Queens of a Day.

By Margaret Griffith.

QUEENS of a day have to make up for the brevity of their sovereignty by the pomp of their installation. Therefore, each succeeding year, the chosen one, in her magnificent state robe, with crown, bracelet, and ring, carrying a sceptre and a huge bouquet, and seated in a superb flower-wreathed car, makes her royal progress through the streets of Paris, as the Mi-Carême or Mid-Lent festival of the students comes round.

Surrounded by her maids of honour and flattering attendants, lauded by the Press, and greeted with the loud and enthusiastic plaudits of the crowds that have assembled all along the route to do honour to the *Reine des Reines*, her triumph is as absolute as it is ephemeral.

The Mi-Carême Carnival is entirely organized by the students of the Latin Quarter, who conscientiously live up to the letter of their motto—*Folie et Charité*. Though generally regarded as mad Bohemians, whose words are wild and deeds worse, those best acquainted with them know of many acts of unostentatious charity, of privations borne unmurmuringly, and many instances of unselfish generosity that would shame some of their detractors.

It is M. Emile Merwart, Colonial Administrator and President of the Students' Association, who deserves the credit of founding, or rather reviving, the present Mid-Lenten *fêtes;* for one day, while studying in the *Bibliothèque Nationale*, he came across some old records of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries containing descriptions of student celebrations of those days, which he at once determined to revive in Paris. In 1891, with the able collaboration of M. Brill, who was elected President of the Mi-Carême, a brilliant procession was organized, which was to be repeated with added magnificence each year as far as the funds would permit. It was also determined that a queen of the *fêtes* should be selected by vote from among the *employées* of the public *lavoirs* or wash-houses, which it must be explained are not laundries in the accepted meaning of the word, for the linen sent by private individuals, shops, or by *blanchisseuses*, or laundresses proper, are *only washed* in these places.

The attributes and qualifications essential for the high position of queen are beauty and goodness, for it is said that purity of morals is as much a *sine quâ non* as purity of linen in these *lavoirs*, and canvassing and preliminary meetings are strictly forbidden to the candidates who aspire to royal honours. The election usually takes place at the Café Americaine, in the Place de la République, in the presence of the committees, of the students, and of the *lavoirs;* M. Sémichon, the President of the Committee of Wash-houses; M. Gastane, its Hon. President —who is now in his eighty-third year—and on whose right hand the queen sits after her election; M. Brill, President of the Mi-Carême; and M. Remy Cavoy, Vice-President of the Syndic Chamber of the Washermen of France. The candidates, who often number a hundred or more, pass before their judges with their numbers pinned on their breasts, and the voting immediately follows. Unhappy is the one who attempts to captivate her judges by gaudy attire, for an over-trimmed hat even may disqualify her. The French standard of beauty differs slightly from ours, the grand proportions of a Juno being preferred to more ethereal charms. The election of the queen and her maids of honour over, the queen has to choose her king, who, in default of a *fiancée*, is usually the son of one of the laundry proprietors or an *employé*, for she is no longer ambitious, and she fully realizes that her brief glory will not bring to her feet a Prince Charmant or a noble King Cophetua.

With newly-acquired dignity, she graciously receives the congratulations of her companions and the company generally. Then a casket is handed to her containing a ring of diamonds, rubies, or other precious stones, and a large bouquet from the Committee of Students. Another handsome floral offering is made by the proprietor of the Café Americaine. Speeches follow, during which M. Sémichon announces that their queen reigns not only over the *lavoirs* of Paris, but that the President of the Syndic extends her sovereignty over the whole body of French washerwomen.

The queen-elect remains at the wash-house until about a week before her final triumph, when she has to be photographed, and to hold consultations with her dressmaker—for what may not depend on her robe?—and to hold *levées*, at which all the journalists of Paris assist; but she remains perfectly unmoved by their praises and compliments.

The beautiful dresses worn by each succeeding queen and her maids of honour are usually presented to them by some well-known drapery firm. Last year they were given by the *Magazin* known as the *Samaritaine*.

The bracelet is the gift of the President of France, the ring and bouquet of the students, and the sceptre and crown—which every year differ in design—of the committee of *lavoirs*.

One day occupying a throne and the next beating linen at the wash-tub is a startling transformation; but these ex-queens live happily on the memories of their brief honours, and carefully preserve their robes and regalia, to don them a second time on as equally happy an occasion—that of their marriage.

Seven queens of a day have already reigned in Paris. Two of them are married—one of whom, alas! is awaiting the result of her petition for divorce; a third is in exile, and three are spinsters, but there has, as yet, been no dauphin.

It has been my privilege to have interviewed these queens of the past, and to hear from their own royal lips the history of their lives and the glories of their sovereignty.

The first "Queen of Queens" was Mlle. Louise Sicard, who was elected in 1891. I called upon her at the laundry of the Rue Milton, where she has worked for many years. On stating my business at the little office in the laundry where soda, soap, and other necessaries are weighed and given out to the washer-women, the ex-queen was summoned from her tub, and stood before me, a tall, dark, and rather handsome woman of commanding presence and mien, and with a little more than a suspicion of down outlining her upper lip.

"I was less fortunate than my successors," she said, "for I had neither bracelet nor ring, and had to buy my own dress, which I wore at my wedding, for I was married about ten months ago," she added, proudly. "My diadem alone remains now, and if you will come to my house in Montmartre, I will show it you. It is in a glass case in the place of honour, for I shall always preserve it."

"Will you give me your photograph, so that I can reproduce it in a grand English magazine?"

"I will ask my husband if he will permit me to do so, for he is very particular. You know that, having been chosen to be the first 'Queen of Queens,' I am the most important. I was invited to go on a tour in Normandy, and to visit the principal towns of France. I was *fêted* everywhere, and presented with several beautiful medals and many presents. I have also collected several thousand francs for charity. In my *armoire* at home I have eighty-four cuttings from different journals written about me."

I was duly impressed by the importance of this ex-queen, and, as she seemed impatient to return to her tub, I took my leave, after inviting her to come and see me at my hotel. A few evenings later a card was sent in to me with a little portrait in one corner, and inscribed, "Louise Sicard, 1ce Reine des Reines."

I hastened to receive my guest, who, on this occasion, was dressed in deep mourning, and was much more dignified and reserved than the first time I saw her in her working

From a Photo. by] MLLE. LOUISE SICARD—QUEEN IN 1891. *[Pierre-Petit, Paris.*

attire. I realized at once that the oft-quoted "dignity which hedges a king"—or queen—must lie in their fine clothes. Mme. Sicard was accompanied by her husband, who explained at great length the difficulties and responsibilities of his position as the guardian and protector—she was nearly twice his size—of so exalted a personage. After a little light refreshment he became confidential, and informed me that "she had hundreds of offers of marriage that year," referring to 1891, whereupon the ex-queen nonchalantly interrupted, "That's nothing; we all get the same," adding, with an eloquent, disdainful gesture of the hand, "I threw them all behind the fire." Her photograph, in an elaborate gilt frame, was then exhibited, and I was told they had only that one copy, and they could not part with such a precious souvenir. I expressed my willingness to pay for its being copied, so that difficulty was overcome, and I was promised a photograph in three days. Instead of the picture, however, I received a letter, offering me the original portrait, frame and all, for the modest sum of twenty pounds. As I considered the demand excessive for a cabinet portrait, albeit it was that of the first "Queen of Queens," I did not reply to *Monsieur le Mari*, but preferred to reproduce, for the amusement of the readers, the royal visiting-card.

MLLE. HENRIETTA DELABARRE—QUEEN IN 1892.
From a Photo. by Pierre-Petit, Paris.

Mlle. Henrietta Delabarre was the queen of 1892. She lives with her mother and sister at the Rue des Trois-Couronnes, where they have a laundry, a clean and inviting little home; the exterior, painted blue, looks as bright as the merry face of the ex-queen herself, who came forward to receive me and to learn my business.

"Ah," she said, in reply to a question, "I have never forgotten that lovely day and the acclamations of the crowd—I felt as if I were in a dream. Yes, our reign is brief, but I hope to reign a long time in the hearts of the Parisians."

Mlle. Delabarre was very charming; she has pleasant manners and a reputation for beauty. She was very anxious to know if the queen of 1896 was pretty, for our conversation took place shortly after the last election. "My sister," she went on to say, "was chosen last year as a maid of honour, but we would not let her go, for such a post is not consistent with the dignity of a queen's sister." I saw the crown, which was a little tarnished, possibly by reason of its having been used more than once, for it was explained that her sister Mlle. Anaïs had worn it last year when chosen queen of the Oberkampf laundry.

"I still value it, although it is a little *passée*, as you see," she remarked, "and my robe will perhaps serve me some day for my wedding." The mother, who was busy ironing, here looked up and said, "Oh, yes, let's make bets on your wedding," then turning to me she said, "My daughter is very hard to please, madame; she cannot make up her mind, but she does not lack suitors." The queen smiled, and said, "There is time enough for that; I am not in a hurry to get married." Then, changing the subject, she

went on to say, "Nothing will ever make me forget the Mi-Carême of 1892. It was the most perfect day of my life."

Mlle. Eugenie Petit, the queen of 1893, is now Madame Renard. She is very pretty, but very unfortunate, for her marriage has turned out to be a failure, and her happiness was as short-lived as her royalty. Separated from her husband, although only married about a year, and living with her family in great poverty in the Santé Quarter, she is impatiently awaiting for her divorce; but I heard it said that "the judges do not seem to admit the possibility of incompatibility of temper between a queen and her subject. Nevertheless, nothing is more common." This poor, sad queen has fallen from her high estate, and sits in lonely misery thinking longingly of her past splendours and pleasures, and her tears flow as she turns on her finger the little gold ring given her by the students on the day of her election. Queens in misery are as much out of place as "Kings in exile."

MLLE. EUGENIE PETIT—QUEEN IN 1893.
From a Photo. by Pierre-Petit, Paris.

The queen of 1894, Mlle. Bonhomme, is another unhappy proof that royalty is not exempt from misfortune. Her father was at one time proprietor of the *lavoir* Jouy-Rouve at Belleville, and fairly well to do, but from some cause or other, business got bad and went from bad to worse, until the final crash came, that not even the small sum of money received by the young queen at her festival could avert. That was soon swallowed up, and still misfortunes, which never come singly, followed fast and faster. It was discovered that the queen was a usurper, and had no right to her throne, for she was not a member of the Corporation of Washerwomen, which is an absolute essential; but out of pity for the sore distress of her family she was allowed to keep her regalia and royal robes. Nevertheless, to find means to appease clamorous creditors, the final sacrifice had to be made: the beautiful gown, her crown, and the bracelet, which was the gift of the late President Carnot, had to be taken to the *Mont-*

MLLE. BONHOMME — QUEEN IN 1894.
From a Photo. by Pierre-Petit, Paris.

MLLE. LOUISE GRIMM—QUEEN IN 1895.
From a Photo. by Pierre-Petit, Paris.

de-Piété. The gloom was a little dispelled when two suitors came to woo Mlle. Bonhomme, one a butcher's boy, the other an engraver, but they both quickly retired when they discovered she had no *dot*. This poor, luckless queen was at last compelled to say good-bye to her beloved Paris—the scene of her triumphs, the city of brightness and pleasure, and to retire to Auvergne, her native province.

Mlle. Louise Grimm, the beautiful blonde queen of 1895, has been the most fortunate and happiest of all the queens up to the present. She lives with her mother in the Rue des Boulets, in the Roquette Quarter, and keeps a small laundry. Her royalty, she told me smilingly, lasted more than a day. "I was four months at the laundry exhibition at the Palais de l'Industrie, where as 'Queen of Queens' of the Guilds, I gave demonstration lessons in laundry work for the benefit of the visitors. I have been much spoiled, and have had hundreds of proposals; many of them, however, I must confess, were from unknown persons, who principally wanted to obtain my photograph, but I had several genuine offers also, one from a millionaire living in the Hautes-Pyrenées." "And you refused it?" "Yes, I can afford to wait, and I should like to see and know a great deal about a person before I could marry him."

This ex-queen is as wise as she is fair. Her lovely gown, her crown, ring, and the bracelet presented to her by M. Felix Faure, are religiously preserved in her wardrobe, and exhibited with pardonable pride.

Mlle. Defilloy was the queen of last year. She belongs to a *lavoir* in the Jouy-Rouve district, and was selected from among ninety-six candidates, but she is not as beautiful or as refined-looking as her predecessor. Her two maids of honour, Mlles. Marie François and Eugénie, are very handsome girls,

MLLE. DEFILLOY — QUEEN IN 1896.
From a Photo. by Pierre-Petit, Paris.

and rather put their royal mistress in the shade.

Some of the proprietors of the *lavoirs* complain that this custom of selecting queens has unfortunate results: that the acclamations, compliments, and praises turn their heads, and that they become discontented with their position and work, which, after the high prerogative they had enjoyed, they consider beneath them. Their companions become jealous of them, and vent their feelings in petty spite and annoyances, which engender bitter ill-feeling. How far this is true I do not know. All the queens I saw seemed to be contented enough; the worries of poverty and domestic troubles would come to them the same if they had never worn the ermine. The institution is eminently picturesque from an artistic point of view, and one it would be a pity to do away with.

The funds at the disposal of the committee for the Mi-Carême of 1896 were much smaller than the amount placed in their hands for the festival of the previous year. This may be explained by the fact of the revival of the old Bœuf-Gras celebrations, and their taking place only a few weeks before the students' fête, and also because all the shopkeepers on the boulevards had subscribed towards the Bœuf-Gras instead of, as formerly, supporting the Mi-Carême. This is the more to be regretted as the students devote all their profits to charitable purposes. In 1895 they had in hand the sum of £450; last year only a little more than half that amount, subscribed by the Municipality, the committee of the *lavoirs*, the Students' Association, and the general public, was available.

Despite lack of funds and bad weather, the *fête* was a great success, and the many who prognosticated a failure, and jeeringly remarked that it was impossible for the Mi-Carême to compete with the Bœuf-Gras, were obliged to own that the students knew what they were about. "Bah!" was the students' reply to the croakers, "our youthful limbs and 'go' will outwit our rivals." The procession was originally intended to represent all the events of the preceding year —political and religious excepted—but it was finally decided to include only the principal events. There were twelve chariots in all, and the royal carriage, which, with its escort of students, looked very imposing. The students of the Colonial College had exercised their ingenuity in the representation of a Hindu fête and the procession of Buddha; but the most amusing feature in the whole procession was the triumph of auto-mobilization, organized by the students of the Ecole d'Alfert. An elegant Victoria, propelled by invisible force, was occupied by horses sitting in nonchalant poses, with forelegs crossed, and escorted by cavaliers personifying such historic celebrities as Fanfan la Tulipe, Don Quixote, Sancho Panza, Henry IV., and Jean d'Arc. Following this novel equipage were veterinary surgeons, with downcast heads and mournful visages, and all in rags, whose profession is menaced by the threatened suppression of horse traction. Behind them were 'bus and cab drivers in an equally pitiable condition, forming an eloquent illustration of the oft-heard cry of, "We have no work to do." Specially characteristic of the Latin Quarter was the Luxembourg car, in which living personages represented the fountain of the Luxembourg. Fifty Auvergnats with bagpipes danced a *bourrée*, not in the best of time, but with most untiring vigour and contagious merriment. It is impossible to describe half the grotesque and laughable skits upon the inventions and events of the age, which the students' ingenuity and love of fun had evolved for the amusement of the public, and not a little to their own.

It is at the Mi-Carême that the students' magazine, which is only issued once a year under the title of *Au Quartier Latin*, appears; it is edited by M. Brill, Marc Legrand, and Maurice Lenoir. The greatest artists and writers seem to be at their best in their free contributions to this unique journal, while equally clever are the articles, poems, and sketches offered by those who are as yet only mounting the ladder of fame. The covers bear the signatures of Cheret, Prudhomme, and Merwart; while the other illustrations are by Carolus Duran, Carriere, Belleuse, Gervex, Rochegrosse, Detaille, Charly (the clever military caricaturist), Jacques Villon, a student who prefers the palette to his law books; the brothers Oury and Job, besides the many other artists and writers who have enrolled themselves under the motto of *Folie et Charité*.