

Confessions of An Ak-Sar-Ben Queen---By One of Them

THE chosen consort of the great King Ak-Sar-Ben and queen of all Quivera; to know the homage of a vast multitude and to be robed in royal garments such as many women never know; to be central figure—yes, the very central figure—of a spectacular ceremony that is the climax of a brilliant carnival season and the most speculated about and talked of woman in the state for weeks before, photographed and written about in newspapers and magazines for weeks after, is an honor that comes to few young women in a lifetime, but to those who have enjoyed that honor the experience is fraught with incidents that serve to stimulate a sympathetic understanding of that uneasiness that is ascribed to the head that wears the crown.

The first inkling I had of what was in store for me came about two months before the Ak-Sar-Ben ball. I overheard my father and mother talking—it was a discussion of my ability to endure the nervous strain, the probable cost of equipment and the advisability of letting me know anything about it until the last possible moment. I had caught their words by mere chance, but what girl could be expected not to listen, much less blame for pricking up her ears. For fifteen straight minutes I stared at the magazine before me, straining my ears to catch every word, and when it dawned upon me what it was all about I just sneaked upstairs to my room and locked the door. I tiptoed over to the window and peered out, and as a branch brushed against the screen I jumped back and screamed. Then that saying about what a guilty conscience can do with a shadow came to me and I sat down on my bed and laughed aloud. In another instant I found myself looking into my own face in the glass before me and wondering if I had hysterics.

Uneasy Lies the Crowned Head

For a whole week I waited for somebody to break the news to me, but the whole affair was evidently being managed in true royal fashion. I found myself swelling with an indignant sympathy for royal personages I had read about who are married off or made queens by their relatives without even being consulted as to their own feelings. I got so furious that I decided to even up with them all by refusing to serve when they should finally deign to submit their plans to me. But that very evening when my father called me into the library and told me I was to be Ak-Sar-Ben queen, I astonished him by giving him a mighty hug and saying:

"Oh, I know it; ain't it fine and dandy?"

Then a whole hour was spent impressing upon me the necessity of absolute secrecy and offering a few suggestions for throwing people off the track should any suspect—all this cautioning to me who for eight days and nights had lived along as usual with my family and friends and not so much as given them a hint of the secret that I carried. And this was just the beginning of the preliminary to the actual event. Yes indeed, there is something besides honor and glory or social triumph in being an Ak-Sar-Ben queen. It entails a lot that means sacrifice, regret and even remorse, and I have seen the

day since, and many of them, too, when I would have traded the whole thing to regain the confidence of the girls I had sacrificed by my lies for the sake of guarding that abominable secret.

The details of choosing the coronation gown I do not care to recall. It is enough to say that, had the responsibility fallen upon me alone, that gown would scarcely have cut the important figure at the coronation that it did. In vain I racked my brain for an idea and finally a local modiste arranged it all, but, ungrateful wretch that I was, I offered no correction when the newspapers later gave the credit to a Paris designer.

All Queens Are Liars

It is bad enough to be deprived the satisfaction of sharing this great glory with one's best friend without being actually compelled to prevaricate about it. Talk about tall and adroit story-telling—I fairly lied away my reputation. At first it wasn't so hard. The girls took it for granted I was to be maid also. My name had been announced with the rest, but gradually people began to question me. It had gotten out somehow—it always does—and then, how I did fib. I felt as though I could never look the girls in the face again after it was over.

It was really a mighty awkward situation. I was responsible for the keeping of that secret, but I had a feeling that it was bad policy to let anybody know just how good a story teller I could be and I knew that eventually everybody must know. I planned gowns with the girls and even had a new white dancing frock made up to be passed off to help carry out the bluff. That seemed more convincing than even my stoutest denial that I had been chosen for a higher position than that of maid.

For want of something better I even began to growl against those adorable aigrets that the girls always wear in their hair. I likened them to those red and blue brush concerns that band wagon horses wear strapped to the sides of their heads. I vowed I should never wear one and that started something among the girls and, to my consternation, some of the others took it up and hard feelings actually grew out of the incident.

A Very Embarrassing Situation

To make matters more comfortable I overheard one girl telling another that she knew I was to be queen because her father had said my father had the pull to get my appointment. That was not a pleasant dose, but then, there is something in having a father who has pull and I found consolation in the fact that I was still better off than some girls of my set. Next day I received a note from a young woman employed in one of the downtown stores informing me that she understood I was to be queen and requesting me to wear and then return to her a pair of pink silk garters that she informed me she had mailed to me under separate cover. This was too much and I determined to make a success of my bluff if it cost me a spell of nervous prostration.

A few evenings later I was staggered by an invitation from a friend to take me to the ball. I swallowed hard for a minute and then accepted it, trusting to Prov-

idence to find a way out. But the more I thought of it the plainer this very invitation presented itself as the best possible solution of my trouble. I determined to go with him to the ball; to wear my new white dancing frock, aigret and all, and accompany him to the Den and to make use of the queen's dressing room after I got there. It was a mean trick to serve him, but then, it isn't every young man who is privileged to escort a queen to her coronation and I figured that the risk was not too great.

Some Terrors of Anticipation

Being listed as one of the maids afforded excuse for an unusually early start and speculation as to who the king and queen really were constituted the greater part of our conversation en route. And all of the time I remembered with humiliation that in the same royal fashion in which I had been "selected" queen, the ball committee had refused to enlighten me regarding the identity of him with whom I was to share the throne. By dint of pouting and teasing and finally by falling back upon my woman's dignity I had extracted from one of this supreme trio the names of two men, one of whom was to be king. I had personal acquaintance with neither of them. Several years before I had once seen one of them and by chance learned who he was, but I was by no means confident I should recognize him should we meet again. The other man I had never seen. It had evidently not occurred to the committee that an introduction might relieve the possible embarrassment of such a meeting, or if it had they evidently preferred risking a hitch in the smoothness of the coronation to trusting the other half of the great secret to a woman.

With the assistance of my faithful dressmaker I got into my coronation robes, red velvet mantle and all, and I had been dressed fully a quarter of an hour before the bugle blew the preliminary to the royal entrance.

Facing the Fiery Ordeal

In another minute a tap at my door summoned me to the little passage way that lead out to the floor and from where, trembling all over, I watched the procession pass by, waiting to fall in. At last my turn came and I stepped out, adopting the measured tread as nearly as my shaking knees would allow. I had gone but a few paces when I was brought to a sudden stop and felt a queer sensation as though the back of my gown was being pulled out. One of the little girls who served as page and bearer of the coronation robe had stepped on my train. Again I started forward conscious only of the glare of lights, the blare of music and something dragging behind me. I forgot all about the handsomest gown I ever had in my life or ever expect to have except as it was brought to my mind by being stepped upon at regular intervals crossing the floor.

At last the steps to the throne loomed up before me and I began to climb with a prayer in my heart that my shaking knees would serve me to the top. Midway of the red velvet ascent a tack had given way allowing the carpet to slip beneath my feet. For one awful, intermin-

able moment I struggled for my balance. A vision of myself sprawling out on that red velvet approach flashed before me and I could hear, or thought I could, the whole multitude catch its breath. In another second my other foot had found the step above and I was safe and a few more steps brought me to the top.

Won't Some One Introduce Us

As I looked into the smiling face of my king I thought, "Who on earth are you, anyhow," for, if I had ever seen the man before I had no recollection of it. As though from miles away his voice came to me saying, "How do you do, Miss Queen," and I stammered out, "How do you do, Mr. King." I was scared to death for fear the people had heard me, though they were applauding wildly.

It has come to me since in my hours of more serene reflection that a training school for kings is a much needed institution in connection with the coronation. At least I should advise a rehearsal, and also that the queen be admitted to it. I recall now that, as I dropped upon my knees before the King for him to place the crown upon my head, I noticed his hands were trembling. In another minute I felt the weight of the crown upon my head and then was conscious something was wrong. Instead of resting back on my hair it seemed to come down over my forehead as though it might be much too large and I felt something stiff poke against the bridge of my nose. I ventured to look up and it was well that I did, for the crown was hastily snatched from my head and turned over. This time it rested quite comfortably and I realized he had gotten it on upside down the first time.

Begets Sympathy for Real Royalty

Throughout the rest of the ceremony I guess I did my part—at least no one has ever been unkind enough to tell me of anything wherein I failed—but personally I recall nothing but that sea of faces until it came time for the congratulation, and then I came to. As opportunity afforded I glanced at the king, and I think I realized something of what real royal women must feel even amid the brilliancy of their coronation as they look upon the kings who have been chosen for them. At any rate I am confident it is a mistake, and here I am sure all my predecessors and all who have come after me will agree with me, that to choose a married man for king deprives the experience of every possible bit of romance. It spoils the whole thing, for the queen at least. Whenever I screwed up my courage to appear friendly with that man I had never seen before I was sure to remember that he had a wife somewhere down in that multitude before us and the fear that she might be a jealous person froze the smile on my face.

All in all, being crowned Ak-Sar-Ben queen is not an unalloyed pleasure. A church wedding is not to be compared with it. I know, for I have gone through both. But worse still than the actual ceremony is the squaring things with one's friends after it is all over, and the regaining of one's reputation for truthfulness.

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