

QUEEN BEE.

BY BLANCHE L. MACDONELL, MONTREAL.

Author of "World's Great Altar Stairs," "Atonement of Madame de Blémont," "Old Patch," etc.

I.

"Queen Bee," I lamented, solemnly. I really believe there were tears in my eyes I was so deeply touched by the mournful nature of my own convictions. "You would be simply perfect, only that, when you were made, the womanly heart and soul and faith were left out of you."

Bee, the sweetest, archest, daintiest coquette that ever beguiled a man of his heart, was certainly amused, but scarcely impressed, by my earnestness. Her eyes sparkled, the dimples deepened in the pretty cheeks, the fair face bloomed into fresh rose colour. I regarded her with a sort of despair. A beguiling innocence was one of her chief characteristics. Her brightness, and her little impulsive vanities and audacities, were just a part of that girl's art. What could one say to a clever and caustic young person, who always remained mistress of the situation? A creature with grave, childish eyes, and a tender voice, who was as worldly wise as the shrewdest old dowager of them all. That was one of the things that always exasperated me about Queen Bee. I was thoroughly convinced of the exceedingly reprobate nature of her proceedings, yet I could never succeed in actually despising her.

"Queen Bee," I continued, severely, "you remind me—I grieve to judge you harshly, but it is absolute truth—you irresistibly remind me of Austin Dobson's 'Belle Marquise,'

Just a pinky, porcelain trifle,
and its very shocking."

With a faint flutter of red on her cheek, a soft uplifting of the dark fringed eyes, Bee broke into the merriest peal of laughter.

"Pâte tendre, rose du Barry,
Quick at verbal points and parry,
Clever, certes—but to marry—
No, Marquise."

Do you really consider me as clever as that, Cousin Martha? Then it's no wonder that the Smiths and Browns and Jones' persist in fluttering about me. It's rather a feeble and ineffectual kind of homage, and not at all the sort I require."

That child's heartlessness shocked me so deeply that I could have cried over it. She was absorbed by her absurd folly to the very verge of ruin. The Aubreuil de Tardieu were one of the most ancient families in the Province of Quebec, but everyone knew that the old house was fast crumbling to decay. Madame de Tardieu prided herself upon her ancient lineage, and in order to sustain its glory, she mortgaged her property, until nothing remained but debts and duns and entanglements. She wore a brave face till the last, though the strain had been so great and none of her own helped to bear the burden. Her daughter-in-law, Madame Adolph, was always termed a charming woman, who took very good care that no one should ruffle her placidity. Even that old autocrat, Madame de Tardieu, shrank from the hysterical tears and plaintive reproaches which the slightest allusion to any trouble evoked from Hélène. I was very fond of Adrien de Tardieu, but I was sometimes tempted to wonder why he did not apply himself seriously to his profession, instead of drifting about in that aimless, leisurely, enjoyable fashion, which all his friends deplored. Adrien was very handsome, gay and amusing. He has every attractive gift that a man can have, except a capacity for making money, and, unfortunately, the poor boy has inherited an immense faculty for spending it. I am not in the least mercenary—indeed, Queen Bee's heartlessness has always shocked me dreadfully—but, of course, if a man can't make money, he must manage to secure it some other way. Things in this world are so perverse, that instead of marrying some of the rich girls, who were ready enough to smile upon, that foolish lad must add to the miserable complications by falling desperately in love with his penniless cousin. Adrien was a

man of very strong feeling. It was most touching to hear him deplore the family troubles—such a contrast to the cool amusement with which Queen Bee always alluded to them.

"We are respectable, well-bred paupers—the very worst kind, I assure you—Cousin Martha," she would say, with a comical quiver of the pretty mouth. "If we have luxurious tastes, and nothing a year to gratify them with, at least we understand how to carry ourselves with an air and make the most of our departed glories. Do you know that they are marketable commodities, those decayed glories, even in these degenerate days?" I watched Queen Bee dancing that night. She looked like an elfin sprite or a fairy queen. It was a barren, dreary place, Bédou's seaside hotel at Pointe-au-Pic. I was perfectly aware that I would have been much more comfortable in bed, yet there I sat watching her, fascinated, just like that crowd of silly boys. With ruin staring her in the face, her spirits never failed, and if it had been anyone but that shallow, trifling Bee, I should have thought that there was an odd touch of desperation about her vivacity. All her fun was tinged with a delicate spirit of satire that gave it a piquant flavour, and she held her supremacy with admirable self-possession. Daring to audacity, she smiled and sparkled for everyone alike. The stupid boys—not that they were all boys, either, for there was Adrien, with that thrill of foolish bliss in his elegant eyes, and old Mr. Rowe, stout, bald, pompous, the widower of two wives—joined the throng. If he had been a poor man, the youths would have jeered at him, but wealth has its privileges, and they all stood aside respectfully. Bee's witching deference enslaved the modern Croesus, and the uncertainty which always attended her varying moods contributed to the piquancy of the situation. Really it was a sorry spectacle. I am persuaded he must, in his heart, have been ashamed of his idiotic folly. He kept glancing at me, half deprecatingly, half defiantly, as though he resented my observation. In my room, after it was all over, Bee bewailed herself with spirit and vivacity.

"It's very hard work entertaining the Smiths and Browns and Jones'. They all look alike and say the same thing, and in time their brilliant witticisms become monotonous. I'll tell you a secret, Cousin Martha. I am a sham all through. Though these foolish men are convinced I am a beauty, I am not even very pretty. I have fine eyes"—regarding herself, with strict impartiality, from arching foot to pretty head, as she stood, a slender creature, with a soft, rose bloom palpitating on either cheek, lustrous, wistful eyes, the proud little head, crowned with masses of bronze-brown hair, in the dim depths of the tarnished mirror, in which everything was reflected in the most hopelessly distorted fashion—"I have fine eyes and I dress up to them. Every penny that I could beg, borrow or scrape, I have spent upon my dress this summer. Oh! Cousin Martha,"—holding me in a close, impulsive clasp—"how lovely it must be to be peaceful and placid and elderly, as you are."

Did I fancy it, or were there really tears in the wine-brown eyes? The fringing lashes were quite wet. I have always been noted for my penetration in fathoming motives and analyzing character. I was far too wise to be impressed by Queen Bee's mock sentiment. It might be the reaction after the long strain of fatigue and excitement, and that consummate little actress was not at all above playing tricks to move the feelings of a simple-hearted old maid.

II.

By next morning she had recovered her customary vivacity. She was everywhere the centre of the merriest, most rollicking groups of young people; the low, sweet laugh rang out like music. The restless glow and sparkle of the girl wearied me.

"Do you never intend to rest?" I enquired, somewhat sharply.

"There will be plenty of time for rest when I have settled my affair. This sort of thing may be shocking, but it at least has the merit of being amusing. Just think of the long, dull years of

domestic felicity of Darby and Joandom that are to come," nodding to me with bright significance.

That was another of Queen Bee's exasperating traits that I always resented. She persisted in bestowing her unwelcome confidences upon me, and then treated me as though I were a fellow-conspirator. Old woman as I am, I blushed. If I could only make you understand the strict English fashion in which my sisters and I were brought up. We never walked in the street unattended. We were thought to maintain our dignity and to carry ourselves as gentlewomen, displaying a coldly gentle reserve to the opposite sex. If we had permitted ourselves to express our sentiments and follow our own inclinations with the independence that girls do now, poor, dear mamma would certainly have fainted away. Bee had imbibed all these loose, colonial ideas, and had absolutely no dignity to maintain. I never could account for it, but she had a way of blushing and dimpling and glancing up at them that always fascinated men, who were ever ready to cast themselves at her feet.

Just before tea, as I was taking my constitutional (I need scarcely remark that I am excessively regular in all my habits), I perceived that something was attracting the attention of a group of young people near me. My worst enemy could not accuse me of unbecoming curiosity, but I have always considered it quite commendable—nay, quite an obligation—to keep oneself posted concerning all that goes on. There were smiles and significant glances exchanged by the group on the piazza. I recognized the tolerant shrugs with which Queen Bee's friends accepted her escapades.

"Queen Bee's latest freak. The very last edition of Beauty and the Beast, Miss Kemp." In sustaining a reputation for brilliancy, Gladys Preston succeeded admirably in appearing very sharp and ill-natured.

A *calèche* was dashing swiftly down the precipitous, stony road; the sturdy Canadian pony flew like the wind; the *habitant* driver cracked his whip; the rickety vehicle swayed and bumped and jolted on its high wheels. Queen Bee was flushed and triumphant, and her companion was that unutterably absurd old man. The girl arrived remarkably cool, composed and well poised. There was ready audacity in her sparkling glance. Mr. Rowe was purple, breathless and well-nigh apoplectic; in his violent efforts to assume a jaunty air, he succeeded in looking pitifully, pathetically disreputable. I deplored the poor old soul's humiliation. It really wounded my feelings to see him beaming with ineffable satisfaction over his own fatuous folly.

"Prince Charming has made his appearance," whispering as she passed, with that reckless, impatient laugh, that always shocked me.

"What does she say?" Adrien asked, quickly. "What design has taken possession of Queen Bee?"

"Design," I repeated, resentfully. "A nice design, truly, making a fool of that wretched old man."

Adrien shook his head in emphatic denial. There was a curious look of enlightenment in his eyes; odd, strained tones in his voice.

"He is very rich. Bee means something." I felt for Adrien. All my friends are aware that I have had many excellent offers, and that I might have settled in the most advantageous manner, yet the pained look in that poor boy's eyes revived an old, old memory. I remembered the bitterness and wrong, the keen edge of wretchedness, the long, dull agony of parting. Ah, me! Do we never really forget? I spoke, with a rising tremor in my throat:

"Adrien!" I cried, impulsively, "she is not worthy of you."

"What's the use?" he exclaimed, savagely. "What chance could there be for such a poor devil as I with a woman like Queen Bee? We De Tardieus are an ill-fated lot. I always foresaw what the end must be, and now the game is all up."

I cried over that lad, and petted and sympathized with him. I am certainly very fond of him, but I must confess that he was not as ap-