



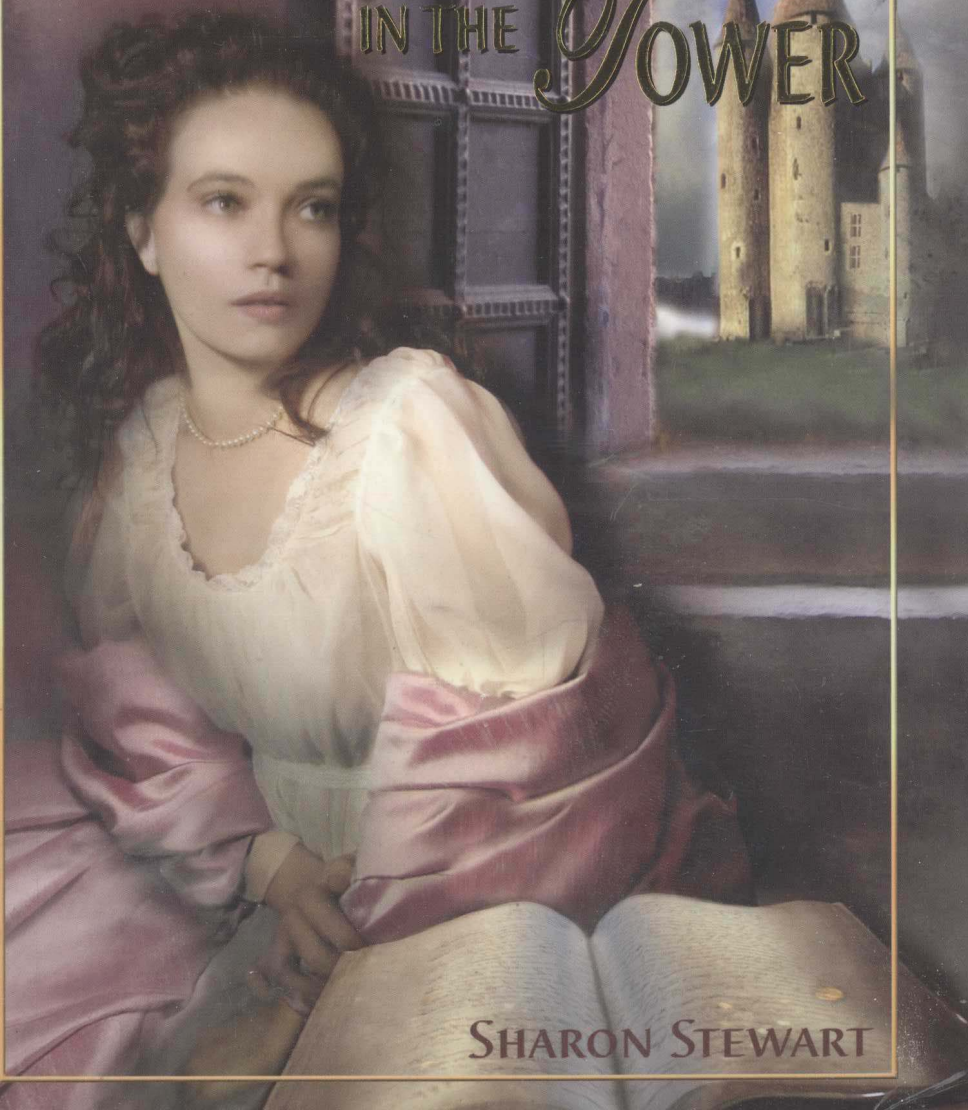
BENEATH THE CROWN

THE

PRINCESS

IN THE

TOWER



SHARON STEWART



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To M.T.C., who wouldn't have wanted it.

To R.J.S., who always did.

— S.S.

*This novel is a work of fiction. Although it is based
on the life of Marie Thérèse Charlotte de France,
some characters, events and details have been altered
in the interests of the story.*



THE TOWER OF THE TEMPLE

PARIS

OCTOBER 1795

They want me to remember everything that happened, and write it all down. Do they think I could forget any of it? Mon dieu, do they think I don't wake up in the dark of night, remembering? And why write it all down now? Because they plan to do to me what they did to the others? Or do I only feel afraid because it is so cold, and still raining, and the wind always sounds so mournful around the Tower?

Well, I will give them the account they want. Why not? They've kept me locked up and silent long enough. So I will write of the events I remember, and the facts I know. That will satisfy them.

But my own deepest feelings I will not tell them. Let them guess, if they will. Not for them this story, the real story, of our long journey from sunshine into shadow . . .



SORROWS

JUNE 1789

My name is Marie Thérèse Charlotte de France, and I am a princess. I suppose I'm not the usual sort of princess. For one thing, I am not charming. Princesses are supposed to be, of course. Beautiful and charming and accomplished. Well, I am none of those things, and I know it.

My maman, Queen Marie Antoinette, used to tell me at least once a day that pride was my worst fault. Yet what had I been told all my life? That I was descended from famous ancestors going back a thousand years. That my papa, King Louis XVI, ruled the most glorious country in Europe, and that Versailles, the palace I lived in, was the most splendid in the whole world. So how could I help being proud?

Yet despite my pride, I had many Sorrows. One was the Sorrow of Being Born a Girl, for this meant I could never rule France. There was a law against

it. That's why my brother Charles was the Dauphin, heir to the throne, although he was only four. Another of them was the Sorrow of Shortness. Everyone in the world, except for my little brother, was taller than I was. I spent all my time with my neck cricked back, looking up at people. This may have helped with the pride a bit, but it was no help to my temper.

Even this, though, was nothing compared to the Sorrow of Etiquette. My governess, the old macaw . . .

But I'd better explain about my game. People remind me of animals, so the first thing I do when I meet someone new is decide which animal it is. I did it with all the people around me. My governess, Madame de Mackau, with her beaky nose and shrewd beady eyes, looked exactly like a macaw. I knew because I'd seen a picture of one in a book of Papa's. I never called her that to her face, of course. I was too much in awe of her for that. But I sometimes did behind her back, which I suppose was wicked of me. Dear, kind Madame de Fréminville, my *femme de chambre*, was a different kind of animal. Frémi had round eyes and a habit of twitching her nose. A perfect rabbit. I did call her that sometimes, just to tease her.

My own family were animals, too, of course, though I would never have dared to tell them so. Maman, the Queen, was tall and beautiful, with

golden hair and bright blue eyes. She had a long snowy neck, and a smooth gliding walk. I thought she was as graceful as a swan. My papa, though, was stout and a little awkward in his movements. He was a bear. Not a ferocious bear, but a kindly, shambling one. Charles, my clever little brother, was definitely a squirrel — mischievous and full of tricks.

As for me, I was a pony, a mettlesome pony that people were always trying to put a bridle on. The bridle was called etiquette. Princesses are never allowed just to *be*. There's always something they're supposed to be thinking or not thinking, doing or not doing, every single minute of the day. "Stand up straight!" they tell you. But not so straight that people think you are stiff. "Be responsive!" But never show your feelings. "Smile!" But not too much, and never grin. "Curtsey or nod to all the right people!" But never, ever to the wrong people. There are a couple of thousand other rules like that, and I was supposed to remember all of them.

The macaw used to say that etiquette is your backbone. It gives you support from the inside. Maman always said it's a suit of armour: heavy to wear, but it gives a lot of protection. All I knew was, I never got it right. Maybe that's why my family always called me Mousseline, which means "fluffy." It was supposed to refer to my frizzy hair, but sometimes I think they meant my brains as well.

That summer of 1789, when everything in my life began to change forever, I was eleven. It was late June, the hottest anyone could remember, and already the heat was fraying people's tempers. As usual, I was struggling with etiquette.

"I won't wear it!" I glowered down at the puffy white dress the wardrobe maids had laid out on my bed. "It makes me look like a . . . a sheep! I want to wear the blue one. The one with the *paniers*. Please, Frémi."

Madame de Fréminville rolled her eyes. "Your Highness, you know the blue satin isn't suitable. Not for today. It's much too heavy for such hot weather, and the *paniers* are too formal."

"But we're dining in public, and I hardly ever get to wear the blue. And it's my favourite."

"Madame de Mackau won't approve . . ."

Of course she wouldn't. The macaw hardly ever approved of anything I did. It made me want to wear the dress even more. "*Pleeease*, Frémi."

I could tell Frémi was beginning to weaken. She usually did when I worked on her enough. "*Parbleu*, Frémi," I said, "What can the old macaw do, after all. Peck us to death?"

Frémi smothered a smile. She did try to be proper all the time, but she couldn't quite manage it. It was the thing I liked best about her. She nodded to the maids. The white muslin dress was carried off,

and the blue satin unwrapped from its green taffeta cover and brought forward.

Someday, I promised myself, I shall have as many gowns as Maman, and every single one will have *paniers*.

I had to take a deep breath and hold it in as the maids laced my stays tightly up the back over my chemise and petticoat. Then the *paniers* were fastened with ribbons to the bottom of the stays, one on each side, like baskets. The dress followed. I stood before the mirror, swishing my skirts, admiring the way the basketwork held the shining folds out on each side. Mine were only little *paniers*, of course. On grand occasions, Maman and the great ladies of the court wore ones so wide that they had to go through doors sideways.

"Isn't it lovely?" I crowed.

No one answered. I glanced over my shoulder and there in the doorway was Madame de Mackau! I quickly turned back to the mirror, trying to pretend I hadn't seen her. It was all very well to joke about her when she wasn't there. In the flesh, she could freeze me to the spot.

"What on earth!" she exclaimed. "Madame de Fréminville, what can you be thinking of? *Paniers*, today? And heavy satin in this hot weather?"

"Don't scold Frémi," I said quickly. "It's my fault. She didn't want me to wear it, but I insisted."

“Your Highness is too old for such nonsense. Please take it off at once!”

Now, I don’t like being given orders. So I folded my arms and refused to budge.

Frémi glanced at the clock on the mantel. “Madame, there really isn’t time for her to change now,” she pleaded. “There’s her hair still to be done and it’s past eleven thirty. She mustn’t be late for mass.”

Madame de Mackau frowned and bit her lower lip. She was beaten, and she knew it. I certainly couldn’t be late for mass. It simply wasn’t proper etiquette. Too bad!

“Oh, very well,” she snapped. “But heaven knows what Her Majesty will say!”

Having won my point, I stood still, for once, while the maids combed my frizzy hair into curls, powdered it white, and wound blue ribbons through it to match the dress. I took one last look in the mirror. Maybe it wasn’t the right dress for today. But, oh, it was beautiful.

Followed by Madame de Mackau and two ladies in waiting, I hurried up the stairs that led to the Queen’s Apartments on the floor above. My mother was ready and waiting — and Maman didn’t like to be kept waiting. Charles was already there, attended by the ladies and gentlemen of his household. He had far more people to wait upon him than I did, and much finer rooms, too. He gave me a big smile,

probably because he knew I'd be in trouble for keeping Maman waiting.

I curtsied carefully to her, making sure not to catch my heel in the hem of my gown, and trying not to wobble on the way up.

She was looking very splendid in her new silk dress. Its pinkish brown shade was all the fashion at court that year. Papa had joked that it was exactly the colour of a flea. He was right, but Maman had not been amused.

She wasn't amused now, either. The expression in her eyes was stony as they travelled first over me and then, questioningly, to Madame de Mackau. She couldn't say anything about my dress now, of course. That wouldn't have been proper etiquette in the midst of a crowd of ladies and gentlemen. So I was safe for the moment. I crossed my fingers behind my back. With any luck, Maman might forget to scold me later.

Without a word, she turned and led the way toward the royal chapel, which lay on the far side of the palace. Her ladies in waiting fell in behind her. Her friend, the stuck-up Yolande de Polignac, came next, leading my brother Charles by the hand. His ladies and gentlemen followed. Madame de Mackau and my two ladies followed me at the end of the procession.

At the south end of the palace we emerged into

the Hall of Mirrors. Late morning sun poured through the tall arcaded windows that ran the length of the huge gallery, glancing off the mirrored walls opposite and the huge crystal and silver chandeliers overhead. Rich carpets in scarlet and blue, and red marble columns capped with gold, glowed in the dazzling light. I always liked the Hall — it was like walking into a rainbow.

Down the length of the gallery people stood about in groups, some waiting to see us pass by on our way to the chapel, others just there to gape at everything. For it was the custom that anyone decently dressed and not freshly marked by the smallpox might visit the public rooms of Papa's palace of Versailles. Like all of us, it too belonged to France.

A whisper ran before us. "It's the Queen! The Queen, and Monsieur le Dauphin!" Courtiers bowed and curtsied, like a bed of brightly coloured flowers bending in the wind. Other folk, not used to the ways of the court, craned their necks to see us pass. Maman nodded graciously to left and right as she glided along. Charles, too, smiled and nodded. He was very good at it, but then, *he* had plenty of charm.



After mass, Papa, Maman and the rest of us trailed back across the palace to Maman's apartments, where we would dine in public. Despite the sun-

shine outside, the room was ablaze with candles. Their light gleamed on silver cutlery and sparkled off cut crystal goblets, and their heat made the air shimmer and dance. Sweat trickled down between my shoulder blades under the heavy satin of my bodice. I was beginning to regret not wearing the muslin gown.

I gazed down at the steaming plate of soup in front of me and sighed. Maman glanced down the table at me, and the message in her eyes was clear. "Eat something!" So I picked up my spoon and swallowed a mouthful. Who could possibly want to eat soup on such a hot day? And why would anybody want to watch someone else do it?

Yet the room was half full of people, and the eyes of all of them were riveted on us. Part of the room was cordoned off, and behind the purple velvet ropes a crowd stood many ranks deep to see Papa and the rest of us eat our meal. They whispered, pointed, tittered behind their hands, and strained their ears to hear any tidbits of conversation we might exchange. There were silk-clad courtiers, and portly merchants in sober dark colours. You could tell which of these had only rented their formal swords at the gate — they looked as if they might trip over them. There were plain working folk, too, the men clad in clean cotton smocks, the women with crisp white kerchiefs at their necks and aprons

over their best dresses.

Eating in public always made me feel like an animal in the palace zoo. I knew it was my duty, but it was a horrible one. How my parents stood it, I never knew. Charles and I only dined in public twice a week, but my parents did it almost every day.

I sneaked a glance down the table. Maman, as usual, was eating very little, but Papa was placidly spooning up his soup. He was the only one who ever really enjoyed any of these dinners. The truth was, all of us usually had a small snack beforehand, so most of the food ended up being distributed to the servants, and to any of the poor who came to the doors of the palace kitchens. Still, we had to eat a little. Watching us chewing and swallowing was part of the show, and people expected it.

The delicate soup plates were whisked away by white-gloved servants, their foreheads beaded with sweat under the snowy white of their wigs. As platters laden with the next course were carried in, there was a stir and scuffle amongst the crowd, as people who wanted to leave scrambled rudely over those at the back who had just arrived.

Papa patted his ample chin with a napkin. "Off to see my brothers eat their fish and fowl, are you?" he asked their retreating backs.

Maman shook her head at him with a little frown, so he turned his attention to a platter of cold turbot,

its elaborate jellied glaze already melting in the heat. I shuddered. Fish of any kind was nasty enough, but cold jellied fish was disgusting. I wouldn't taste it, no matter what!

Charles, who was sitting on a cushion on a chair beside Maman, began to fidget. "Maman, I'm so hot!" he whimpered. His cheeks were flushed scarlet, and his silky hair hung in damp ringlets on his lace collar.

"Be patient, *chou d'amour*," soothed Maman. "You must be polite, you know, because all these nice people have come just to see us."

Obediently, Charles turned and smiled at the crowd, and was rewarded with approving murmurs. A few of the women blew kisses to him, and he delighted them by blowing one back.

Nice people, indeed! I thought. Nosey people, more like.

Maman, meanwhile, was smiling brightly, but I wasn't fooled. She hated these public occasions as much as I did. I was just more honest about it, that was all. Or to put it another way, Maman was very charming, whereas I have a face that shows exactly what I feel, and I'm very bad at pretending. Maman often called me *Mousseline la sérieuse*.

Catching my eye, she leaned toward me and whispered, "For heaven's sake, Mousseline, don't you stare at me, too. And don't look so solemn. *Smile!*"

But I didn't want to smile at these people who stared at us so greedily. They said anything that came into their heads right out loud, too.

"*They* can afford enough bread," I heard a fellow with fierce moustaches mutter to his companion. She nodded, her eyes fixed on the golden loaves set out on the table.

Enough bread? I wondered. Surely everyone had plenty of that.

"Serious little thing, isn't she?" a fat man in the crowd remarked, staring hard at me.

"Haughty little thing, you mean." Someone snickered. "Like mother, like daughter. It's the Austrian pride, you know."

Bright colour rose in Maman's cheeks. I lowered my eyes to my plate. Why *Austrian* pride? It was true that Maman had been an Austrian archduchess before she married Papa, but that had been a long time ago. Yet I knew these people didn't like Maman. The feeling crackled in the air around us.

Fish, fowl, roast, game, another roast, savories, ices, compotes . . . Would the meal never end? Mercifully, the crowd finally began to thin out as people went to watch members of the family in other parts of the palace, or sought cooler air outdoors. At last Papa pushed back his chair and dinner was over. He rose, offering his arm to Maman. Yolande de Polignac collected Charles, and I fell in