

# CHRONICLES OF THE FRENCH REVOLUTION

by Sandra Shotlander

## EXTRACT

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## CHARACTERS

TICKET SELLER	Woman at a fair. Later the drummer girl
OLYMPE	Olympe de Gouge, a playwright and revolutionary
QUEEN	Marie Antoinette, queen of France and wife of Louis
NARRATOR	A female performer, a young girl during the Revolution
MOTHER	A citizen, mother of the narrator
MIDWIFE	Friend and help to the mother and the narrator
THEROIGNE	Theroigne de Mericourt, a revolutionary
CHILD	The narrator as a young girl in Paris during the Revolution
LOUISON	Louison Chabray, a sculptress on the march to Versailles
MADAME ROLAND	Wife of political leader of the Girondins
WIFE	A peasant woman
TWO COURT WOMEN	Attendants to Marie Antoinette
SERVING WOMEN	
WOMAN IN BUTTER QUEUE	
KING	Louis, king of France and husband of Marie Antoinette
PROVENCE	Duc de Provence, Louis' brother
DUC D'ARTOIS	Louis' brother
MIRABEAU	Count Mirabeau, a founder of the National Assembly
DR GUILLOTIN	A founder of the Assembly and an inventor

[continued over]

BAILLY	Revolutionary, later mayor of Paris
DAVID	Jacques-Louis David, an artist during the Revolution
DE LAUNAY	Commander at the Bastille
LIANCOURT	Duc de la Rochfoucauld-Liancourt, Grand Master of the Wardrobe
MOUNIER	President of the National Assembly
LAFAYETTE	A military commander
SULEAU	Founder of <i>The Apostles</i> , a Royalist journal
CHAIRMAN	Chairman of the Paris commune, a revolutionary political figure
PEASANT	
LORD	
CLERGYMAN	
LAWYER	
STEWARD	
TOWN CRIER	
PRIEST	
MILLER	
NOTARY	
MAN DISTRIBUTING BUTTER	

Also: Deputies, nobles, journalists, peasant men and women, two peasant children, two royal children, guards, acrobats, a boy, men and women in the streets of Paris, at the Bastille and at Versailles, the queen's attackers, a judge, a sergeant, and a female warder.

## ACT ONE

*On the stage are platforms, high across the back and tiered on the sides. In the centre is a raised area with a giant wheel, the sort used at a fete, spun to win prizes. It has three circles, red, white and blue, in the style of a revolutionary cockade. Posed in front of the wheel, unlit, is a young woman, the ticket seller, dressed in carnival clothes with a tricorne hat, early 1800's dress. She has a drum. With her is a small troupe of jugglers and acrobats in a tableau.*

TICKET SELLER Step up! Step up! Buy your tickets to the revolution. What happens, ladies and gentlemen, when the wheel turns? (*jugglers etc. perform*) Nothing can stop us now. Try your luck! Try your luck! You've got to be in it to win it. Who will turn the wheel? Who will turn the wheel?

*She spins the wheel. Acrobats somersault. Lights up on three deputies in the French parliament or National Assembly. They are reading The Declaration of the Rights of Man in grand epic style. In a gallery sits Olympe de Gouge. She is late thirties.*

DEPUTY 1 Deputies, Article One of *The Declaration of the Rights of Man*. (*reads*) Men are born free and remain equal and free.

OLYMPE (*from the gallery*) Men, are you capable of being just?

*Deputies look up at her.*

DEPUTY 1 (*ignoring the interruption*) Article Two. The aim of every political association is the preservation of the rights of man, liberty, property, security and resistance to oppression.

OLYMPE           *(from the gallery)* Oh, my poor sisters! What has the revolution done for you?

DEPUTY 2       *(to Deputy 3)* Who is that woman?

DEPUTY 3       It is Olympe de Gouge.

DEPUTY 2       What does she do?

DEPUTY 3       She is a playwright, or so she calls herself.

DEPUTY 2       Does that give her the right to speak here?

DEPUTY 1       *(continuing to read)* The source of all sovereignty resides in the nation.

OLYMPE         *(from the gallery)* If women have the right to mount the scaffold, they have the right to mount the rostrum.

DEPUTY 2       If somebody doesn't silence her, I will.

TICKET SELLER Stop! Stop! Not that. Not yet. That is not where we start. Step up. Step up. Tickets to the revolution. Who will turn the wheel? Who will turn the wheel?

*She spins the wheel, as a crowd of citizens of Paris enter at a run down-stage, shouting. Meanwhile the queen and court women join the king and nobles on a platform upstage in a dance formation.*

CROWD           We want bread. Give us bread.

TICKET SELLER In Paris 1789, angry crowds went hungry. There was famine in the land.

CROWD Give us bread. Give us bread.

TICKET SELLER The king, queen and the nobles in the palace at Versailles, well fed as usual, did not heed the cries of their citizens.

PROVENCE *(as they dance)* Why don't they eat cake?

QUEEN *(severely to him)* Really, Duc de Provence, I'm glad I didn't say that.

*They dance on. The troupe at the wheel parodies them.*

CROWD Find the bakers. String them up. They are being paid to starve us.

CITIZEN *(as baker enters)* There's one. String him up.

*The crowd rushes off in pursuit. The nobles freeze.*

TICKET SELLER *(chanting)* What God never sees,  
What the king seldom sees,  
What we see every day,  
Read my riddle I pray.

*As she speaks, music. Members of the troupe put on costumes. One of them becomes a male peasant, three others the nobleman, the clergyman, and the lawyer, who is dressed in black.*

TICKET SELLER Poor France, poor miserable people. But not today, today this peasant is happy.

*Peasant comes forward with vegetables wrapped in a kerchief. He speaks to the audience.*

PEASANT *(unwrapping his kerchief)* I've been lucky today. See what I've dug up. A turnip *(displaying each vegetable on his kerchief as he speaks)*, some beets, two potatoes, to take home to my wife and children. *(he sighs and rubs his hands together with satisfaction)*

CLERGYMAN *(entering)* God bless you.

PEASANT *(kissing his hand)* God has blessed me.

CLERGYMAN Serve God. *(taking several vegetables.)* My tithes.

*He exits. The peasant reacts.*

LORD *(entering)* My sword protects you.

PEASANT *(kissing lord's hand)* My lord, my master.

LORD Serve your master. *(taking vegetables)* My dues.

*He exits. The peasant reacts.*

LAWYER *(entering)* May your crops grow.

PEASANT Thank you, sir. May your business flourish.

LAWYER            *(taking the last vegetable and the kerchief)* My fees.

*He exits.*

PEASANT           *(cries out)* What shall I do? They have taken everything.

*Lights cross-fade to mother and two children, waiting to eat.*

WIFE                Husband, you are home. What did you bring us?

PEASANT           Nothing.

WIFE                Nothing. No turnip? *(he shakes his head)* No potatoes?

PEASANT           Nothing.

WIFE                I will serve the supper. *(takes a saucepan and a ladle and serves into bowls)* Eat, children.

CHILD 1            But this is water.

CHILD 2            Where is the soup?

WIFE                Hush, children. This is all we have.

PEASANT           *(shaking his fist)* Nothing but water and air.

*Lights cross-fade to a young female acrobat, who has put on her narrator's costume. She steps forward.*

NARRATOR      What God never sees,  
                      What the king seldom sees,  
                      What we see every day,  
                      Read my riddle I pray.

There was a nobleman who owned all he surveyed. His peasants toiled, and paid their dues in sweat and labour, as well as in produce. They paid with their bodies, and he wounded their souls. He loved to go hunting. After hunting on this day, he held a banquet. Peasant women were called in from the village to assist.

*Mother, who is pregnant, and the midwife are stirring huge copper saucepans or polishing huge dishes. Two other women serve as well.*

STEWARD        *(entering, inspects their work)* Is everything ready?

SERVING WOMAN 1      Yes, sir.

STEWARD        Good, they are almost here. *(exits)*

SERVING WOMAN 2      Woe betide us if they should have to wait, even for a moment.

MOTHER        *(lifting a pot, gasps)* Oh, Oh.

SERVING WOMAN 1      What is wrong?

MIDWIFE        *(taking the saucepan from the mother)* Is it the baby?

MOTHER        I felt it moving. Oh. Oh ... *(bends over with pain)*

MIDWIFE Sit down here. *(puts her on a bench)* Lie back. Has it started?  
*(mother groans)* Mercy on us!

STEWARD *(entering to sound of trumpets)* Quickly, quickly, they are ready.  
Bring the banquet.

*The two serving women exit with huge trays.*

STEWARD *(to midwife who is comforting mother)* What are you doing there?  
Bring the food I say.

MIDWIFE Sir, I cannot.

STEWARD What?

*Mother is groaning.*

MIDWIFE We must get help for her.

STEWARD But the guests wait.

*Trumpets. Mother groans.*

MIDWIFE Have pity sir. It is the baby. She is in labour.

STEWARD Leave her. *(midwife doesn't move)* Leave her. Leave her, I say.  
*(starts beating midwife, while mother groans in labour)*

MIDWIFE Have pity, I beg you.

STEWARD Bring the food. My lord will not be kept waiting.

*Lights.*

NARRATOR So I was born without linen. That was on the lord's table. Without hot water. That was in my lord's cooking pot. And without a helping hand to deliver me or comfort my mother. Who my father was I'll never know, for my mother would not say. A stranger passing through the village fell in love with her. We went with him to Paris, where my mother set up a stall in the market place. There my mother married him, and he looked after us well, until he was recruited into the army and went to the frontier. That was the last my mother heard of him, until a soldier brought his watch and some belongings back to her, a scarf, a leather pouch, and told her he had been killed. From that day on I never saw my mother cry.

*While she speaks we see mother on a stool and the soldier bringing back belongings. Mother buries her face in the scarf. Ticket seller spins wheel.*

TICKET SELLER 1789, the year of famine, the year of bread riots. Women were too weak to nurse their babies.

*A pageant of poverty. On one part of the stage, we see a man and wife with a baby. They bring the bundle in, put it down and kneel behind it and pray as though it has died.*

*On another part of the stage a peasant sits in despair, while his wife shakes her fist at the heavens, and so on. On another part of the stage, the king watches.*

TICKET SELLER *(to audience)* Look at the king. Look at him. Is that a tear in his eye? Could his conscience be pricking him? Could his heart be opened to the people? He has just had a conference with his