his pursuit. There was a youth, too, in the palace, who enjoyed no inconsiderable share of Henri's regard; one of his pages, who had frequently attended him in the field, and in one instance had preserved his life at the extreme hazard of his own; this noble action endeared him to the monarch, who had him constantly about his person. The history of the page, however, could never be ascertained; he had been introduced to the king's service by a nobleman, since dead, and the youth, Victor, himself, refused to answer any enquiries upon the subject, and when the king alluded to it, the only reply was tears. He was evidently the child of misfortune, though the glare and glitter of the court had thrown a bright veil over his sorrows, and the warrior boy, as Henri frequently termed him, had become the most gay and joyous youth about the court. Towards the Mareschal de Turenne, however, the absorbing attention of Victor was directed, and often his replies bore a mysterious import; Turenne's schemes of gallantry were discovered and most frequently destroyed by the page, who seemed dearly to enjoy the triumph he had won, and the mental

distraction of the warrior. Yet Turenne dared not resent the many insults offered him, for, independent of the interdiction of the monarch, there was something in the boy's manner that awed him, and he shrunk even from his laughing reproof.

One clear and beautiful Summer's evening, Henri was walking in the romantic gardens of the palace, scheming new plans of pleasure, and anticipating the brilliant assemblage of beauty that would gem the festival of the night, when accidentally the tearful looks of his warrior boy met his glance, and he immediately exclaimed—

“Victor, my boy, why those tears? but now thou wert enjoying some mad-cap folly thou hadst played upon Turenne; he would have chastised thee but for my interference, but you seemed in your laughing revelry to despise his threats.”

“Ah, sire!” exclaimed the page, “to you I dare reveal, that while the smile played upon my burning cheek, shame, sorrow, and indignation pervaded my heart, for he upbraided me with the mystery of my poor parents. Did all men resemble him, what would have been the fate of Victor!”

“Banish those reflections, my child; that face was never moulded for a tear to sully its pure brightness. I will confess, my admiration has been raised why thou should'st still conceal thy father's name, even from myself—still I commend thy caution;—it may be, that he is a foe to Henri and to France!”

“Oh no!” impetuously exclaimed the page, “for the beloved Henri he would have shed his blood—would yield his life! But there has been ——Ah!—excuse me, sure, I *dare not* proceed!”

“I will believe thee,” rejoined the king, “you, doubtless, have sufficient reason for this mystery, but of this be sure, that Henri Quatre ever is thy *friend*.”

The grateful page seized the hand of the monarch, and pressing it to his lips, testified his sense of the obligation; then snatching his guitar, he run his fingers wildly over the strings, and breathed the warm feelings of his soul:—

“My father once fought for the freedom of France,
And was first the bright fame of his king to advance;
But alas! the sad hour—misfortune's dire hand,
Drove my ill-fated sire to a far distant land;
Where he grieves in despair, yet I *dare not* reveal
The secret which pains my young heart to conceal!

My heart-broken sire bid me join in the wars,
And fight in his own darling country's cause;
When I eagerly strove victor's laurels to gain,
And rescue from branded opprobrium our name:
Impetuous I rush'd to the midst of the strife,
And Heaven led my arm to save Henri's life!”

The monarch and his *protegee* were interrupted by the arrival of Turenne, warm with the expected gratification of another achievement dismissed, and the gay Mareschal proceeded to

develop his discovery. He had been shooting a short distance from Marseilles, and upon entering a woodman's cottage for refreshment, had been entertained by a beautiful and unsophisticated creature, who was instantly selected as a proper object for the perverted gallantry of the monarch and his dissolute companion. The king was in raptures at Turenne's glowing description of the rustic beauty's charms, and instantly ordering proper disguises, they proceeded to the woodman's cottage.

Though mystery hung so darkly over the fortunes of Victor's parent, yet the good old man lived not far distant from the spot where Henri and his court were now abiding. Victor often trembled lest the old man might be discovered, yet he himself, guileless and honest, trusted to the great Power that protects the innocent and laughed his Victor's fears to scorn. Frequently did the son retire from the glare and splendour of royalty to enjoy the humble happiness of a home, beloved, because it was consecrated by a father's presence, and more endeared to him, because it was also the abode of his beloved Marie, a young and beautiful girl, who passed as the daughter of the woodman, but she was not really so. She was beloved by Victor, and the innocent Marie returned that love with all its purity and holiness.

Victor, his father Eustache, and his beloved Marie, were enjoying those domestic pleasures which alone the pure of heart may know, haloed by those undying rays of virtue which shed brilliancy across the career of life, and which even in pain, in anguish, speak consolation to the mourner, and whisper peace and resignation to the breaking heart.

Their home
Was covered with sweet creeping shrubs,
And had a porch of evergreens; it stood
Beneath the shelter of a maple tree.
Whose boughs spread o'er it, like a green tent,—
'Twas beautiful in summer, with gay flowers,
Green leaves, and fragrant grass strewn o'er the floor,
And, in the winter, cheerful with its hearth,
Where blazed the wood fire.—
Here was the happiness of hearth and home!

The little family were enjoying their domestic pleasures when a loud knocking was heard at the outer door, and Victor instantly recognized the voices of Henri and Turenne. The family were alarmed, but Eustache, desiring them to abate their fears, led his son into an interior apartment, and then quickly opened the door to the two disguised gallants. They introduced themselves as travelers in want of some needful refreshment, which was immediately granted by the woodman, who assumed an air of gaiety, and welcomed his enemies with a smile.

"Welcome, welcome, gentlemen," exclaimed he, "to the best my cottage affords; 'tis humble, true, but it is seasoned with good will, and the hearty welcome of old Eustache."

"You seem in brave spirits, my good host."

"Thus I am always;—here I live, a merry old woodman, contented and happy, for my home is devoid of care, and my meals are prepared by the sweetest child in Christendom;—nay, do not blush Marie—make the strangers welcome; you did not learn to blush from me, you rogue."

Turenne engaged the woodman in conversation, while Henri accosted the maiden; the artifice was not unseen on Eustache, who narrowly attended every action of his guests, though he apparently was absorbed in the humorous conversation of Turenne. The approaches of Henri, however, became too distressing to Marie for longer endurance, and Eustache instantly pouring wine, solicited the king to drink.

“Aye!” exclaimed the monarch, “to the lovely Marie.”

“True, she is a good girl,” rejoined the woodman, “an artless, unsophisticated innocent, her heart had never been sullied by the vices of a town, nor the licentiousness of a court, where such men as the Mareschal de Turenne preside.”

“Ah!” exclaimed the king, “you think the Mareschal an indifferent fellow, eh?”

“Indifferent!” rejoined the indignant Eustache, “he is a blot upon humanity. Had Henri known the baseness of his heart, I, *perhaps*, should not have been in this forlorn condition;—perhaps, my child could have proved a meteor in the sky of France! But that’s all over now,”—and the old man dashed away the tear that trembled upon his eyelid.

“And what the devil have you to say against Turenne?” enquired the astonished Mareschal.

“What is that to you.—Come drink again. The king—may heaven bless him!”

“You love your king, then?” enquired Henri.

“Yes, and have fought for him; my best blood has been spent in his service; but time, and the injuries I have experienced, have unnerved my arm, blanched my dark hairs, and brought me sorrowing to the grave. But still were my country in danger, I would again rush to the field, for though my arms might be a little stiff, the more active warriors I could lead on to glory: if I beheld a coward fly, I would be a barrier to arrest his progress, and he either should return to his duty, or make his way across my bleeding corse!”

“Excellent old warrior! But tell me friend, why you are so embittered against the favourite Mareschal of Henri. If any secret hangs upon the information, I pledge my honour it shall go no farther and as for my friend, I think I can well answer for *him*. Don’t you think I can Phillippe?”

“Assuredly,” exclaimed the hot warrior, eager to learn the woodman’s mystery.

“Well then,” commenced Eustache, “some years ago—I am a bad hand at telling a story; but this is its burthen:—some years ago, there were in the French army, two generals, the Marquis de Croissy and the Count D’Albert.”

“Ah!” exclaimed the monarch in surprise.

Eustache did not appear to notice the expression of his guest, and thus proceeded: "Nature had blest the Count with one fair child, a daughter, of whose beauties an Emperor might be proud; the panders of Turenne discovered the treasure, and soon reported her to their master, who had the vile audacity to propose dishonourable terms to the father himself—even to the noble Count D'Albert!"

"Impossible!" ejaculated the king.

"By heaven he did!" rejoined the woodman, "and I think he must remember to this day the return of the girl's father to the insolent propositon; but the Mareschal had an horrible revenge; the ruthless tiger, spoiled of his prey, laid snares for the indignant parent;—false witnesses were suborned, a plot conjured up;—the Count, his friend the Marquis de Croissy, and their immediate circle of associates, who had dared to express their sentiments respecting the vicious conduct of Turenne, were implicated, arrested, tried—and *banished!*"

"Well, well do I remember that important affair," replied the monarch, "'twas said, too, that the king lamented two such noble warriors should prove traitors—"

"'Twas false!" interrupted Eustache, "let him stand forward who dare assert the crime, and in his teeth will I hurl back the lie, the wicked, damning lie!"

Turenne felt awed but the violent expression, and fierce demeanor of the woodman, beneath whose humble aspect, there appeared a brighter soul than beams usually in humble clay.

"And who are you," enquired he, "that you feel so warmly on the subject?"

Eustache paused for a moment, and after glancing keenly at his enquirer, replied, "The *faithful servant* of the Count, who scorned to leave his master amidst all his sufferings." Henri enquired his fate, and the old man continued:— "He paid the debt of nature; he was a man unused to misfortune, and when it burst so fiercely upon his devoted head, he sunk under it, and he died! In vain the Marquis and myself strove to console him. In vain we bid him hope for pardon from the king. 'Tis foolish hope,' exclaimed he, 'The spirit of happiness has taken her flight from my bosom forever, and all that remains for me, is to die!' He grasped my hand in the agony of grief, and a deadly paleness spread across his face, his lip became livid, and his eyes were fixed in death; he fell exhausted into my arms! A whisper murmured upon his lips— 'Eustache, to thee I resign my child—preserve her from Turenne—protect her!' I swore before the face of Heaven to guard her as my own; tears fell from his pale eyes, and his white and chilly hands grasped mine—he looked upon my face, and with that look, he died!"

The youthful Marie, who had tremblingly listened to the woodman's recital, now fell in tears upon his bosom, exclaiming, "Oh my dear father! no more! no more!" The sight was affecting; and to Henri's generous heart it spoke a language, forcible as pathetic; he looked expressively at Turenne, but the Mareschal averted his head, and remained in unmoved sternness, sketching figures upon the ground. The attention of Henri, however, was fixed upon the veteran, who endeavored to compose the lovely and sorrowing girl: and observing that Henri was waiting for the conclusion of his narrative, he hastily passed his hand over his brow to clear away the traces

of the tears that had fallen upon the neck of his child, and thus processed:—"I have little more to add;—I laid the Count in the cold earth, and though no pompous procession escorted him to the tomb, no empty panegyric sounded over his remains, they were embalmed with the tears of his faithful follower; and his child planted a rose-tree upon his grave; it is still daily attended by the affectionate girl, and prayers from that hallowed spot rise to the throne of the blessed, from whence the spirit of the father looks down upon his child, and welcomes her aspirations of piety and hope."

A considerable pause succeeded the pious ejaculation of the woodman; Turenne remaining in his sullen abstraction, but Henri, in admiration of the generous fervor of his host; his every unworthy thought was sacrificed at the shrine of virtue, and his heart panted to reward such unsophisticated goodness. The light notes of the guitar, however, broke the long silence, and the king immediately recognized the voice of his page accompanying the instrument. Turenne started in surprise, and expressive looks were rapidly exchanged between the strangers. Ere they could come to any resolution, however, the door of the inner apartment opened, and the page entered with his guitar, nodding respectfully to the strangers, and continuing his *chanson* without the least movement of surprise.

"Turenne," whispered the king, "what mystery is this? what does this mean?"

"Mean!" echoes the Mareschal, "why that we are in a sad predicament—that cursed page will discover us, and then——"

"The Lord have mercy upon the poor Mareschal." Then turning to the page, he whispered, "Victor, how came you here?"

"I do not know you, indeed, good gentlemen, never saw you before in my life," replied the page, not appearing to be acquainted with them; a hint that was instantly taken by the monarch, who, with his companion, prepared to make a hasty departure. Victor, however, seizing the cloak of the latter as he was retiring, laughingly whispered in his ear—

"*Spoil sport, Mar! ha! ha! Ha!*"

"You shall repent!" fiercely replied Turenne, as he burst from the grasp of the page; who rejoined with another loud peal of laughter, as he closed the door upon the woodman's guests.

On the ensuing day, while Henri was surrounded by his little circle of friends, Turenne, Victor, and the esteemed and virtuous Sully, sharing principally in the monarch's consideration, a page entered to announce the arrival of two peasants whom Henri had privately ordered to be arrested and conducted to his presence; they were now introduced, and the surprise of Victor was not greater than that of Turenne, upon beholding, in the two prisoners, the woodman and his child. "Honest Eustache," exclaimed the king, as they entered the saloon, "in hours of peace I am indeed a merry monarch, and it is fit that merry monarchs should be entertained by such merry subjects as thyself!" The apprehensions of Victor, Eustache, and Marie, subsided at the friendly greeting of the king, and the former, stepping forward, and assuing an air of gaiety, observed, "I am happy that so brave a veteran will be rewarded by Henri Quatre." "He shall be rewarded, my

warrior boy,” rejoined the king. Turenne immediately remarked the strangeness of the royal determination, but Henri was resolute, and the Mareschal was compelled, at length, merely to solicit the aspersions might be retracted, which the woodman had so unsparingly cast upon him;—Eustache looked contemptuously upon the Mareschal, and in a voice of decision, exclaimed, “No!”—“Then,” impetuously relied Turenne, “justice shall compel you to speak truly of the Mareschal!” “I have spoken truly,” was the reply of Eustache, who became warm with the fierce observations of Turenne. “Liar!” exclaimed the latter—“Liar and slave! Dost thou not fear the vengeance of Turenne?”

“I fear no one—but my God and my king!”

“My brave, my good old man,” rejoined the monarch, “this altercation must not be;—Mareschal, you must be reconciled to the loyal veteran.”

It had proceeded too far, however, with the fiery Mareschal, who spurned the mediation of the monarch, and glancing furiously at Eustache, he repeated, “Liar and slave!”

“I cannot bear with this,” cried Eustache, “I am no liar, I am no slave; to his face, to the bold face of the noble wretch, would I proclaim his infamy, and brand his villainy upon his brow.”

“Slave, I am Turenne!”

“And I am——”

“Hold, hold!” shrieked the page, as he threw himself into the woodman’s arms, “you know not what you say.”

“Away, away my child, it is too much, I cannot stand before my king and hear him praise my loyalty and zeal, and still be branded with a traitor’s name—no, no, it is too much, and come what may, know wretch, I am thy victim, the innocent De Croissy!”

Turenne relapsed into his former sullenness; Eustache was clasped in the arms of Victor and Marie, his eyes flashing fire, and his face clear with the consciousness of innocence, which his general aspect confirmed. Henri gazed upon the scene with a sigh, and even the stern Sully shed tears. Victor looked wistfully in his patron’s face, but met there with disappointment and regret; the Marquis de Croissy had returned from banishment and his life must pay the forfeit. Victor quitted the embrace of the veteran, and advancing entreatingly towards the throne, exclaimed, “indeed, he is innocent!” Henri waved his hand, the page continued to supplicate, but the monarch affirmed the law of France to be inviolable, and that it must take its course, he could not stay its execution.

“Oh!” exclaimed the page, “often have you required your warrior boy to ask some favour, the granting which might prove how tenderly you loved him: I have refrained from begging until now, and now I crave De Croissy’s life!”

“It is not in my power to give.”

“Oh yes, who dare disobey the orders of our king—of Henri Quatre?” He advanced upon the first step of the throne, and Henri averted his face;—the page knelt, and clasping the monarch’s hand, murmured a stanza of his favourite and plaintive air:—

“My heart-broken sire bid me join in the wars,
And fight for his own darling country’s cause;
Where I eagerly strove victor’s laurels to gain,
And rescue from branded opprobrium our name;
Tempestuous I rushed to the midst of the strife,
And Heaven led my arm *to save Henri’s life!*”

The page paused, and Henri turned towards him, exclaiming hurriedly—

“Indeed, indeed I would do much to repay thy valour—ask me anything but this.”

“I ask but life for life!”

“Why take this interest in a stranger’s fate?”

“He is——*my Father!*”

Victor fell at his sovereign’s feet, still grasping the hand which he held, and protesting the innocence of his parent.—At this moment an attendant entered the saloon with a communication from Turenne, who had left the spot in considerable agitation, while the page was pleading to the king. The monarch’s eyes brightened as he pursued the note, and immediately raising the page from his feet, he desired him to acquaint his noble father with his restoration to his original titles and possessions. The contents of that note never transpired, but the errors of Turenne were forgiven, and by his after deeds he endeavored to atone for the misery which he had previously created. The gloom of sadness and despair was superseded by the brilliancy of happiness, and the festival that witnessed the union of the page with the lovely Marie, the daughter of the Count d’Albert, whom de Croissy had cherished and protected, hallowed the reconciliation with Turenne, and his return to virtue. It was indeed a day of happiness; youth mingled with its characteristic fervour, in the scene, and age “threw its crutches by” for the moment, to encourage the festivity which such felicitous occurrences had occasioned. The Marquis de Croissy again resided in the halls of his ancestry, and the possessions of D’Albert were bestowed upon his child. The evening of de Croissy’s life was thus cheered by a scene of joy that burst upon his paths when they seemed closed in eternal night, and his son Victor, and the faithful and affectionate Marie, enjoyed the felicity of their mutual loves, and Henri Quatre was their friend.

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