

# The King's Sweetheart

Honore de Balzac

There lived at this time at the forges of the Pont-aux-Change, a goldsmith whose daughter was talked about in Paris on account of her great beauty, and renowned above all things for her exceeding gracefulness. There were those who sought her favours by the usual tricks of love and, but others offered large sums of money to the father to give them his daughter in lawful wedlock, the which pleased him not a little.

One of his neighbours, a parliamentary advocate, who by selling his cunning devices to the public had acquired as many lands as a dog has fleas, took it into his head to offer the said father a domain in consideration of his consent to this marriage, which he ardently desired to undertake. To this arrangement our goldsmith was nothing loth. He bargained away his daughter, without taking into consideration the fact that her patched-up old suitor had the features of an ape and had scarcely a tooth in his jaws. The smell which emanated from his mouth did not however disturb his own nostrils, although he was filthy and high flavoured, as are all those who pass their lives amid the smoke of chimneys, yellow parchment, and other black proceedings. Immediately this sweet girl saw him she exclaimed, "Great Heaven! I would rather not have him."

"That concerns me not," said the father, who had taken a violent fancy to the proffered domain. "I give him to you for a husband. You must get on as well as you can together. That is his business now, and his duty is to make himself agreeable to you."

"Is it so?" said she. "Well then, before I obey your orders I'll let him know what he may expect."

And the same evening, after supper, when the love-sick man of law was pleading his cause, telling her he was mad for her, and promising her a life of ease and luxury, she taking him up, quickly remarked--

"My father had sold me to you, but if you take me, you will make a bad bargain, seeing that I would rather offer myself to the passers-by than to you. I promise you a disloyalty that will only finish with death--yours or mine."

Then she began to weep, like all young maidens will before they become experienced, for afterwards they never cry with their eyes. The good advocate took this strange behaviour for one of those artifices by which the women seek to fan the flames of love and turn the devotion of their admirers into the more tender caress and more daring osculation that speaks a husband's right. So that the knave took little notice of it, but laughing at the complaints of the charming creature, asked her to fix the day.

"To-morrow," replied she, "for the sooner this odious marriage takes place, the sooner I shall be free to have gallants and to lead the gay life of those who love where it pleases them."

Thereupon the foolish fellow--as firmly fixed as a fly in a glue pot-- went away, made his

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preparations, spoke at the Palace, ran to the High Court, bought dispensations, and conducted his purchase more quickly than he ever done one before, thinking only of the lovely girl. Meanwhile the king, who had just returned from a journey, heard nothing spoken of at court but the marvellous beauty of the jeweller's daughter who had refused a thousand crowns from this one, snubbed that one; in fact, would yield to no one, but turned up her nose at the finest young men of the city, gentlemen who would have forfeited their seat in paradise only to possess one day, this little dragon of virtue.

The good king, was a judge of such game, strolled into the town, past the forges, and entered the goldsmith's shop, for the purpose of buying jewels for the lady of his heart, but at the same time to bargain for the most precious jewel in the shop. The king not taking a fancy to the jewels, or they not being to his taste, the good man looked in a secret drawer for a big white diamond.

"Sweetheart," said he, to the daughter, while her father's nose was buried in the drawer, "sweetheart, you were not made to sell precious stones, but to receive them, and if you were to give me all the little rings in the place to choose from, I know one that many here are mad for; that pleases me; to which I should ever be subject and servant; and whose price the whole kingdom of France could never pay."

"Ah!, sire!" replied the maid, "I shall be married to-morrow, but if you will lend me the dagger that is in your belt, I will defend my honour, and you shall take it, that the gospel made be observed wherein it says, 'Render unto Caesar the things which be Caesar's' . . ."

Immediately the king gave her the little dagger, and her brave reply rendered him so amorous that he lost his appetite. He had an apartment prepared, intending to lodge his new lady-love in the Rue a l'Hirundelle, in one of his palaces.

And now behold my advocate, in a great hurry to get married, to the disgust of his rivals, the leading his bride to the altar to the clang of bells and the sound of music, so timed as to provoke the qualms of diarrhoea. In the evening, after the ball, comes he into the nuptial chamber, where should be reposing his lovely bride. No longer is she a lovely bride--but a fury--a wild she-devil, who, seated in an armchair, refuses her share of her lord's couch, and sits defiantly before the fire warming at the same time her ire and her calves. The good husband, quite astonished, kneels down gently before her, inviting her to the first passage of arms in that charming battle which heralds a first night of love; but she utters not a word, and when he tries to raise her garment, only just to glance at the charms that have cost him so dear, she gives him a slap that makes his bones rattle, and refuses to utter a syllable.

This amusement, however, by no means displeased our friend the advocate, who saw at the end of his troubles that which you can as well imagine as he did; so played he his share of the game manfully, taking cheerfully the punishment bestowed upon him. By so much hustling about, scuffling, and struggling he managed at last to tear away a sleeve, to slit a petticoat, until he was able to place his hand upon his own property. This bold endeavour brought Madame to her feet and drawing the king's dagger, "What would you with me?" she cried.

"Everything," answered he.

"Ha! I should be a great fool to give myself against my inclination! If you fancied you would find my virtue unarmed you made a great error. Behold the poniard of the king, with which I will kill you if you make the semblance of a step towards me."

So saying, she took a cinder, and having still her eyes upon her lord she drew a circle on the floor, adding, "These are the confines of the king's domain. Beware how you pass them."

The advocate, with whose ideas of love-making the dagger sadly interfered, stood quite discomfited, but at the same time he heard the cruel speech of his tormentor he caught sight through the slits and tears in her robe of a sweet sample of a plump white thigh, and such voluptuous specimens of hidden mysteries, et cetera, that death seemed sweet to him if he could only taste of them a little. So that he rushed within the domain of the king, saying, "I mind not death." In fact he came with such force that his charmer fell backwards onto the bed, but keeping her presence of mind she defended herself so gallantly that the advocate enjoyed no further advantage than a knock at the door that would not admit him, and he gained as well a little stab from the poniard which did not wound him deeply, so that it did not cost him very dearly, his attack upon the realm of his sovereign. But maddened with this slight advantage, he cried, "I cannot live without the possession of that lovely body, and those marvels of love. Kill me then!" And again he attacked the royal preserves. The young beauty, whose head was full of the king, was not even touched by this great love, said gravely, "If you menace me further, it is not you but myself I will kill." She glared at him so savagely that the poor man was quite terrified, and commenced to deplore the evil hour in which he had taken her to wife, and thus the night which should have been so joyous, was passed in tears, lamentations, prayers, and ejaculations. In vain he tempted her with promises; she should eat out of gold, she should be a great lady, he would buy houses and lands for her. Oh! if she would only let him break one lance with her in the sweet conflict of love, he would leave her for ever and pass the remainder of his life according to her fantasy. But she, still unyielding, said she would permit him to die, and that was the only thing he could do to please her.

"I have not deceived you," said she. "Agreeable to my promise, I shall give myself to the king, making you a present of the peddler, chance passers, and street loungers with whom I threatened you."

When the day broke she put on her wedding garments and waited patiently till the poor husband had to depart to his office client's business, and then ran out into the town to seek the king. But she had not gone a bow-shot from the house before one of the king's servants who had watched the house from dawn, stopped her with the question--

"Do you seek the king?"

"Yes," said she.

"Good; then allow me to be your good friend," said the subtle courtier. "I ask your aid and protection, as now I give you mine."

With that he told her what sort of a man the king was, which was his weak side, that he was passionate one day and silent the next, that she would luxuriously lodged and well kept, but that she must keep the king well in hand; in short, he chatted so pleasantly that the time

passed quickly until she found herself in the Hotel de l'Hirundelle where afterwards lived Madame d'Estampes. The poor husband shed scalding tears, when he found his little bird had flown, and became melancholy and pensive. His friends and neighbours edified his ears with as many taunts and jeers as Saint Jacques had the honour of receiving in Compostella, but the poor fellow took it so to heart, that at last they tried rather to assuage his grief. These artful compeers by a species of legal chicanery, decreed that the good man was not a cuckold, seeing that his wife had refused a consummation, and if the planter of horns had been anyone but the king, the said marriage might have been dissolved; but the amorous spouse was wretched unto death at my lady's trick. However, he left her to the king, determining one day to have her to himself, and thinking that a life-long shame would not be too dear a payment for a night with her. One must love well to love like that, eh? and there are many worldly ones, who mock at such affection. But he, still thinking of her, neglected his cases and his clients, his robberies and everything. He went to the palace like a miser searching for a lost sixpence, bowed down, melancholy, and absent-minded, so much so, that one day he relieved himself against the robe of a counsellor, believing all the while he stood against a wall. Meanwhile the beautiful girl was loved night and day by the king, who could not tear himself from her embraces, because in amorous play she was so excellent, knowing as well how to fan the flame of love as to extinguish it--to-day snubbing him, to-morrow petting him, never the same, and with it a thousand little tricks to charm the ardent lover.

A lord of Bridore killed himself through her, because she would not receive his embraces, although he offered her his land, Bridore in Touraine. Of these gallants of Touraine, who gave an estate for one tilt with love's lance, there are none left. This death made the fair one sad, and since her confessor laid the blame of it upon her, she determined for the future to accept all domains and secretly ease their owner's amorous pains for the better saving of their souls from perdition. 'Twas thus she commenced to build up that great fortune which made her a person of consideration in the town. By this means she prevented many gallant gentlemen from perishing, playing her game so well, and inventing such fine stories, that his Majesty little guessed how much she aided him in securing the happiness of his subjects. The fact is, she has such a hold over him that she could have made him believe the floor was the ceiling, which was perhaps easier for him to think than anyone else seeing that at the Rue d'Hirundelle my lord king passed the greater portion of his time embracing her always as though he would see if such a lovely article would wear away: but he wore himself out first, poor man, seeing that he eventually died from excess of love. Although she took care to grant her favours only to the best and noblest in the court, and that such occasions were rare as miracles, there were not wanting those among her enemies and rivals who declared that for 10,000 crowns a simple gentleman might taste the pleasures of his sovereign, which was false above all falseness, for when her lord taxed her with it, did she not reply, "Abominable wretches! Curse the devils who put this idea in your head! I never yet did have man who spent less than 30,000 crowns upon me."

The king, although vexed could not repress a smile, and kept her on a month to silence scandal. And last, la demoiselle de Pisseleu, anxious to obtain her place, brought about her ruin. Many would have liked to be ruined in the same way, seeing she was taken by a young lord, was happy with him, the fires of love in her being still unquenched. But to take up the thread again. One day that the king's sweetheart was passing through the town in her litter to buy laces, furs, velvets, broideries, and other ammunition, and so charmingly attired, and looking so lovely, that anyone, especially the clerks, would have believed the heavens were

open above them, behold, her good man, who comes upon her near the old cross. She, at that time lazily swinging her charming little foot over the side of the litter, drew in her head as though she had seen an adder. She was a good wife, for I know some who would have proudly passed their husbands, to their shame and to the great disrespect of conjugal rights.

"What is the matter?" asked one M. de Lannoy, who humbly accompanied her.

"Nothing," she whispered; "but that person is my husband. Poor man, how changed he looks. Formerly he was the picture of a monkey; today he is the very image of a Job."

The poor advocate stood opened-mouthed. His heart beat rapidly at the sight of that little foot--of that wife so wildly loved.

Observing which, the Sire de Lannoy said to him, with courtly innocence--

"If you are her husband, is that any reason you should stop her passage?"

At this she burst out laughing, and the good husband instead of killing her bravely, shed scalding tears at that laugh which pierced his heart, his soul, his everything, so much that he nearly tumbled over an old citizen whom the sight of the king's sweetheart had driven against the wall. The aspect of this weak flower, which had been his in the bud, but far from him had spread its lovely leaves; of the fairy figure, the voluptuous bust--all this made the poor advocate more wretched and more mad for her than it is possible to express in words. You must have been madly in love with a woman who refuses your advances thoroughly to understand the agony of this unhappy man. Rare indeed is it to be so infatuated as he was. He swore that life, fortune, honour--all might go, but that for once at least he would be flesh-to-flesh with her, and make so grand a repast off her dainty body as would suffice him all his life. He passed the night saying, "oh yes; ah! I'll have her!" and "Curses am I not her husband?" and "Devil take me," striking himself on the forehead and tossing about. There are chances and occasions which occur so opportunely in this world that little-minded men refuse them credence, saying they are supernatural, but men of high intellect know them to be true because they could not be invented. One of the chances came to the poor advocate, even the day after that terrible one which had been so sore a trial to him. One of his clients, a man of good renown, who had his audiences with the king, came one morning to the advocate, saying that he required immediately a large sum of money, about 12,000 crowns. To which the artful fellow replied, 12,000 crowns were not so often met at the corner of a street as that which often is seen at the corner of the street; that besides the sureties and guarantees of interest, it was necessary to find a man who had about him 12,000 crowns, and that those gentlemen were not numerous in Paris, big city as it was, and various other things of a like character the man of cunning remarked.

"Is it true, my lord, the you have a hungry and relentless creditor?" said he.

"Yes, yes," replied the other, "it concerns the mistress of the king. Don't breathe a syllable; but this evening, in consideration of 20,000 crowns and my domain of Brie, I shall take her measure."

Upon this the advocate blanched, and the courtier perceived he touched a tender point. As he had only lately returned from the wars, he did not know that the lovely woman adored by

the king had a husband.

"You appear ill," he said.

"I have a fever," replied the knave. "But is it to her that you give the contract and the money?"

"Yes."

"Who then manages the bargain? Is it she also?"

"No," said the noble; "her little arrangements are concluded through a servant of hers, the cleverest little ladies'-maid that ever was. She's sharper than mustard, and these nights stolen from the king have lined her pockets well."

"I know a Lombard who would accommodate you. But nothing can be done; of the 12,000 crowns you shall not have a brass farthing if this same ladies'-maid does not come here to take the price of the article that is so great an alchemist that turns blood into gold, by Heaven!"

"It will be a good trick to make her sign the receipt," replied the lord, laughing.

The servant came faithfully to the rendezvous with the advocate, who had begged the lord to bring her. The ducats looked bright and beautiful. There they lay all in a row, like nuns going to vespers. Spread out upon the table they would have made a donkey smile, even if he were being gutted alive; so lovely, so splendid, were those brave noble young piles. The good advocate, however, had prepared this view for no ass, for the little handmaiden look longingly at the golden heap, and muttered a prayer at the sight of them. Seeing which, the husband whispered in her ear his golden words, "These are for you."

"Ah!" said she; "I have never been so well paid."

"My dear," replied the dear man, "you shall have them without being troubled with me;" and turning her round, "Your client has not told you who I am, eh? No? Learn then, I am the husband of the lady whom the king has debauched, and whom you serve. Carry her these crowns, and come back here. I will hand over yours to you on a condition which will be to your taste."

The servant did as she was bidden, and being very curious to know how she could get 12,000 crowns without sleeping with the advocate, was very soon back again.

"Now, my little one," said he, "here are 12,000 crowns. With this sum I could buy lands, men, women, and the conscience of three priests at least; so that I believe if I give it to you I can have you, body, soul, and toe nails. And I shall have faith in you like an advocate, I expect that you will go to the lord who expects to pass the night with my wife, and you will deceive him, by telling him that the king is coming to supper with her, and that to-night he must seek his little amusements elsewhere. By so doing I shall be able to take his place and the king's."

"But how?" said she.

"Oh!" replied he; "I have bought you, you and your tricks. You won't have to look at these crowns twice without finding me a way to have my wife. In bringing this conjunction about you commit no sin. It is a work of piety to bring together two people whose hands only been put one in to the other, and that by the priest."

"By my faith, come," said she; "after supper the lights will be put out, and you can enjoy Madame if you remain silent. Luckily, on these joyful occasions she cries more than she speaks, and asks questions with her hands alone, for she is very modest, and does not like loose jokes, like the ladies of the Court."

"Oh," cried the advocate, "look, take the 12,000 crowns, and I promise you twice as much more if I get by fraud that which belongs to me by right."

Then he arranged the hour, the door, the signal, and all; and the servant went away, bearing with her on the back of the mules the golden treasure wrung by fraud and trickery from the widow and the orphan, and they were all going to that place where everything goes--save our lives, which come from it. Now behold my advocate, who shaves himself, scents himself, goes without onions for dinner that his breath may be sweet, and does everything to make himself as presentable as a gallant signor. He gives himself the airs of a young dandy, tries to be lithe and frisky and to disguise his ugly face; he might try all he knew, he always smelt of the musty lawyer. He was not so clever as the pretty washerwoman of Portillon who one day wishing to appear at her best before one of her lovers, got rid of a disagreeable odour in a manner well known to young women of an inventive turn of mind. But our crafty fellow fancied himself the nicest man in the world, although in spite of his drugs and perfumes he was really the nastiest. He dressed himself in his thinnest clothes although the cold pinched him like a rope collar and sallied forth, quickly gaining the Rue d'Hirundelle. There he had to wait some time. But just as he was beginning to think he had been made a fool of, and just as it was quite dark, the maid came down and opened alike the door to him and good husband slipped gleefully into the king's apartment. The girl locked him carefully in a cupboard that was close to his wife's bed, and through a crack he feasted his eyes upon her beauty, for she undressed herself before the fire, and put on a thin nightgown, through which her charms were plainly visible. Believing herself alone with her maid she made those little jokes that women will when undressing. "Am I not worth 20,000 crowns to-night? Is that overpaid with a castle in Brie?"

And saying this she gently raised two white supports, firm as rocks, which had well sustained many assaults, seeing they had been furiously attacked and had not softened. "My shoulders alone are worth a kingdom; no king could make their equal. But I am tired of this life. That which is hard work is no pleasure." The little maid smiled, and her lovely mistress said to her, "I should like to see you in my place." Then the maid laughed, saying--

"Be quiet, Madame, he is there."

"Who?"

"Your husband."



"Which?"

"The real one."

"Chut!" said Madame.

And her maid told her the whole story, wishing to keep her favour and the 12,000 crowns as well.

"Oh well, he shall have his money's worth. I'll give his desires time to cool. If he tastes me may I lose my beauty and become as ugly as a monkey's baby. You get into bed in my place and thus gain the 12,000 crowns. Go and tell him that he must take himself off early in the morning in order that I may not find out your trick upon me, and just before dawn I will get in by his side."

The poor husband was freezing and his teeth were chattering, and the chambermaid coming to the cupboard on pretence of getting some linen, said to him, "Your hour of bliss approaches. Madame to-night has made grand preparations and you will be well served. But work without whistling, otherwise I shall be lost."

At last, when the good husband was on the point of perishing with cold, the lights were put out. The maid cried softly in the curtains to the king's sweetheart, that his lordship was there, and jumped into bed, while her mistress went out as if she had been the chambermaid. The advocate, released from his cold hiding-place, rolled rapturously into the warm sheets, thinking to himself, "Oh! this is good!" To tell the truth, the maid gave him his money's worth--and the good man thought of the difference between the profusion of the royal houses and the niggardly ways of the citizens' wives. The servant laughing, played her part marvellously well, regaling the knave with gentle cries, shiverings, convulsions and tossings about, like a newly-caught fish on the grass, giving little Ah! Ah's! in default of other words; and as often as the request was made by her, so often was it complied with by the advocate, who dropped off to sleep at last, like an empty pocket. But before finishing, the lover who wished to preserve a souvenir of this sweet night of love, by a dextrous turn, plucked out one of his wife's hairs, where from I know not, seeing I was not there, and kept in his hand this precious gauge of the warm virtue of that lovely creature. Towards the morning, when the cock crew, the wife slipped in beside her husband, and pretended to sleep. Then the maid tapped gently on the happy man's forehead, whispering in his ear, "It is time, get into your clothes and off you go--it's daylight." The good man grieved to lose his treasure, and wished to see the source of his vanished happiness.

"Oh! Oh!" said he, proceeding to compare certain things, "I've got light hair, and this is dark."

"What have you done?" said the servant; "Madame will see she has been duped."

"But look."

"Ah!" said she, with an air of disdain, "do you not know, you who knows everything, that that which is plucked dies and discolours?" and thereupon roaring with laughter at the good joke, she pushed him out of doors. This became known. The poor advocate, named Feron,

died of shame, seeing that he was the only one who had not his own wife while she, who was from this was called La Belle Feroniere, married, after leaving the king, a young lord, Count of Buzancois. And in her old days she would relate the story, laughingly adding, that she had never scented the knave's flavour.

This teaches us not to attach ourselves more than we can help to wives who refuse to support our yoke.

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