



The Countess of Charny : or, The Execution of King Louis XVI (A Historical Novel of Love and Loyalty)

Alexandre Dumas (pere)

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IT was on the first of October, 1791, that the new Legislative Assembly was to be inaugurated over France.

King Louis XVI., captured with Queen Marie Antoinette and the royal family, while attempting to escape from the kingdom and join his brothers and the other princes abroad, was held in a kind of detention, like imprisonment without hard labor, in the Tuileries Palace in Paris.

His fate hung on the members of the new House of Representatives. Let us hasten to see what they were.

The Congress was composed of seven hundred and forty-five members: four hundred lawyers of one kind or another; some seventy literary men; seventy priests who had taken the oath to abide by the Constitution, not yet framed, but to which the king had subscribed on the sketch. The remaining two hundred odd were landholders, farming their own estates or hiring them out to others.

Among these was François Billet, a robust peasant of forty-five, distinguished by the people of Paris and France as a hero, from having been mainly instrumental in the taking of the Bastille, regarded as the embodiment of the ancient tyranny, now almost leveled with the dust.

Billet had suffered two wrongs at the hands of the king's men and the nobles, which he had sworn to avenge as well on the classes as on the individuals.

His farm-house had been pillaged by Paris policemen acting under a blank warrant signed by the king and issued at the request of Andrea de Taverney, Countess of Charny, the queen's favorite, as her husband the count was reckoned, too. She had a spite against Billet's friend, Dr. Honore Gilbert, a noted patriot and politician. In his youth, this afterward distinguished physician had taken advantage of her senses being steeped in a mesmeric swoon, to lower her pride. Thanks to this trance and from his overruling love, he was the progenitor of her son, Sebastian Emile Gilbert; but with all the pride of this paternity, he was haunted by unceasing remorse. Andrea could not forgive this crime, all the more as it was a thorn in her side since her marriage.

It was a marriage enforced on her, as the Count of Charny had been caught by the king on his knees to the queen; and to prevent the stupid monarch being convinced by this scene that there was truth in the tattle at court that Count Charny was Marie Antoinette's paramour, she had explained that he merely was suing for the hand of her friend Andrea. The king's consent given, this marriage took place, but for six years the couple dwelt apart; not that mutual love did not prevail between them, but neither was aware of the affection each had inspired in the other at first sight.

The new countess thought that Charny's affection for the queen was a guilty and durable one; while he, believing his wife, by compulsion, a saint on earth, dared not presume on the position which fate and devotion to their sovereign had imposed on them both.

This devotion was confirmed on the count's part, cemented by blood; for his two brothers, Valence and

Isidore, had lost their lives in defending the king and queen from the revolutionists.

Andrea had a brother, Philip, who also loved the queen, but he had been offended by her amour with Charny; and, being touched by an American republican fever while fighting with Lafayette for the liberation of the thirteen colonies, he had quitted the court of France.

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THE FOES FACE TO FACE, THE FRIEND IN NEED, THE WIDOW, THE EMETIC, THE EASY-
CHAIR, THE BLOOD-STAINS

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