

**A FRIEND OF  
MARIE-ANTOINETTE  
(LADY ATKINS)**

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A friend of Marie-Antoinette (Lady Atkins) by Fr?d?ric Barbey

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**FRÉDÉRIC BARBEY**

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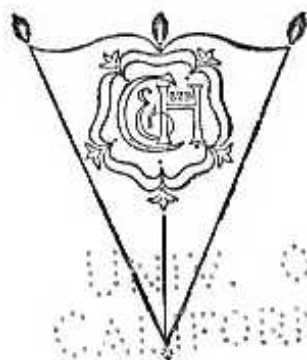
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TRANSLATED FROM THE FRENCH  
OF  
FRÉDÉRIC BARBEY

WITH A PREFACE  
BY  
VICTORIEN SARDOU  
OF THE FRENCH ACADEMY



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## P R E F A C E

WHEN I brought out at the Vaudeville in 1896 my play, entitled *Paméla, Marchande de Frivolités*, in which I had grouped together dramatically, with what verisimilitude I could, all the various Royalist attempts at rescuing the son of Louis XVI., the Dauphin, from the prison of the Temple, there were certain scholars who found fault with me for representing an Englishwoman, Lady Atkyns, as the protagonist, or at least the prime mover in the matter of his escape. Some of them went so far as to accuse me of having invented this character for the purpose of my piece.

Lady Atkyns, certainly, has left but few traces of her existence ; she was a Drury Lane actress, pretty, witty, impressionable, and good—it seems there were many such among the English actresses of the time. Married (we shall see presently how it came about) to a peer, who gave her wealth at least, if not happiness, and who does not appear to have counted for much in her life, Lady Atkyns became a passionate admirer of Marie-Antoinette ; she was presented to the Queen at Versailles, and when the latter was taken to the Temple,

the responsive Englishwoman made every effort to find her way into the prison. She succeeded by the use of guineas, which, in spite of the hatred professed for Pitt and Coburg, were more to the taste of certain patriots than the paper-money of the Republic.

Lady Atkyns suggested that the Queen should escape dressed in her costume, but the Royal prisoner would not forsake her children. There is a tradition that in refusing the offer of her enthusiastic friend, Marie-Antoinette besought her good offices for the young Dauphin, while putting her on her guard against the intrigues of the Comte de Provence and the Comte d'Artois. However, most of these facts were still in doubt, resting only on somewhat vague statements, elliptical allusions, and intangible bits of gossip, picked up here and there, when, one day, my friend Lenôtre, who is great at ferreting out old papers, came to me, all excitement, with a document which he had come upon the evening before in a portfolio among the Archives of the Police.

It was a letter, dated May, 1821, and addressed to the Minister by the director of the penitential establishment of Gaillon. This official was disturbed over the proceedings of a certain "Madame Hakins or Aquins." Since the false Dauphin, Mathurin Bruneau, sentenced by the Court of Rouen to five years' imprisonment, had become an inmate of that institution, this foreigner had installed herself at Gaillon, and had been seeking to get into communication with the prisoner. She



seemed even to be bent upon supplying him with the means of making his escape.

I drew from this the obvious conclusion that if in 1821, Lady Atkyns could bring herself to believe in the possibility of Mathurin Bruneau being the son of Louis XVI., it must be because she had good reasons for being convinced that the Dauphin had escaped from the Temple. And this conviction of hers became of considerable importance because of the *rôle* she herself had played (however little one knew of it) in the story of the Royal captivity.

It was quite clear that after her promise to the Queen, the faithful Englishwoman, who, as we have seen, was not afraid to compromise herself, and who was generous with her money, must have kept in touch at least with all the facts relating to the Dauphin's imprisonment, learning all that was to be learnt about the Temple, questioning everybody who could have had any contact with the young captive—warders, messengers, doctors, and servants. If after such investigations, and in spite of the official records and of the announcement of his death on June 9, 1798, she could still believe twenty-six years later that the prince might be alive, it can only be because she was satisfied that the dead youth was not the Dauphin.

Had she herself got the Dauphin out of prison? Or had she merely had a hand in the rescue? By what process of reasoning had she been able to persuade herself that an adventurer such as this Bruneau, whose

imposture was manifest, could be the Dauphin? Why, if she believed that the Prince had been carried away from the Temple, had she kept silence so long? If this was not her belief, why did she interest herself in one of those who had failed most pitifully in the impersonation of the prince? Lenôtre and I could find no answer to all these questions. To throw light upon them, it would have been necessary to undertake minute researches into the whole life of Lady Atkyns, following her about from place to place, learning where she lived during the Revolution, ascertaining the dates of all her sojourns in Paris, studying all the facts of her existence after 1795, together with the place and date of her death, the names of her heirs, the fate of her correspondence and other papers—a very laborious piece of work, still further complicated by the certainty that it would be necessary to start out upon one's investigations in England. We did not abandon all idea of the task, however; but time lacked—time always lacks!—and we talked of it as a task that must wait for a year of leisure, knowing only too well that the year of leisure would never come.

Chance, upon which we should always count, settled the matter for us. Chance brought about a meeting between Lenôtre and a young writer, just out of the *École des Chartes*, M. Frédéric Barbey, very well informed, both through his earlier studies and through family connections, concerning what it is customary to designate "*la Question Louis XVII.*" M. Barbey had

the necessary leisure, and he was ready to undertake any kind of journey that might be entailed ; he revelled in the idea of the difficulties to be coped with in what would be to him an absorbing task. Lenôtre introduced him to me, and I felt certain from the first that the matter was in good hands. M. Barbey, in truth, is endowed with all the very rare qualities essential to this kind of research—a boundless patience, the *flair* of a collector, the *aplomb* of an interviewer, complete freedom from prejudice, and the indomitable industry and ardent zeal of an apostle.

M. Barbey set out for England at once, and came back a fortnight later, already possessed of a mass of valuable information regarding the early life of our English Royalist, including this specific item : Lady Atkyns died in Paris, in the Ruc de Lille, in 1836. An application to the *greffe de paix* of the *arrondissement* resulted in M. Barbey's obtaining the name of the notary who had the drawing up of the deeds of succession. At the offices of the present courteous possessor of the documents, after any amount of formalities and delays and difficulties, over which his untiring pertinacity enabled him to triumph, he was at last placed in possession of an immense pile of dusty papers, which had not been touched for nearly seventy years : the entire correspondence addressed to Lady Atkyns from 1792 down to the time of her death.

That was a red-letter day ! From the very first letters that were looked at, it seemed that henceforth