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La Tricoteuse

by Sue Hitchcock

I knit, I've always knitted. I can't even remember my mother teaching me. In our family all the girls had to knit because it was a good source of money to buy what we needed. It wasn't that it was the only thing we did, because we grew vegetables in our cottage garden and we had to sell them in the market. My father worked for the king, in his gardens at Versailles and our cottage was owned by the king, of course, but everyone grew vegetables.

Back to the knitting. The queen, Marie Antoinette had to have silk stockings and the fine thread took a long time to knit, so we were kept pretty busy. I don't have to look at what I'm doing, I can feel the stitches, but to turn the heel is more complicated with decreasing and increasing and my eyes are not what they were. Anyway I'm only knitting red liberty caps now for the revolutionaries, thank god!

When I was younger, the queen thought my stockings were the best of all. "Aspasie," she would say, "You have the cleverest fingers, but can you make the next pair just a bit longer?"

"I shall need more silk for that, your highness."

"Gabrielle will give you the silk and your payment."

As time went by the payments got meaner and food got more expensive. In the market all the knitters who, like us, were running their vegetable stalls too, started to get angry because all the week's produce didn't pay for the bread our families needed. All through France there was unrest. There were tythes to pay and if we failed, our cottages would be burnt.

“We must make our voices heard!” was the subject of the market women's conversation and we marched upon Versailles, forcing the King back to Paris, demanding he give back the rights of tenure and common ground we had had. Feelings were coming to a boil and then the Bastille prison was stormed. The prisoners there weren't really the oppressed, just people who had annoyed the King, for a variety of reasons, but it was the start. My father no longer worked at Versailles and he sank into despair, living off his brother. Besides that our silk stockings weren't wanted – the Queen was having them sent from Austria .

When they told her how little bread there was, she said “Let them eat cake!!” Can you believe it?

She was incredible, still playing at shepherdesses in her hideaway. The only good thing was, we got the wool from her sheep, she didn't want woolly clothes. The last time I had taken stockings to her, she had pushed me away, saying “I don't need you any more!”

Well, I wouldn't have believed we could get rid of them, but everyday now I visit the execution site and watch Madame La Guillotine doing her work. I still knit, only red caps now, but I await the execution of the King, Louis Capet as we now call him and then, then, the queen.